

Gender as a mediation between world literature and national literature

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Recent discussions of world literatures in and beyond various dichotomies could also be approached from a specific interactive gender angle. Gender denotes a movement, literal or figurative, in performance or as performance, and hence it points to a hybridity of elements that such dynamics involve, and to a hybrid multi-scaling of whatever makes or reflects world and/or national literature. It is because gender performs language and language performs gender, both as its own and each other's medium, that they also mediate, demarcate, and (re)create a resistant literary territory. Literary writing is a singular act: it defines an individual enterprise, which is recognized, read, and disseminated to various degrees. Such a singular act is, however, also relational, because singularity defines itself on the background of relationality.¹ Hence, gender can be read like an embodied private property that cannot be detached from the attributes of its sociality. This connotes various integrative interactions as well as resistances to interactions within wider sociopolitical practices, affects, and the pertaining topology of various conscious and unconscious structures, which are also in the format of what is said or unsaid within one's relationality to its necessarily embedding materiality.

This article probes such layered mediation of gender-language performance, exemplified comparatively in two 20th-century European polyglot women writers, the Russian-Ukrainian (Tatar) poet Anna Akhmatova, and the Austrian (Carinthian) poet-prosaist Ingeborg Bachman. Their preferred writing languages, Russian and German respectively, within two (re)“imperializing” structures, the socialist Bolshevik and nationalist Austrian one, and also within the Cold War structures, poetically re-write these structural grids from within. Furthermore, they do so from Akhmatova's and Bachmann's opposite positions, of forced immobility and high mobility. Akhmatova deliberately stayed in her native land and thematized her determination to render the surrounding, frighteningly violent socio-political structures and processes poetically, especially in her poems from 1917–1924.² Bachmann deliberately left her native land and kept writing in the German language as her truest “house that drifts through all languages” (quoted from the translation of her 1961 poem “Exile”). The dynamics of gender in their work are also related to their position of immobility

or mobility: while Akhmatova employs the crashing power of femininity, Bachmann subverts binary gender roles, suspicious of the efficacy of early feminist politics to expose the roots of the millennia-long victimization of women. It is the way gender evolves and mutates in the work of these two writers that navigates national and/or world aspects of their production, and also mediates their individual cogency in performing what can be read as national and/or world literature.

MEDIATION, AFFECT, AND LITERARY FIGURATION

The performance of literary language evolving through a gendered mediation can help in thinking world literature in relation to national literature. Mediation takes place via an impartial third party that assists disputing parties in resolving conflict through the use of mediation. This process is both party-centered, because it focuses upon the needs, rights, and interests of the parties, and evaluative, because it analyzes issues and relevant norms. Mediation is narrative, involving dialogue, empathy, or a form of affection, triggering an affect in constructing stories as a primary human activity that leads to a better understanding. Semiotically, it also corresponds to Charles S. Peirce's concept of interpretant as thirdness (mediator, means, mold, pertaining to thought, language, representation) that mediates between firstness (being, sensation) and secondness (relation, existence, experience). As gendered, such narrative mediation is largely impartial, without favoring any side, it is like a concept from formal logic that, when introduced in discourse, diversifies itself and variegates in reference.

Specifically, related to the topic of world literature and national literature, gender as a form of mediation opens further horizons of multiplicity in performing, interpreting, and intertwining what can be read as world and/or national literature. It does so primarily with its capacity for creating textually the points of resistances, fluctuations, and/or interactions among various involved referents and possible interpretants. Gender molds an affect into a literary figuration, and it facilitates the tuning of such considerably autonomous literary figuration to specific and/or select layers and scales of identification, longing, and belonging. That way gender also mediates, communicates, and dialogizes the sides and aspects of what is (created or read as) national and/or world one within a literary platform, as this article will illustrate through the literary production of Akhmatova and Bachmann.

The early, ravishingly feminine poetic articulation of Anna Akhmatova delved into the meaning of poetry as a performing medium for inspiration, motivation, and emotional and intellectual relationships. From the start of World War I, her poetry took on a sharp, reactive curve, bridging the stream of her always controlled affect with the firmness of her response.³ In her graphic poem "July 1914", we read:

... Стало солнце немилостью Божьей,
Дождик с Пасхи полей не кропил.
Приходил одноногий прохожий
И один на дворе говорил:

... the god of wrath glares in the sky,
the fields have been parched since Easter
a one-legged pilgrim stood in the yard
with his mouth full of prophecies

«Сроки страшные близятся. Скоро
Станет тесно от свежих могил.
Ждите голода, и труса, и мора,
И затмения небесных светил.

Только нашей земли не разделит
На потеху себе супостат:
Богородица белый расстелет
Над скорбями великими плат».
(1997, 58)

– Beware of terrible times...
The earth opening for a crowd of corpses,
expect famine, plague, earthquakes
and heavens darkened by eclipses...

But our land will not be divided
by the enemy at its pleasure,
the mother of God will spread a white shroud
over these great sorrows.
(1997, 59)

However, in her thematic turn to that time of the cruelest existential, societal, and political hardship in Europe and the world, Akhmatova only redeployed and intensified her strikingly feminine, *entering-the-mirror rhetoric* (my expression), addressing the surrounding violence directly to its face. She extended and sharpened such expressive modality through the Russian Revolution, and then through the most frightening interwar years. Her persistent self-projecting and self-duplicating image, this face-to-face gaze,⁴ first as her motif then as her self-divisive interlocutor, in fact was her own repetitive mirroring of and bowing to the figure of the female Muse. This mediator was initially her “wedded” Companion and then her “sister” (in her 1911 poem “Muse”: “Муза-сестра заглянула в лицо, / Взгляд ее ясен и ярок” [“The Muse-sister looked at my face, / her gaze bright and clear”]). Later it was a Savior, Conveyer, and the one that remains – Poetry itself.

The candlelit room of spirit that Akhmatova describes in her earliest poems remains for more than five decades the very essence and self-citational medium of her life, along with key formal elements of her aesthetics, such as *face* and *gaze* (illustrated above), and with her key poetic devices, *transference* and *mediation*. Transference, Freud’s psychoanalytic *Übertragung* (1905), is Akhmatova’s visual and linguistic self-displacement onto the so-called personal (although in fact impersonal) pronoun “It”, which mutates in gender as it moves through her poetry. Navigating national and world aspects of her writing and mediating her resistance, affect, and belonging, the “It” brings Akhmatova into an intimate conversation with other, equally threatened Russian and world literary characters and writers throughout history (such as Hamlet, Pushkin, Blok, Pasternak, Dante, Petrarch, Lot’s wife, Cleopatra, Sophocles), partly switching her own voice, place, and figuration with theirs. Within Akhmatova’s imperiled existence, such retroactive transference strengthened her liberating emotion for the merciless (yet still rhymed) straightforwardness of her poetic language.

The Bolshevik post-empire that seized control from the Russian empire, with the народ (narod, or nation) as a multivalent designator of suffering in the hands of the ruling structures condensed out of the same “stuff” of which the *narod* was made, crucially introduced ambiguity in both the socialist and nationalist referent of the term. While various poets’ historical and historiographical identifications of the same period moved in both directions, socialist or nationalist,⁵ their line of differentiation, in the case of the truest poetic witnessing, embodied and mediated at the border of life and death, was not simple or even possible.

Impoverished, stigmatized, and closely surveilled, Akhmatova's life was constantly "hanging on a thread" ("Жизнь, кажется, висит на волоске", as she says in her second "Muse" poem, in 1924; 1997, 78). However, her colleagues also called her "Queen of the Neva," "the Soul of the Silver Age" and most flatteringly, "Anna of all the Russias". Within this title, Russia was a geographical-political term, implying the layered segments of the varieties of spirit and origin within the term *narod*; hence, to the understanding of many, Akhmatova was just as socially engaged as her socialist colleagues, but in her own figurative, artistic and human ways. The contemporary perspective of gender studies rules out biology as a key constituent of a nation and replaces it with a non-binary cultural performativity. However, this performativity is based on an essentially non-binary Freudian drive.⁶ One recent definition of this drive describes it as inhabiting the figural space, a non-homogenous, heterotopic space of passage, of transit and transformations between "the mental and the somatic", where *between* does not stand for the binary logic of exclusion but it figures the movement of a passing (De Lauretis 2008, 15). Likewise, it is possible to observe mutations within the binary-polarized socialist and nationalist functions, mediated by Akhmatova's performing mutations of gender.

Akhmatova's poetic function can be compared to Ingeborg Bachman's post-imperial and post-Nazi literary figuration of the 1950s and 1960s. Educated in the humanities, social sciences, arts, and law, physically travelling freely through her new, deeply divided and heavily burdened society, as well as through multicontinental geographies, Bachmann was intellectually-critically delving into the sexist constellations of human history, producing valuable prose out of her initially poetic expression. As such, Bachmann was a true counterpoint and poetic fellow to Akhmatova. Reading them comparatively, however, there was no discernable trait of masochism in Akhmatova's threatened and at times fully banned literary production. The feminine dignity of Akhmatova's mirrored *imperial* significance organized her whole being, as its resilient figuration which worked through and dissolved the affect.⁷ Similarly, Bachmann cherished her own self-divisive, critical lament for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, from whose history she said she was learning: "And because of the lack of activity into which one is forced there enormously sharpens one's view of the big situation and of today's empires" (1983, 106). However, even if Bachmann can be read today as prophetically displaying *avant la lettre* in the 1960s many of later poststructuralist and postfeminist theoretical features, the whole palette of her supposedly liberating woman's voice was always perversely and/or masochistically blocked by the impasses of sexual and other kinds of violence/violation. Her discursive, symbolic, aesthetic, ethical, or any other order she attempted to introduce with her writing could not safely confront and eliminate the destructiveness of wider societal affects.

With deliberate repetitiveness, Bachmann took on the role of narratively mediating the political currents of her time onto her apparently new Austrian self.⁸ Her speaking from a presumed male viewpoint arguably stands for her flagrantly linguistic way of exposing and combating the remaining traces of masculine Nazi verbal constructs in German that survived in mutated forms in postwar society. As

a consequence, however, she could hardly escape their masochistic repetitiveness in her own life and paradoxically, she had a shorter life than Akhmatova's despite the latter's terrible physical conditions. In 1973, Bachmann died in tragic circumstances in Rome, similar to the deaths of the women characters she described in her narratives. Out of the apparent elitism of Bachman's willfully chosen intellectual opposition to the ruling currents of the Austrian nationalist political circles, she was affectively performing escapes of her individual self from her national self, as if she was a proxy for the world-as-microcosm. Hence, Bachmann also reminds one of Akhmatova's paradigmatic poetic self-divisiveness as the medium of her confronting and combating the scales and structures of the surrounding society forcefully imposed on her.

However, unlike Akhmatova, who constantly faces and converses with a Muse as her key aid and counterpart, Bachmann's narratives play out the difficulty or impossibility of any non-masculine symbolic order, as they lack any form of women's interconnectedness, even conversation – this is a riddle Bachmann offers to her readers' interpretation. Bachmann's bravely negative writing back to her (post-Nazi) "nation" had the aim of guiding her readers to participatively transform by understanding the pattern of self-hurting women's gender-articulations, demonstrated in her narratives. Her gender mediation always bore the tinge of the Austrian imperial past: the multiethnic, composite, thriving, but not at all idealized sociopolitical structure that preceded the 20th-century world wars, a large part of which was at that time walled up behind the Iron Curtain.

MUTATIONS OF GENDER, MUTATIONS OF NATION

In her 1909 poem "Reading Hamlet", Akhmatova's distinctively female writing stages her claim to see herself as a woman poet firmly coming from the world literary tradition:

У кладбища направо пылил пустырь,
А за ним голубела река.
Ты сказал мне: «Ну, что ж, иди

в монастырь

Или замуж за дурака...»
Принцы только такое всегда говорят,
Но я эту запомнила речь.
(1997, 38)

A desolate spot to the right of the cemetery,
behind it a river blue.

You said: "All right then, get thee
to a nunnery
or go get married to a fool..."

That's all what princes always say,
But I memorized these words my way.

Likewise, in her 1917 poem "When in the Throes of Suicide", depicting Russia's developments and its confused, forfeited Church, she takes it upon herself to be a medium for displaying the ways of those who fled the Revolution and those who stayed in Russia. Her literary mourning for the nation is her self-dignifying act as she retains her own vertical of spirit so "not to be tempted, not to be defiled", when her own inner voice, her "It", calls her to depart the land as most of those closest to her had already done. This is the direct opposite of Bachmann's refusal to help in the construction of her Austrian nation (as she says in her poem "Exile": "I am a dead man who wanders registered nowhere"; 1999a, 229), and of her ironic display of the most

perverse ways of mourning for the victims past or present (that could no longer protect her from herself).

These two women writers performed different forms of mediation against the political plagues of their time, Bolshevik and nationalist ones. Akhmatova was always upstream of her living object cathexis, while Bachmann was enticed by the residuals of the war crimes committed in her Viennese surroundings to play with the death drive. The verse about the breakdown of the “healing power of fingers” comes repetitively in Akhmatova’s immediate post-World War I poems, as in her 1919 “Why is this century worse than previous ones?”:

Чем хуже этот век предшествующих?

Разве

Тем, что в чаду печали и тревог,
Он к самой черной прикоснулся язве,
но исцелить ее не мог.

(1997, 70)

Why is this century worse than previous
ones?

Amidst the grief and fear,
fingers touching the foulest ulcer
but not healing the wound.

She also pointed out in the 1921 poem “Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold...” (“Всё расхищено, предано, продано”) that the “miracles of the nature, ripe cherries, stars, galaxies” still reach to human hearts, so that “we do not despair” (1997, 73). That same year, her ex-husband Nikolay Gumilyov was executed by the secret police, and Akhmatova’s tone became stern, yet rebellious, calling for the God to “put the cold cross” to her heart.

From 1922 to 1924, when many of her friends escaped from the country, Akhmatova’s poems mediate and perform her resilience. Her paradigmatic anti-exile poem says:

Не с теми я, кто бросил землю
На растерзание врагам.
Их грубой лести я не внемлю,
Им песен я своих не дам.

Но вечно жалок мне изгнанник,
Как заключенный, как больной.
Темна твоя дорога, странник,
Польнью пахнет хлеб чужой.
(1997, 74)

I am not one of those who left the land
to the mercy of its enemies,
I will not heed their rude flattery,
I won’t give them my verses.

But I feel sorry for an exile
as I do for a prisoner, or a sick one,
as dark is your road wanderer,
the worm eats your foreign bread.⁹

In 1961, long after she completed the drafts of the verses of her interwar elegy *Requiem* (written [and re-written] mostly between 1935–1940), about the Great Purge (1936–1938), she added an opening stanza, which described the previous decades of her work:

Нет, и не под чуждым небосводом,
и не под защитой чуждых крыл, –
Я была тогда с моим народом,
Там, где мой народ, к несчастью, был.
(1997, 98)

No, no foreign sky protected me,
and no stranger’s wing shielded my face.
I stand as witness to my people’s lot,
survivor of that time, that place.
(1997, 99)

In Russian, in these or in her subsequent poems, Akhmatova does not use the word “survivor”, expressing herself in simplest, highly sublimated words, such as “I stayed with my people then, where my people in its misfortune was” (literal translation), clearly attributing herself and her work to national literature. In terms of gender roles, related to Akhmatova’s claim that she deemed herself a poet (and not “poetess”), she explains that she started probing woman’s capacity to write as good as the man to whom she was personally related. Yet, when she established the style for women’s writing, she wondered if she could change it back, as if she continually searched for a purpose within the fluidness of gender roles. As she says in “Epi-gram” (1958):

Могла ли Биче словно Дант творить,
Или Лаура жар любви восславить?
Я научила женщин говорить...
Но, Боже, как их замолчать заставить!
(1997, 136)

Could Beatrice have written like Dante
Or Laura have glorified love’s pain?
I taught women how to speak,
But God, how to silence them again?!
(1997, 137)

The American selection of Akhmatova’s poetry (including *Requiem* and its opening stanza) published by Max Hayworth and Stanley Kunitz in 1967, explicitly calls her a survivor and witness. By embedding Akhmatova’s language intertextually within Western theoretical discourses, specifically those of witnessing and testimony (considerably rooted in the Holocaust experience), this English translation inscribed Akhmatova into the major streams of world literature.

In 1961, Bachmann wrote her paradigmatic poem “Exile”, later incorporated into her prose masterpiece *Malina* (1971; Eng. trans. 1999a) as part of her unfinished tetralogy *Todesarten* (Ways of dying), comprised of *Malina*, two novel drafts, *Der Fall Franza / Requiem für Fanny Goldmann* (1978; Eng. trans. *The Book of Franza. Requiem for Fanny Goldman*, 1999b), and also the fragments of *Eka Rotwitz* (1978). Writing to document the effects of the postwar negative societal energies by previous collaborators with the Nazi regime, and to expose the victimization of women who then victimized themselves throughout world history, Bachmann is “virtually alone among postwar German writers who dared to raise questions about ‘racialization’ of the white psyche”, as Sara Lennox puts in her study *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters* (2006, 295). Investing her whole being into the literary witnessing to the “society as the biggest murder-scene of all” (Bachmann 1999a, 182), always related to Vienna, Bachmann specified language and history as her two major Muses (229). Travelling for most of her adult life, living physically and intellectually as a nomad, she kept the German language as her only true home, although an unbearably heavy and uncanny one.

Noticeably, in “Exile”, Bachmann speaks of herself as a man.

Ein Toter bin ich der wandelt
gemeldet nirgends mehr
unbekannt im Reich des Präfekten
überzählig in den goldenen Städten
und im grünenden Land

I am a dead man
who wanders registered nowhere
Unknown in the realm of prefect,
Superfluous in the golden cities
and the greening land

abgetan lange schon
 und mit nichts bedacht
 Nur mit Wind mit Zeit und mit Klang
 der ich unter Menschen nicht leben kann
 Ich mit der deutschen Sprache
 dieser Wolke um mich
 die ich halte als Haus
 treibe durch alle Sprachen
 O wie sie sich verfinstert
 die dunklen die Regentöne
 nur die wenigen fallen
 In hellere Zonen trägt dann sie den
 Toten hinauf. (1999a, 229)

written off long ago
 bequeathed nothing
 save wind and time and sound
 I who cannot live among people
 I with the German language
 this cloud around me
 that I keep as a house
 I drift through all languages
 Oh how this cloud darkens
 the somber ones the rain notes
 Only a few fall
 Into brighter places It carries the dead
 man high. (1999a, 228)

Similarly in *Malina*, the nameless female “I” figure is taken over by the male voice, as she explained in an interview: “That I knew: it will be male. That I can only narrate from the male position or point of view... It was for me like the discovery of my own person, not to deny this female ‘I’, and yet to put the emphasis on the male ‘I’. It cannot be presented any other way... One cannot want the perspective, one has it” (Bachmann 1983, 99–100).

As a writer, she distanced herself from the emerging second wave feminists’ criticism of patriarchal or male-dominated institutions and cultural practices, and their condemnation of sexual violence throughout society that asked for women’s interconnectedness. However, Bachmann’s emphasis on subversive language performativity within the dominant masculine symbolic order is in the Viennese philosophical and psychological tradition of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Otto Weininger.¹⁰ Within the borders of her self-withdrawal from everyday society and also of her excessive mobility, her work subverts gender roles and shows some postfeminist features, such as turning down birthday wishes from the President of the Austrian Academy in *Malina*.¹¹ Bachmann’s interrogation of the binary-thinking and essentialism and her work upon the masculine dictum from within itself were apparently striving towards a new stage in the understanding and studies of gender, as well as towards an authorial profile of world literature.

CONCLUSION: AT HOME AND IN THE WORLD

In spite of the fact that Bachmann won major German and Austrian literary awards in the 1960s mostly for her poetry, her meticulously woven prose was still widely ignored in Austria, while in America, from the late 1970s onward, she was translated and read as an avant-garde figure of contemporary world writing.¹² It was the 2008 German publication of the long-sealed intimate correspondence between Bachmann and the poet Paul Celan (Bachmann and Celan 2008),¹³ that brought renewed attention to her quality and genius in her home country. Similarly, Akhmatova was twice in a row shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in literature, in 1965 and 1966 (just before her death in 1967) on the basis of the German and English translation of her work, published abroad before it was allowed in Russia; hence, the translation of her poetry functioned as both a literary mediation and literary creation.

Regarding mediation, mutation, gender, and nation in the work of Akhmatova and Bachmann, “nation” is amalgamated as much as internally diversified within the hybrid multi-scaling of longing and belonging performed by both these women writers, only in different ways. Their physical realities and materialities produced different emphases within their writing: Akhmatova’s was mostly on what is conscious, spoken, and said, and Bachmann’s on what is unconscious, hidden, and unsaid. Evidently, each of them experienced and articulated the boundaries of the singular speaking subject differently: Akhmatova with sharply clear verse, where the “It” unmistakably finds its “I”; Bachmann with a fluid poetic prose, where the “I” delves back into all the more impersonal “It” from an ironic, critical distance.

Obviously, what is considered world literature overlapped with what is considered national literature in the case of both of these writers, Akhmatova and Bachmann, while both were also literary prophets of some later developments in gender studies. Starting from the “It” in her poetry, Akhmatova regained her “I” in the face of the surrounding death structures, towards her national as well as world significance. Bachmann’s dead man from “Exile” travelled back via Rome, where she died, to make her the most appreciated woman writer today in her beloved Vienna. As gender mediation is already a metamorphosis, transgressing the speaking subject and the reading subject, the Bakhtinian dialogism (1981) of such mediation is prone to appropriating the opposite of what one seemingly is. This also pertains to both national aspects and world aspects of the writing self that are meticulously articulated by Akhmatova and Bachmann, as each of them, in her own way, looked beyond the national context to a world one.

NOTES

- ¹ About singularity in literature see Attridge 2004; Weber 2021; Festić 2022.
- ² This time-frame (1917–1924) covers my selection of Akhmatova’s poetry, pertaining to the article topic.
- ³ In general, the translation by Max Hayward and Stanley Kunitz ([1967] 1997) is used. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Russian and German, and emphasis are by the present author.
- ⁴ Reference to Jacques Lacan’s understanding of “gaze” as an excess, outside of the control of a subject’s consciousness (1981).
- ⁵ Notable literary writers in Russian language of the same time also belonged to opposite blocks, such as, on the pro-socialist side Maxim Gorky, early Vladimir Mayakovsky, Grigori Alexandrov, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Vladimir Kirillov, and on the anti-Bolshevik side Alexander Blok, Andrei Bely (symbolists), Sergei Yesenin, Anatoly Marienhof, Nikolai Punin, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam.
- ⁶ Teresa de Lauretis wrote an extensive study on this topic (2008).
- ⁷ For some studies on Akhmatova see Feinstein 2005; Harrington 2006; Rilkova 2010; Mandelstam 2018.
- ⁸ The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis defined by Jacques Lacan (1981): unconscious, repetition, transference, drive. On a further elaboration of repetition as introducing a difference with each repetitive act, see Deleuze [1968] 1995, an exposition of the critique of identity and Western metaphysics.
- ⁹ Translation is made by the present author, consulting Hayward and Kunitz translation ([1967] 1997).

- ¹⁰ Such were the philosopher of language (and language games) Ludwig Wittgenstein and the psychologist Otto Weininger (bisexual nature of human identity).
- ¹¹ On post-feminism see, e.g., Wright 2000.
- ¹² See some studies on Bachmann, such as Leahy 2007; Bürger and Rider 1989.
- ¹³ The published correspondence covers almost twenty years of their intimate friendship (1948–1967). Bachmann remarkably confronted the immediate Austrian/German Nazi past and in the literary, human, and male poetic figure of Celan she found a spring of inspiration for saving memory and truth behind new national states.

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Gender as a mediation between world literature and national literature

Gender dynamics. Language. Im-mobility. National/world literature.

This article approaches the discussion on world and national literature from an interactive gender angle, pointing to a hybrid multi-scaling of their components. It probes Anna Akhmatova's and Ingeborg Bachmann's gender and language performance within two (re)imperializing post-World War I/II structures, the socialist Bolshevik and nationalist Austrian ones, and how these two writers rewrite these structures from within, from the positions of forced immobility and high mobility. It is the way gender evolves and mutates in their work that navigates the national and world aspects of their production as well as their individual cogency in performing what can be read as national and/or world literature.

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