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Italo Calvino's *Lezioni Americane* applied to his famous novel *Il Barone Rampante*

Abstract: This article highlights the presence of two of Italo Calvino's lessons in his novel *Il Barone Rampante* [*The Baron in the Trees*]. In his *Lezioni Americane* [*American Lessons*] the author focuses on the main features of literature, and in particular lightness and visibility can be found in one of his most famous writings. After a brief explanation of the main characteristics of both lessons, some examples from the novel are given. Starting from some studies about *Lezioni Americane* and *Il Barone Rampante*, the aim of this research is to compare the two novels taking into account the thought of the author.

Key words: Calvino, Baron, American, lessons, lightness, visibility, comparative

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When analyzing Italo Calvino's writings in order to compare them, there are some studies that have been taken into account in this article. Domenico Scarpa's and Marco Belpolit's works about the author represent a fundamental contribution concerning Calvino's life and thinking. At the same time, articles such as the ones published by Umberto Eco provide an interesting point of view on the writer's work.

In 1960 Italo Calvino published the first edition of *I Nostri Antenati* [*Our Ancestors*], a trilogy of fantastic-allegorical novels about contemporary man. This particular moment of the author's production delineates the shift from neorealism to fantastic¹. The collection of novels was published in Turin by Einaudi.

The first novel of the trilogy is *Il Visconte Dimezzato* [*The Cloven Viscount*], completed in 1952. It is a brief novel set at the end of the XVI century that narrates the deeds of the viscount Medardo of Terralba, who, with the Christian army, leaves Italy to reach Bohemia in order to fight against the Turks. It is during this war that the viscount is somehow cut into halves which end up fighting one another. This plays a core role in symbolizing the inner contrast typical of the new kind of man that Calvino is describing in this cycle of novels. The second novel, *Il Barone Rampante* [*The Baron in the Trees*], was written in 1957 and became one of Calvino's most famous novels due to the particular plot and the unique style of the novel. It is the story of a baron, Cosimo Piovasco of Rondò, told by his brother Biagio. The novel begins in the XVII century when, at the age of 12, the protagonist has a fight with his parents and decides to climb a tree in order to live there for the rest of his life. He achieves these aims by conducting a very well described life in trees, going from one branch to another. He creates his new life, watching the world from above and discovering love, in the character of Viola, and history. *Il Barone Rampante* is to all effects a *bildungsroman*² as it follows the growing up of Cosimo and his formation. Living in the trees, in fact, doesn't mean that the protagonist is not involved in culture, philosophy and history. One of the expedients used by

¹ A. Tinkler, *Italo Calvino*, "The Review of Contemporary Fiction", Spring 2002, p. 68.

² According to the Collins English Dictionary it is "a novel concerned with a person's formative years and development." The German word is composed by *bildung* (education) and *roman* (novel), and the first novel considered as an example of *bildungsroman* is Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, translated in English in 1824.

Calvino is to place in the novel a correspondence between Cosimo and Voltaire. The last novel that completes the trilogy is *Il Cavaliere Inestente* [*The Nonexistent Knight*], completed in 1959. This last novel takes place at the time of the Crusades and relies upon two opposite characters: Agiulfo, an empty suit of armor that exists only because of willpower and conscience, and Gurdulù, who exists, but without conscience.

In the introduction to the edition of 1960, Italo Calvino describes the trilogy as «un'esemplificazione dei tipi di mutilazione dell'uomo contemporaneo» and, he adds, this man is «mutilato, incompleto, nemico a se stesso³». The trilogy represents the interest of Calvino for mankind and their feelings, experiences and problems. The same interest that Ludovico Ariosto already showed and for whom Italo Calvino took inspiration. The link between the authors is, in fact, the *fil rouge*⁴, which is present in both their writings: the analysis of men's behaviors and emotions in both concrete and fictional realities. Calvino's reference to Ariosto's writing is visible throughout the trilogy. There are many allusions relating to chivalric literature: from the setting to the name of the characters, such as "Bradamante" and a strong use of irony.

Irony is one of the main tricks used by Italo Calvino in his famous novel *Il Barone Rampante* to give a style to the writing in order to make it light and easy to read. This particular novel is one of the best and proves that the author applies his own ideas, e.g. the one he explained in his *Lezioni Americane*⁵ [*American Lessons*]. Italo Calvino should have provided a cycle of conferences at Harvard University during the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures from 1985 to 1986. Due to the death of the author he never gave these lectures, but they were posthumously published by his wife Esther. The title of each lesson later became the title of each chapter of the book: *Leggerezza*, *Rapidità*, *Esattezza*, *Visibilità*, *Molteplicità*⁶, and the last one, incomplete, that is on con-

³ In this quotation Calvino means the trilogy as an exemplification of the types of mutilation of modern man, who is mutilated, incomplete, and an enemy of himself. I. Calvino, *I Nostri Antenati*, Torino, Einaudi, 1960.

⁴ The concept of *fil rouge* is a French metaphor that means conductive thread. A recurring element or concept present within a work or that links more than one writing.

⁵ I. Calvino, *Lezioni Americane. Sei proposte per il nuovo millennio*, Milano, Garzanti, 1988.

⁶ Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, Multiplicity.

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sistency, and appears as an appendix with the title *Cominciare e finire* (literally *Starting and ending*). Each lesson is a clear summary of Italo Calvino's suggestion for the new century and, at the same time, of his ideas on literature. Some of these ideas are likely to be found in Calvino's most famous novel. In particular, the most evident ones are *Lightness* and *Visibility*.

In one analysis of *Il Barone Rampante*, Umberto Eco noticed how Calvino focused on being somehow light in his way of writing and, highlighted the critic, he directly refers to the first lesson of *Lezioni Americane*:

[...] eliminato dalle prime versioni delle proprie opere certi paragrafi moraleggianti che avrebbero potuto rendere le sue lezioni troppo invadenti. Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò non insegna nulla, almeno, non ai lettori. Si limita a incarnare un esempio. Solo in due punti il romanzo suggerisce una possibile lettura/interpretazione morale. Il primo punto (nel capitolo XX) è quello in cui si dice che Cosimo riteneva che, se si voleva osservare la terra nel modo giusto, bisognava mantenere la giusta distanza da essa. Il che mi rimanda a un'osservazione dalle *Lezioni Americane*: «È sempre in un rifiuto della visione diretta che sta la forza di Perseo, ma non in un rifiuto della realtà del mondo di mostri in cui gli è toccato di vivere, una realtà che egli porta con sé, che assume come proprio fardello». [...] Cosimo decide di trascorrere la propria intera vita aerea sugli alberi, volando via dal mondo terreno. Ma quegli alberi non sono per lui una torre d'avorio. Dalle loro cime, osserva la realtà, acquistando una saggezza superiore, proprio perché la gente che egli vede gli appare piccolissima, e comprende meglio di chiunque altro i problemi dei poveri esseri umani che hanno la sventura di dover camminare sui propri piedi⁷.

Everything in the novel is based on the antithesis between heaviness and lightness from the very beginning. The omniscient narrator, Cosimo's brother, describes the heavy ritual of family dinners and its participants: the long and weighty wig of their father, the strict rigor of the abbot, their parents' repro-

⁷ In this article Eco explains how Calvino decides to remove every moral paragraph from his writing. Cosimo carries a message without imposing it on the reader. His behavior works as an example for what Calvino means in his lessons. U. Eco, *La morale è nella leggerezza*, "Domenica – Il Sole 24 ore", may 26 2013.

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aches for any imperfect behavior. The long description underlines the looming climate of heaviness. In contrast, life outside the home is described as easy and bright. In two words: pure lightness. The descriptions of the settings, whether they are indoors or outdoors, are always provided by the author using the dichotomy heavy – light.

In addition, another thing that must be noted is how the language of the author also serves the aim of being light.

Quella del Barone Rampante è una lingua cristallina, e Calvino (si veda la terza delle sue *Lezioni Americane*) ha detto che il cristallo, con la sua sfaccettatura precisa e la sua capacità di riflettere la luce, era il modello di perfezione che aveva sempre accarezzato, come un simbolo⁸.

Even if the author focuses, through his characters, on historical events, demonstrating a great knowledge of facts and philosophers such as Voltaire, his style does not change. It just stays as clear and light as it is when he tells about the young boy in the trees. The style stays but the point of view is totally different when Cosimo manages to jump over the high branch. It seems, for the guy, a great conquest and a unique opportunity to look at things from another perspective. As the narrator will explain, Cosimo will notice how every single thing looked from above just seemed different:

Critics have unanimously assessed *The Baron in the Trees* the most successful work of the trilogy. *Bildungsroman* (formation novel), geometric fairytale, historical pastiche, philosophical action: none of these seems to be totally appropriate to describe this work depicting the adventurous life in a fantastic eighteenth-century atmosphere of this positive, rebellious, lonely, impulsive, forward-looking hero, with autobiographical features and therefore particularly well-loved by Calvino⁹.

⁸ The crystal clear language used by Calvino is coherent with his third lesson. He states that the structure of a crystal allows it to spread light, and somehow a crystal language is the perfection that the author seeks. *Ibidem*.

⁹ M. Campagnaro, *A Classic Work of Italian Literature: Italo Calvino's Trilogy for Young Readers*, Padova, Libri & Liberi, 2013, p.88.

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As Campagnaro states in this quotation, the adventures described by Calvino are surrounded by the XVIII Century's atmosphere, and moving the point of view of the protagonist permits an honest narration of the history of the time. Also, Calvino highlights the inner debate of every man, split between the use of reason as the main tool for an interpretation of life and, on the other hand, personal relationships and the importance of society. This constant seeking for a balance between solitude and bonding is what Cesare Cases defines in 1958 as *pathos* of distance¹⁰:

col Barone Rampante Calvino ha invece trovato la soluzione: ha insediato il suo eroe sulle piante, a una distanza tale da poter essere in rapporto con gli uomini e giovar loro senza essere offeso dalla sana, ma un po' maleodorante natura del popolo e da quella arida e crudele dei suoi nobili familiari¹¹.

Visibility

By physically moving his protagonist Calvino emphasizes how the character becomes a bridge between the events that take place on the ground and the reader. He narrates this novel through Cosimo's descriptions and perceptions and, most of all, Cosimo's view. He applies to this novel one of his lessons: *visibility*.

All'origine di ogni storia che ho scritto c'è un'immagine che mi gira per la testa, nata chissà come e che mi porto dietro magari per anni. A poco a poco mi viene da sviluppare questa immagine in una storia con un principio e una fine, e nello stesso tempo [...] mi convinco che essa racchiude qualche significato¹².

In his own *incipit* to *I Nostri Antenati* Calvino underlines how, in his creative act of writing, he starts from an image that comes to his mind. He has an

¹⁰ The concept was firstly defined by Friederich Nietzsche as a behaviour of aristocratic men.

¹¹ Cases focus on how Italo Calvino finds a solution by placing his hero in the trees. Cosimo keeps a strong connection with the ground and with his family, but is not spoiled by human nature. C. Cases, *Calvino e il "pathos della distanza"* in *I metodi attuali della critica in Italia* edited by M. Corti e C. Segre, Torino, Eri, 1970, p.50.

¹² I. Calvino, *I Nostri Antenati*, Torino, Einaudi, 1960, p. 11.

image, he visualizes it, and later on it becomes meaningful. This is the basis of his novels. When he published his novel, a few years after the outbreak of television in Italy, he faces a new reality in which mankind is all the time exposed to a lot of images. Due to technological progress, in fact, Calvino is worried about the capacity to preserve imagination in his reader. Writing is, for the author, one of the main means that can develop the human faculty to imagine that could perish because of technology. He wants the reader to create and visualize colours, shapes and scenes simply by starting from letters put one with another on the page of a book. According to this aim, the novel is filled with precise descriptions in order to build precise and meticulous images. For example, in the following extract, it is clear how Calvino's intention is not only to show something but to make it real, to make it viewable and perceptible:

La villa era chiusa, le persiane sprangate; solo una, a un abbaino, sbatteva al vento. Il giardino lasciato senza cure aveva più che mai quell'aspetto di foresta d'altro mondo¹³.

Not only is it possible to read that a shutter slams in the wind, but the reader may also hear it, imagine it.

On the last page of the novel, Calvino entrusts the narrator with one of the most significant representations of his idea of *visibility*:

Ombrosa non c'è più. Guardando il cielo sgombro, mi domando se è davvero esistita. Quel frastaglio di rami e foglie, biforcazioni, lobi, spiumii, minuto e senza fine, e il cielo solo a sprazzi irregolari e ritagli, forse c'era solo perché ci passasse mio fratello col suo leggero passo di codibugnolo, era un ricamo fatto sul nulla che assomiglia a questo filo d'inchiostro, come l'ho lasciato correre per pagine e pagine, zeppo di cancellature, di rimandi, di sgorbi nervosi, di macchie, di lacune, che a momenti si sgrana in grossi acini chiari, a momenti si infittisce in segni minuscoli come semi puntiformi, ora si ritorce su se stesso, ora si biforca, ora collega grumi di frasi con contorni di foglie o di nuvole, e poi s'intoppa, e poi

¹³ I. Calvino, *Il Barone Rampante*, Torino, Einaudi, 1957, p. 85.

ripiglia a attorcigliarsi, e corre e corre e si sdipana e avvolge in ultimo grappolo insensato di parole idee sogni ed è finito¹⁴.

In these thoughts of Biagio, the evidence of what his hometown was and what it is not anymore is clear. He stays at the window and narrates what he is witnessing, giving to the reader one last glance at the environs. As in Calvino's other works, *Il Barone Rampante* also has some examples of humans' *voyeurism*¹⁵, mostly in the character of Biagio. This kind of *visibility* is one he puts into action when he observes Cosimo's actions and then he narrates them. At the same time, Cosimo himself is somehow an observer as he decides to move into the trees. His lifelong activity becomes to look down and watch. No one can see him, while he is able to have a complete vision of the life that develops below his new position:

Guardava tutto, e tutto era come niente. Tra i limoneti passava una donna con un cesto. Saliva un mulattiere per la china, reggendosi alla coda della mula. Non si videro tra loro; la donna, al rumore degli zoccoli ferrati, si voltò e si porse verso la strada, ma non fece in tempo. Si mise a cantare allora, ma il mulattiere passava già la svolta, tese l'orecchio, schioccò la frusta e alla mula disse: – Aah! – E tutto finì lí. Cosimo vedeva questo e quello¹⁶.

¹⁴ [Ombrosa no longer exists. Looking at the empty sky, I ask myself if it ever did really exist. That mesh of leaves and twigs of fork and froth, minute and endless, with the sky glimpsed only in sudden specks and splinters, perhaps it was only there so that my brother could pass through it with his tomtit's tread, was embroidered on nothing, like this thread of ink which I have let run on for page after page, swarming with cancellations, corrections, doodles, blots and gaps, bursting at times into clear big berries, coagulating at others into piles of tiny starry seeds, then twisting away, forking off, surrounding buds of phrases with frameworks of leaves and clouds, then interweaving again, and so running on and on and on until it splutters and bursts into a last senseless cluster of words, ideas, dreams, and so ends.] *Ivi*, p. 246.

¹⁵ M. Belpoliti, *L'occhio di Calvino*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006, p. 12.

¹⁶ [My brother sat there like a sentinel. He looked at everything, but nothing looked like anything to him. A woman with a basket was passing between the rows of lemon trees. Up the path came a muleteer holding on to his mule by the tail. The two never set eyes on each other; at the sound of the metal-shod hoofs the woman turned around and moved toward the path but did not reach it in time. She broke into song then, but the muleteer had already rounded the bend; he listened, cracked his whip and said "Aaah!" to the mule; nothing more. Cosimo saw it all.] I. Calvino, *Il Barone Rampante*, cit., 1957, p. 16.

It is only because he observes that he decides to go from a static immobility to a life of adventures: his willingness to witness the famous thief Gian dei Bruggi, for example, is the spring that pushes him to one of his greatest deeds. In the character of Cosimo, both of the natures of mankind seem to converge: he is the summary of solitude and social relationships. By placing him in the trees, Calvino seems to relegate him to a lonely life made of observation, but throughout the novel this conception is dispelled. As Alan A. Block noted, in fact

For Calvino, in *Baron in the Trees* [sic], reality depends solely on the materialist presences received through the complex ties and connections by which society is organized and controlled. Reality exists in the myriad interactions with which we engage as human beings during the course of our daily lives, and can thus be known in the conscious understanding of the relationships that exist between the self and everything else in the cosmos¹⁷.

Through a detailed description of the events, Calvino enables every reader to literally visualize characters and actions according to what he states in his lesson *visibility*. Indeed, he proposes a process of visualization based on the idea of thinking through images¹⁸. He confers to the act of writing the major role of shaping reality and fantasy.

Lightness

The other main feature of this novel that Italo Calvino explained in his *Lezioni Americane* is lightness. Not only does he adopt this style for this novel, but it may also be considered as a distinctive mark of all the writings he published. As he himself declares at the beginning of the lessons, he will dedicate the first of them to this concept, which soon became the basis of his production.

Dedicherò la prima conferenza all'opposizione leggerezza-peso, e sosterrò le ragioni della leggerezza. Questo non vuol dire che io consideri le ragioni del

¹⁷ Alan A. Block, *The Utopian Reality of Italo Calvino: Baron in the Trees*, "Italian Quarterly", XXX, 1989, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ I. Calvino, *Lezioni Americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, cit., p. 71.

peso meno valide, ma solo che sulla leggerezza penso d'aver più cose da dire. Dopo quarant'anni che scrivo fiction, dopo aver esplorato varie strade e compiuto esperimenti diversi, è venuta l'ora che io cerchi una definizione complessiva per il mio lavoro; proporrei questa: la mia operazione è stata il più delle volte una sottrazione di peso; ho cercato di togliere peso ora alle figure umane, ora ai corpi celesti, ora alle città; soprattutto ho cercato di togliere peso alla struttura del racconto e al linguaggio¹⁹.

He focuses on the contrast between lightness and heaviness which is, as already noted, very common in the novel. Also, he adds, he applies lightness to human and settings' descriptions and to language itself. This first statement is a clear key of reading for *Il Barone Rampante* directly furnished by the author. The weight subtraction, physically elevating the protagonist and choosing a clear style of narration, is the *leitmotiv* of this famous writing. The Cosimo that lives in the trees is, in Calvino's idea, a kind of Perseus that dares Medusa. He symbolically defeats the heaviness of the world and the rationality that loads humankind. The act of disobedience that begins this novel is a clear metaphor for the lightness of thinking that Calvino explains in his lesson. According to the author, and to his character too, there is a strong necessity of distance to approach correctly the events of life and literature. This methodology is not about superficiality but relies on a new way of thinking. When Italo Calvino tells about the time he's living in and his ideas for the new millennium, he embraces a mind-set that has to be not bound to technology and social constrictions.

When it comes to the death of Cosimo and Biagio's father, to give an example from the novel, Calvino's idea of lightness appears very clear. While all the family goes to the funeral, Cosimo watches it from a tree, but the great

¹⁹ [I will devote my first lecture to the opposition between lightness and weight, and will uphold the values of lightness. This does not mean that I consider the virtues of weight any less compelling, but simply that I have more to say about lightness. After forty years of writing fiction, after exploring various roads and making diverse experiments, the time has come for me to look for an overall definition of my work. I would suggest this: my working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language.] *Ibidem*, p. 7.

amount of leaves does not allow him to assist properly at the ceremony. Thus, it may seem that he is distant and detached while he is just reflecting on death in another way. To clarify this, the author includes a very evocative image in this passage: «quando noi tutti gettammo un pugno di terra sulla bara lui ci gettò un rametto con le foglie»²⁰. Biagio describes this scene in order to underline the differences between who stayed on the ground and Cosimo: they threw handfuls of soil on the grave, while he just put a small bough with leaves.

Death plays a core role in the representation of lightness and heaviness. When the protagonist of his novel is about to die, Calvino does not describe it in the traditional way. He shows his character pale and suffering, stiff and bruised. Nevertheless, Cosimo does not come back to the ground, surrendering to the heaviness of death and its rituals. In the very last scene of the novel, Calvino gives the greatest image of lightness ever: he describes the last of Cosimo's jumps, the highest of his flights, until no one is able to see him anymore. Like Perseus, who defeated Medusa by standing on a light and fluffy cloud, Cosimo flies away. This similitude is used by the author like he explains in his lesson about lightness when he analyses Ovidio's *Metamorphosis*. The blood of Medusa gives birth to the famous winged horse Pegasus. Likewise, from the feeling of impending death, Cosimo's lightest image is described. In the same lesson he offers another key for reading this particular part of the novel. He refers to Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, where the great poet Guido Cavalcanti makes a big leap to step away from the world – at that moment gripped by the plague – and its heaviness²¹.

L'agonizzante Cosimo, nel momento in cui la fune dell'ancora gli passò vicino, spiccò un balzo di quelli che gli erano consueti nella sua gioventù, s'aggrappò alla corda, coi piedi sull'ancora e il corpo ancora raggomitato, e così lo vedemmo volar via, trascinato nel vento, frenando appena la corsa del pallone, e sparire verso il mare... [...] Così scomparve Cosimo, e non ci diede neppure la soddisfazione di vederlo tornare sulla terra da morto. Nella tomba di famiglia

²⁰ I. Calvino, *Il Barone Rampante*, cit., p. 33.

²¹ We Lwowie nie było periodyku o takim tytule. Wychodziła w tamtym okresie „Gazeta Narodowa”, redagowana m.in. przez Jana Dobrzańskiego.

c'è una stele che lo ricorda con scritto: "Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò - Visse sugli alberi - Amò sempre la terra - Salì in cielo."²²

The weight of his body never lies in the family grave, where to replace it only a stele is put to represent him. This epitaph explains how Cosimo, despite his decision to living in the trees, never stopped loving the ground. Calvino applies to this novel his lesson about lightness and, as a consequence, his personal vision about life. In his lesson, in fact, he states that when he feels oppressed by the heaviness of the world he just imagines being a Perseus that is able to fly away:

Nei momenti in cui il regno dell'umano mi sembra condannato alla pesantezza, penso che dovrei volare come Perseo in un altro spazio. Non sto parlando di fughe nel sogno o nell'irrazionale. Voglio dire che devo cambiare il mio approccio, devo guardare il mondo con un'altra ottica, un'altra logica, altri metodi di conoscenza e di verifica²³.

What he suggests, anyway, is not a cowardly escape but a change in the approach toward things, so that Cosimo does not flee the ground but watches it from above.

²² [The dying Cosimo, at the second when the anchor rope passed near him, gave one of those leaps he so often used to do in his youth, gripped the rope, with his feet on the anchor and his body in a hunch, and so we saw him fly away, taken by the wind, scarce braking the course of the balloon, and vanish out to sea. ... The balloon, having crossed the gulf, managed to land on the other side. On the rope was nothing but the anchor. The aeronauts, too busy at the time trying to keep a lookout, had noticed nothing. It was presumed that the dying old man had disappeared while the balloon was flying over the bay. So vanished Cosimo, without giving us even the satisfaction of seeing him return to earth a corpse. On the family tomb there is a plaque in commemoration of him, with the inscription: "Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò—Lived in trees—Always loved earth—Went into sky."] I. Calvino, *Il Barone Rampante*, cit., p. 245.

²³ Hipotetycznie, bo poza trzema recenzjami (które kwestię tę podejmują marginesowo), nie znamy świadectw odbioru powieści. Zob. „Świat” 1891, nr 17. „Panu Nossigowi nie chodziło o to, aby powieść napisać, ale aby pod zasłoną powieści poddać pod rozbiór stan naszego społeczeństwa, jego zasad, myśli, dążeń” – [Jan Badeni], „Przegląd Powszechny” 1892, t. 34, s. 86-88; M.M. [Marian Morawski?], „Przegląd Polski” 1892, t. 105, s. 652-654.

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