TOO LONG TO THE COURTLY MUSES

Hugh MacLennan as a Contemporary Writer

Paul Goetsch

RITICAL STATEMENTS about Canadian writers tend to fall into three categories. Literary nationalists hasten to root the writer to a Canadian tradition. Self-conscious cosmopolitan critics see the colonial time-lag at work. And a few sober academics rest satisfied with a thorough analysis, after the modern fashion, of the author's achievement, and suggest his place in literary history only incidentally.

In the case of Hugh MacLennan such diverging approaches have led to some confusion. Do his first three novels "sum up nicely the main stream of Canadian fiction in its first century"? Or is a work like *Barometer Rising* "a remarkably fresh and stimulating book to read" only because the attitudes and techniques of the Georgian writers are applied "to a new environment and historical situation"? Or is it true that "one need only consider the widely contrasted works of Virginia Woolf and Franz Kafka to visualize the diverse areas which Mr. MacLennan is now [in *Each Man's Son*] attempting to synthesize"?

We must admit that all these judgements have some foundation in fact. Mac-Lennan's treatment of nationalism, for instance, bears a resemblance, even if superficial, to the Confederation novel, and a number of the devices he employs — the omniscient point of view, the explicit commentary on action, and the labelling characterization — derive from an older tradition. To arrive at a truly balanced historical estimate, however, we have to describe the characteristic blend of contemporary and traditional elements rather than pick out, and pigeonhole, single aspects of the writer's work.

MacLennan's first novel, Barometer Rising, appearing in 1941, was surprisingly late as a work on the First World War. But, besides offering a fresh interpretation of the Canadian experience from a nationalistic point of view, it gives a new aspect to the war novel. MacLennan starts out from the premises which many major Anglo-Saxon writers accepted in the twenties and thirties. To Hemingway, Dos Passos and others, the war meant the end of the old social order, an initiation into violence that isolated the soldier from the civilian, made him regard traditional values as a mockery, and deprived him of any impulse to cope with the future. For a while this seems to apply to MacLennan's hero Neil Macrae. He returns to Halifax, disillusioned, lonely, vainly trying to observe in the town the same changes the war has caused in himself. "He might as well be dead as the way he was, since the chief loss in death was the ability to communicate." But on his solitary walks through Halifax he gradually finds himself. Even before the climax of the novel is reached, he dismisses, as self-hatred, the idea of avenging himself on his uncle, who betrayed him in France and still threatens to have him tried for desertion. And when the explosion of an ammunition boat destroys part of Halifax, he participates in the rescue work, without thinking about securing his position legally. In his conscience he feels that the young generation need not justify itself; the colonial society has been blown wide apart, and Canadians may now concentrate on the tasks of the future:

... if there were enough Canadians like himself, half-American and half-English, then the day was inevitable when the halves would join and this country would become the central arch which united the new order.

Here MacLennan manipulates the clichés of Canadian nationalism to motivate Neil Macrae's final, positive reaction toward the war. Neil is set free from his disillusion at the moment he is forced, by the explosion, to re-live and view his oversea combat experience within a Canadian context. He realizes that:

[Canadians] were not living out the sociological results of their own lives when they crawled through the trenches of France.

Questionable as the sociological theory that Canada came of age in the First World War may be, it becomes almost credible in the novel because there it is largely conceived in terms of character and action; so much so that nationalism remains a secondary motive, which serves to localize a story of universal implications. While the explosion images the fact of war, the ensuing rescue work, which is carried out by members of both the old and young generations, suggests that, in

the face of chaos, a new group spirit asserts itself. Throughout the novel, the process of self-discovery and rebirth is further objectified by a technique of mystification loosely patterned on the account of Ulysses' return to Ithaca. Like Ulysses, Neil remains anonymous for some time and has to prove himself through action before he may mention his name again and rejoin Penelope Wain.

Fusing the motives of war and homecoming by means of a highly contrived, parabolic plot, MacLennan manages in *Barometer Rising* to bring the personal problems of his typical characters to a satisfying resolution and also to convey, through them, a sense of the social questions involved. In his second and third novels this technique breaks down as social documentation and nationalistic considerations take precedence over character and action.

The earlier part of Two Solitudes seems at first to reproduce the trappings of the social world presented in the English regional novel before and about the turn of the century. As in Hardy's Jude the Obscure, the principles of a closed society, as upheld by typed and slightly satirized characters, are challenged by a few individuals, who, in turn, are ostracized by the society and suffer a fate near to tragedy. At a second glance, however, it becomes clear that the social reality MacLennan depicts is more complex and more modern. The values of the French-Canadian village are not only questioned by its well-meaning seignieur, Athanase Tallard, but also by a rival social edifice, as rigid and as prejudiced—the Anglo-Canadian community. MacLennan's point of departure is, then, a society at war with itself, on the verge of fragmentation.

His theme, the union of the two halves of Canada, is developed in three steps. Athanase Tallard, unlike the Anglo-Canadian Captain Yardley, tries to make the adjustment a political and social, rather than a human, one. He loses his friends and finally himself when, as a result of his quarrel with the Catholic church, he chooses to become a Presbyterian. His death-bed return to his ancestral faith is, as Claude Bissell puts it,

... a dramatic way of saying that with nations, as with individuals, there are deep instinctive urges that cannot be forced into a common mould.4

Tallard's son, Paul, is better prepared to resist the pull of the two "race legends" since his education at English schools has rid him of the prejudices of his group. But the economic depression alienates him entirely from society and disenchants him as the war had disenchanted Neil Macrae. Only after a long stay abroad does Paul realize what it means to be a Canadian. His marriage to

Heather Methuen, an Anglo-Canadian, is meant to indicate the only kind of union possible for Canada, a unity in diversity:

Now as she [Heather] watched him sleeping she knew that in spite of loving her he had never lost the sense of himself. She was not jealous of the part she could not touch. What she did have was a hundred images of him engraved on her mind, all different.

If to be a Canadian means, however, that the French-Canadian has to be bilingual, cut off from his own group, and a member, in turn, of the Catholic and Presbyterian churches, the marriage is not a union of equal partners. MacLennan's novel of symbolic reconciliation in this respect resembles the best-selling minority novels in which the dice are always loaded against the minority. His failure to come to a clear conception is paralleled by an uneven execution of the three movements of his theme, a fact which Hugo McPherson, to whose discussions of MacLennan this essay is much indebted, has well described.

Is Two Solitudes is partly redeemed by the importance of its theme and the imaginative, though contrived and non-realistic account of the clash of opposing group values in its earlier part, MacLennan's third work of fiction, The Precipice, is the least successful of his novels. As a study in the contrasting sensibilities of two peoples, of Americans and Canadians, it recalls those novels of W. D. Howells and Henry James in which the international theme is interwoven with the question of the Puritan's inhibition, innocence, and experience. But while Howells and James introduce us to sharply individualized people and imply national characteristics and differences, MacLennan is not able to translate, into an original story, the generalizations he has drawn in his essays on American-Canadian relations.

When, in 1938, the American engineer, Steve Lassiter, comes to Grenville, one of many Victorian small towns in Canada, he is confronted by society still adhering to the Calvinistic code of belief and behaviour. He himself is plagued by a sense of guilt. In contrast to Jane Cameron, who may be said to represent the collective conscience of Grenville, he no longer believes in the possibility of becoming one of the "elect."

Because Stephen had always feared his father, he thought of him as infallible, like God. Therefore it was inevitable that he thought of the depression as a sort of cosmic accident.

Lassiter tries to forget his own difficulties and marries Jane's younger sister, Lucy, who is glad to escape from her crippling environment. Up to this point, The Precipice resembles The Old Wives' Tale both in its plot-line and in the detached treatment of a small-town background, though not of course, in motivation, for the resolution of the novel is not at all anti-romantic. It is true that Lucy, like Sophia Scales, is left by her husband and returns disillusioned to her home town. But there she is released entirely from her Puritan heritage, recognizes the importance of love and forgiveness, and rejoins her husband at a time he most needs her. Lucy's reaction seems to mirror the therapy which the author prescribes for nations as well as individuals on the basis of an unconvincing diagnosis. According to MacLennan, the differences between the two North-American nations are to be explained by Canada's retarded development and, more especially, by the continuing influence of Puritanism. Yet, since the Canadians have not turned their backs on religion altogether, they are, it seems, in a position to help their American neighbours, who have been driven, by their pursuit of material values, to the edge of a precipice.

The odd mixture of nationalistic and religious considerations, and the clichéridden action, are equally responsible for the novel's failure, and mark it a transitional piece. For *The Precipice* is at least indicative of MacLennan's growing awareness that certain personal problems — those of Steve and Lucy (and of Athanase in the previous novel) — cannot be solved in terms of society but demand a private, that is, religious solution. In *Each Man's Son* the necessary shift in emphasis takes place. Puritanism is still dominant and carries social implications; but in spite of the author's unhappy "Prologue", it is no longer a sociological abstraction. It stands rather for a religious attitude, for a faith subjected to critical examination and found wanting.

The main strand of action is concerned with Dr. Ainslie's spiritual crisis. Brought up a strict Calvinist, Ainslie considers himself and the people on Cape Breton haunted by an ancient curse, by

. . . the belief that man has inherited from Adam a nature so sinful there is no hope for him and that furthermore, he lives and dies under the wrath of an arbitrary God who will forgive only a handful of His elect on the Day of Judgment.

Since his abilities are thwarted on the island, Ainslie feels guilty and lonely. Un-

like the miners, he cannot identify himself with the boxer Archie MacNeil, whose fights in the United States make up the second strand of action. But perhaps, he thinks, he may be able to find a new meaning in life by centering his hopes and ambitions on the prizefighter's son, Alan. This attempt fails. Trying to win the boy for himself, he erects a barrier between him and his mother and drives her into the arms of the Frenchman Camire. Ainslie has yet to learn that one must not love selfishly. He has to learn also that he, himself, is searching not for a son but, as McKenzie tells him, for a God. When he realizes that his fear of the ancient curse has caused him to fear love itself, his spiritual evolution is complete. And by mere chance he may now even prove himself a truer "father" to Alan than Archie MacNeil ever was; for the boy is left an orphan when Archie returns home, slays his wife and her lover, and dies of a brain-hæmorrhage.

Critics have been quick to question the unity of Each Man's Son and to charge MacLennan with failing to relate Ainslie's reflections to the action. On a closer reading, however, we discover that the author has projected a second, more objective point of view which enlarges the narrow rationalizations of Dr. Ainslie and his friend McKenzie. It is the point of view of the eight-year-old Alan Mac-Neil. Alan serves MacLennan as the pivotal character about whom the two parts of the plot revolve. To the boy, who has no knowledge of Puritanism, or even of the meaning of sin, the events appear as a struggle between two kinds of father figure — between the boxer, who is the "strongest man" in the world but indifferent to his son, and Dr. Ainslie, who "know everything" and can explain the nature of the stars. Alan keeps comparing the two. He recognizes Ainslie's love without knowing anything about his Puritan scruples, and hopes that one day the boxer will return and chase his mother's lover away, so that Dr. Ainslie will become their friend again. Horribly enough, his wish comes true. He flees from Archie MacNeil and, in due course, will accept Ainslie as his "father". If we see Alan as the focus of the action, the novel assumes something of the quality of legend and mirrors structurally Dr. Ainslie's development. In fact, Ainslie, for a moment, thinks he is Alan and then realizes that his inner conflict is one between two different kinds of God images:

The theologians, not Jesus, have tried to convince us that God, out of His infinite loving-kindness and tender mercy, out of His all-wise justice, has decided that nearly all human beings are worthless and must be scourged in the hope that a few of them, through a lifetime of punishment, might become worth saving. Now he had something specific to be angry about, and Ainslie let his rage build upon itself.

It seems that Dr. Ainslie does not so much have to emancipate himself from his Puritan environment as to find his true self. When doing his work in the hospital, he has always demonstrated unselfish love and self-sacrifice; and hence it is small wonder that he has, for Alan, embodied the principle of love all the while.

If the two points of view do not quite coalesce to make the novel a fully integrated whole, this is due to the fact that, as in *Barometer Rising*, the technique of the omniscient narrator does not go well with a parabolic plot. What the action suggests has to be commented on *ad nauseam* by the characters to show they have come to the same conclusions as the reader. MacLennan needs an narrator who can both act and interpret the action. His fifth novel, where "the story-teller and the self-explorer are one" is, therefore, a major advance.

study of the character of George Stewart, but beyond it he creates a symbolic structure akin to allegory. On the first level, the novel deals with various phases of Stewart's development, phases which, thanks to his wide range of interests and many contacts with other persons, come to serve as pegs for an account of the major social experiences of people living in our time. The miraculous return from the dead of Jerome Martell in 1951 releases in the narrator a flood of memories presented in a series of carefully worked-out regressions, and juxtaposed to, and thus indirectly interpreted by, Stewart's opinions and actions at the time of the Korean War. From this re-assessment of both past and present emerge two pictures unlike each other in outline. As Stewart demonstrates by stressing the prevailing passions at the expense of naturalistic detail, life during the Great Depression was quite different from life in the post-war world.

It is Jerome Martell who seems to represent the pre-war period. Jerome, on whom childhood experiences in the New Brunswick woods and the shock of the First World War have left their mark, is forever restless, reacting violently on the spur of a moment, unbelieving but searching for a belief; he leaves his wife Catherine and goes to participate in the Spanish War because he thinks a man must belong to something larger than himself and commit himself even to a lost cause. George, on the other hand, views himself as a typical representative of the time after the war. He has married Catherine, his boyhood sweetheart, has got a well-paid job as a radio commentator, is cautious, if not complacent, distrusts

passionate emotions, and, above all, longs to keep his hard-won economic and social security. He thinks he has come to terms with life.

After Martell's return, George realizes how insecure, in a spiritual sense, his position really is; for there is one point after all in which past and present meet. If the depression has meant living in the face of an imminent war, life in the fifties means living in the shadow of the atomic bomb. This idea is effectively presented in terms of Catherine's two marriages. In reaction to the threat of a diseased heart, Catherine has from her childhood chosen to affirm life in extremity; she has the strength to do so even when Jerome Martell's return reminds her how little time remains. The wisdom she has always possessed, which Jerome has acquired in the European concentration camps, "and which George tries to understand and share is the book's religious core."

If the spiritual problems underlying two different phases in history and a solution couched in the form of a message were all MacLennan intended to point out, we should, indeed, fail to understand why he regarded his novel as an experiment. But MacLennan also uses his version of the flashback technique to convey thematically and structurally the fact of George Stewart's religious initiation; except for the Everyman passages toward the end of the novel, the whole statement is rendered through imagery and action.

Since the passages above referred to paraphrase and even mention major concepts of Jung's psychology, it is convenient to interpret the novel, on its second level of meaning, as analogous to Jung's analytic technique - as an individuation process, in which the contents of the unconscious is assimilated with the conscious to effect a harmonization of the psyche. When George are lost in himself, given up to his memories, two persons he knows in actuality loom larger than life and take on the character of archetypal figures. Catherine seems a "queen," "a rock," "a saint," "a spiritual force". Hers is the beauty of an "angel". Her "strength," her "essence," and her "mystery" have attracted George so much that, occasionally, he has "almost drowned" in her "spirit". But at the same time, she has kept eluding him. Catherine resembles what Jung would call the anima archetype. Jerome, for his part, is called "a force of nature," "a martyr," and George's "spiritual father". He is the geist figure which, as Jung says with reference to the old man in the fairy-tale, appears whenever the hero is in a dilemma and needs guidance. Thus, Jerome has strengthened Catherine's will to live, has helped George to get a job, and has miraculously come back before Catherine's death to force Stewart to adopt a new attitude toward life (and cure Harry Blackwell of his obsession with Norah). Jerome's flight by boat from the murderer of his mother is made to equate Stewart's perilous situation:

Then a man discovers in dismay that what he believed to be his identity is no more than a tiny canoe at the mercy of an ocean.

And his return from the bottom of the ocean, as it were, his dying into life after dreadful years in concentration camps, externalizes George's mystical experience that culminates in the recognition of "the last harmony."

In a way, the structure of the novel is paradoxical. What on the factual level appears to be the worst time of Stewart's life — the depression — is, in his self-analysis, a place of danger, and yet of regeneration. Correspondingly, Catherine, the woman George loves, is also the woman he hates for the power she has over him. And if Jerome's departure for Spain seems a bad decision in 1938, it ultimately leads to his salvation. All this suggests not only that many facets of life resist logical analysis, but also that MacLennan is attempting in a work of fiction what, according to George, "the musicians alone seem able to record":

One musical idea uttered in the minor in a certain tempo is surrender, despair and suicide. The same idea restated in the major with horns and woods becomes an exultant call to life.

If this interpretation is just, the success of *The Watch That Ends the Night* as a work of art obviously stands and falls on the credibility of its narrator, George Stewart. One reviewer has said of him that "his mania for handing out crashing complacencies on almost every imaginable major consideration in life... is in curious contrast to his other mania for emphasizing his many insufficiencies." This is putting a basically correct observation in negative terms. George belongs to the stock type of the naive narrator. Like the high school teacher Serenus Zeitblom in Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, he is in everyday life a shrewd but not exceptional observer of events political and social. But, as he knows very well, not everything can be interpreted in his usual manner. Again like Serenus Zeitblom, he is a newcomer to the emotional and irrational part of life; it is in keeping with his character when he depreciates himself in talking of Catherine or Jerome, persons he cannot fully understand. Although he is an intellectual, he has "the grace to wonder". His self-devaluation reveals his humility.

By choosing this narrator, MacLennan seems to have made a virtue of what used to be glaring faults in his previous novels. A man like George will like to generalize glibly about major issues and offer explanations of what makes people

tick. But MacLennan achieves distance between himself and his story-teller by showing how Stewart's rash judgments are corrected by the passage of time or rendered relative by his new religious insights. In the final part of the novel, however, MacLennan seems to identify himself so much with the narrator that many readers will find Stewart's remarks, rhetorical and painfully emotional as they are, hard to accept.

As Hermann Boeschenstein has recently pointed out, Hugh MacLennan is a highly versatile writer, conversant with a host of psychological problems and sociological questions, commanding a variety of devices and techniques. Yet, there is a family resemblance between his novels, and if The Watch That Ends The Night seems an epitome of its predecessors, this is due to the limited number of motives in which MacLennan's artistic vision crystallizes. The return of a man believed dead is the mainspring of action in Barometer Rising and The Watch That Ends The Night. Adultery is made the vehicle of protest against a narrow-minded environment in Two Solitudes, and is an escape from personal difficulties in all the other novels. Leading characters either tend to drop the burdens of civilization and go off by themselves, or, in the manner of Thomas Wolfe's figures, have to go abroad before they recognize what their homecountry means to them.

There is, however, one recurring cluster of motives that, more than any other, gives expression to the triadic structure of MacLennan's vision and lends itself to historical interpretation. The starting-point for MacLennan's novels is incomplete man and his stifled, unduly restricted life. Man, at this stage, is seen to be determined by his environment or by a traumatic shock suffered in early youth or during the war. In his best works MacLennan telescopes this fact, which has been treated at length in the modern novel, into the brief moment of a sudden catastrophe and views man as a child running away in fright. Thus, ten-year-old Roddie Wain flees from the scene of disaster; Alan MacNeil hides from his father; Jerome Martell escapes in his canoe from the lumber camp; and Marius Tallard is shocked into becoming an enemy of his father when he watches him commit adultery. The second stage of development is characterized by the "farewell-to-arms" mood (Hemingway's work is mentioned and discussed in three novels). Released from the pressures of his environment and having gone

through an ordeal, man is lonely, disheartened, and homeless. This period is likewise dealt with as briefly as possible. George Stewart's five-year stay at Waterloo is, for instance, glossed over in a couple of pages. And in *The Precipice* it is not Steve Lassiter, whose disillusion is growing from day to day, but Lucy Cameron who is in the centre of attention. For what MacLennan is, above all, interested in is how man reaches the third stage where he accepts life as it is and is able to make a quiet affirmation. As Stewart says about the political situation in the thirties:

... why waste time explaining the pattern? It is obvious now, and dozens of books have been written about it. Less obvious have been some of the attendant passions that went along with this neo-religious faith. Passion has a way of spilling over into all aspects of the human mind and feelings.

Early in his career, MacLennan took issue with the notion that historical processes are rigidly determined.¹¹ In his literary criticism, he has charged such writers as Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway with reacting "in extreme and private fashion against the change in mental climate which differentiates our time from the past."¹² The mature man is to MacLennan one who faces violence or a narrow environment squarely and does not permit himself to be defeated or cramped by it. In contrast to the children, Neil Macrae and the adult Jerome Martell testify to the capacity of grown-up human beings to pass through an ordeal and assume their responsibility to themselves and to society, whereas Dr. Ainslie learns how to integrate even terrible accidents and catastrophes with a belief in love and God.

MacLennan, then, does not take a tradition for granted. Though the body of experience incorporated in the so-called modern novel is not denied but is partly accepted as valid, MacLennan, as a contemporary writer, wrestles for a positive solution. In this respect, all of his novels are experiments, for few modern writers have dared to encompass, in one work, the movement from violence to such a full affirmation as made in Dr. Ainslie's statement:

Life was never so vivid as when it was in danger, nor was a human being ever so vitally himself as when he had passed through pain and emerged on the other side of it.

To see MacLennan's achievement in proper perspective, we have to admit, however, that he has benefited from his quarrels with the American novelists. First of all, his frontal assault on the complex of violence, by means of a stylized

story, aligns him with the major American writers. Secondly, MacLennan has fallen back, in method, on the major American tradition. It is the romance, with its air of probability in the midst of improbability and its proximity to mythic and allegoric forms of order, which enables him to blend catastrophe and affirmation successfully. Thirdly, MacLennan is close to the American writers when he deals with the third stage. His affimation in *Barometer Rising* and *Two Solitudes* seems to be a nationalistic variant of the collective humanism typical of many novels of the thirties, such as, for example Hemingway's *For Who the Bell Tolls*.

Yet even when MacLennan seems consciously to echo Hemingway, he is characteristically different. Both he and Hemingway (In Our Time) see the effects of the First World War anticipated by Jerome's and Nick Adams' child-hood experiences in the New Brunswick and Michigan woods, respectively. But while Nick retreats behind the Hemingway code of "You got to be tough", Jerome responds more fully as a human being of his age would: he is truly afraid of the murderer of his mother and flees.

I suggest, then, that MacLennan's successful works of fiction are influenced by, and a reaction against, the American tradition of novel writing. This conclusion is borne out by MacLennan's own statements, for in 1946 he said:

... is it natural for Canadians to adhere to the decaying Renaissance culture of Europe, or to the American branch cycle? There can only be one answer. Canadians must write for the American market because it is the cultural pattern to which they naturally belong. It is their only avenue to a world audience. And yet by doing so, they must compete on equal terms with American writers.¹²

Since he believed, however, that the American writers were aping the decadent experiments of European novelists, he demanded that "American literary critics should cease looking to Europe as a model,"¹³ and thus repeated Emerson's famous thesis, "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe."

NOTES

- ¹ W. H. Magee, Trends in the English Canadian Novel in the Twentieth Century, PhD thesis, Toronto, 1950, p. 303.
- ² G. Woodcock, "Hugh MacLennan," Northern Review, Apr.-May 1950, p. 5.
- ³ H. McPherson, "The Novels of Hugh MacLennan," Queen's Quarterly, LX, 1953, p. 198.

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- 4 Two Solitudes, ed. by C. T. Bissell, Toronto, 1951, p. xviii.
- ⁵ R. Davies, "MacLennan's Rising Sun," Saturday Night, LXXIII, March 28, 1959, p. 30.
- ⁶ F. W. Watt, "Fiction," University of Toronto Quarterly, July, 1960, p. 462.
- ⁷ H. MacLennan, "The Story of a Novel," Canadian Literature, 3, Winter 1960, pp. 35-9.
- ⁸ W. Tallman, "An After-Glance at MacLennan," Canadian Literature, 1, Summer 1959, p. 81.
- ⁹ W. O'Hearn, "A Sense of Wonder Preserved and Shared," The New York Times Book Review, Feb. 25, 1959, p. 5.
- ¹⁰ H. Boeschenstein, "Hugh MacLennan, ein kanadischer Romancier," Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, VIII, 1960, p. 117.
- "Roman History and To-Day," Dalhousie Review, XV, 1936, pp. 67-78.
- ¹² "Changing Values in Fiction," The Canadian Author and Bookman, XXV, 1949 p. 14.
- ¹³ "Canada Between Covers," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXIX, Sept 7, 1946, p. 6.

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