

Faustian Polarity and Colourful Mediations: Goethe's Experimental Landscapes

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1. Immanence and the Faustian Challenge

One way to appreciate the complexity of the notion of landscape is to focus on the tension between its holistic general character and the almost infinite potential for differentiation of its individual instantiations.¹ It is not just a matter of the inevitable irreducibility of an abstract concept to its concrete forms. While landscape as a concept exists only at the intersection of a plurality of perspectives, approaches, individual and historical modes of perception, etc., each of the “mediations” of such a concept, i.e. each actual landscape, seems to escape intersection in favour of a distinctive uniqueness. The geographer's landscape, to take just one obvious case, seems to be radically different from the painter's, even though the concept itself is constituted by *both* geography *and* painting. But a painter's landscape also seems to be something very different from a poet's or a photographer's, and even when looking at different landscape paintings it is often difficult to imagine that they share the same subject. In short, while the idea of landscape aspires to an all-encompassing comprehensiveness (both the geographer's and the painter's are fully entitled landscapes), concrete individual landscapes could hardly be more incommensurable. Such a tension, whether apparent or real, is far too broad and undefined to be addressed in a single article. What I will pursue instead is a kind of reverse approach, focusing on the element of unity rather than differentiation between the overarching concept and individual instantiations. I will do this with reference to Goethe.

Although it does not deal with landscapes as such, the Goethean framework I reconstruct can help to illuminate the process of medi-

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¹ In this paper I cannot give a detailed account of the landscape conception I put forward, though I can say that aesthetics as conceived in the conclusion constitutes the essential core of such conception. I flesh out a detailed, interdisciplinary landscape theory in Siani 2024; see also Siani 2022 for some introductory remarks on landscape aesthetics.

ation that underlies them. Goethe's work represents a unique case of organic coexistence and mutual influence and reinforcement of artistic creation, scientific investigation of nature and philosophical conceptions,² providing a promising groundwork to explore the "intersectional" character of landscapes. In Goethe, the successful cooperation of normally distinct activities and worldviews results in an overall experimental attitude toward the interaction of the human and the non-human. Such interaction is construed in a holistic, continuistic way, of which art, science and philosophy give different but mutually supportive accounts. Within this mediation process, "experiential landscapes" coalesce, i.e. experimental spaces of human perception and action in nature, which are informed by, and could be considered as case studies of, this holistic and continuistic view. Through a joint focus on Goethe's *Faust* and his *Theory of Colours*, and some more cursory references to other Goethean works, the aim of this paper is to flesh out a view of landscape 'mediation' that is attractive both for its theoretical heuristic function and for its practical implications.³

Underlying Goethe's holistic and continuist worldview is his distrust of all forms of transcendence and metaphysics that might lead to violating the principle that everything is nature: "God has punished you with metaphysics and inflicted a thorn in your flesh, while he has blessed me with physics" and "forgive me if I so willingly keep silent when speaking of a divine being, whom I recognise only in and from singular things. [...] Here I am among the mountains and I seek the divine *in herbis et lapidibus*", he writes to his friend Jacobi.⁴ Since, along the lines of Spinoza (the philosopher who, along with an artist – Shakespeare – and a scientist – Linnaeus – is one of Goethe's three main authors⁵), nature is God, and nothing else exists apart from this divine being, human greatness does not consist in belittling and dominating the realm of nature, but on the contrary in conforming to its order and morphology. Even natural science must seek the mediation of subject and object. In the experiment, or rather in a connected series of experiments that constitutes an experience "of a higher kind",⁶ subject and object are

² See, to begin with, Pareyson 2003.

³ In doing so, this paper builds on and readapts some results displayed in a much broader work on such Goethean topics, namely Siani 2011, where however I did not establish a connection with landscape issues.

⁴ FA II/II 628 and FA II/II 583-84. For the modalities of the references to Goethe, see the bibliography at the end. Consistent with the intent of the paper, which is philosophical and not literary or historical, I have decided to dispense with chronological notations and works details more in general.

⁵ See FA II/VIII 58.

⁶ HA XIII 18.

mediated and assimilated into the infinite multiplicity of the whole. The only way to understand something of the interconnectedness of nature is to experiment and creatively reproduce the multiplicity of its facets and bonds. The results of such experimentation can each time be presented as an individual “case” that can be predominantly artistic, scientific, philosophical, etc.

Faust, in particular, can be seen as an extraordinary exploration in poetic form of the infinite possibilities offered by the constant variation of a fundamental experiment: that of observing the effects of man’s boundless *Streben* on nature and on himself. In all his plans and with all his will, Faust seeks the answer to the question: “Wo fass’ich dich, unendliche Natur?” (455).⁷ Faust, like Goethe, rejects all transcendence, but unlike Goethe, he rejects as transcendent not that which is beyond nature, but that which his ego cannot comprehend and dominate. There is no place in his horizon for what lies beyond his ego: his love for Marguerite is only lust, and his appreciation of nature cannot be separated from the need to be the only ego that sees and enjoys (emblematic of this is the episode of Philemon and Baucis). Faust is able to move from the noblest project to the meanest crime without splitting: his whole character aims to be a semi-divine archetype of humanity in its constant oscillation between joy and pain, highs and lows. This oscillation is entirely programmatic in Goethe’s experiment: it is the attempt, sometimes tragic, sometimes sublime, sometimes grotesque, etc., to encompass all the oppositions constituting humanity and the world in a single ego, and ultimately in a single moment, without recognising any limit or bond.⁸ In reaching that moment, Faust expects to find a fullness so complete that he can stop time and accept death (1699-1706). In this superhuman and inhuman enterprise, he needs a co-star: Mephistopheles, Faust’s companion in Goethe’s experiment. To understand the nature of their relationship, it is necessary to confront the concept of “polarity”.

2. Polarity, Colours, and Trusting the Senses

Polarity is a core concept of Goethean thought and creativity: a phenomenon originally splits into itself, generating two opposites that, by trying to come together, give rise to “a new, superior, un-

⁷ *Faust* is quoted or referred to from HA III simply by giving the verse numbers in brackets. On *Faust* and philosophy see among others D’Angelo 2009.

⁸ See Mathieu 2002, p. 40.

expected third thing”.⁹ In this way, from a few simple elements, nature is able to produce an infinity of manifestations, all related, but increasingly complex and differentiated (think of Goethe’s study of plants). Now, the primordial opposition is that of light and darkness. We find it expressed in that extraordinary cosmogony in verse that is the poem *Wiederfinden* (“Rediscovery”, “Recovery”) in Suleika’s book, from the *West-Eastern Divan*. The first moment of creation, which follows the divine “so be it!”, is dramatic: in the opening of light, opposition to darkness arises, the elements are dispersed into opposites, caught up in a blind centrifugal force, and God, left alone, operates a second phase of creation where opposites are reconciled, starting with *Morgenröte*, Aurora, the morning red.¹⁰

Humans reproduce and express polarity in its strongest form, because they are endowed with the clearest consciousness and will of all beings. For the same reason, only humans can truly restore universal harmony. Faust is, among other things, the manifestation of contradiction and its overcoming through all the vicissitudes and paths of life. At the beginning, Faust is the man of irreconcilable polarity; more precisely, he does not even consider himself to be a man, but either a god or a worm. He is not located in a space of human action and meaning: this will be achieved through a long journey, thanks to an inexorable action to which the presence of Mephistopheles gives origin and then constancy. Faust’s action is the construction of identity and the process of individuation. His pole is so powerful that it encompasses all the others, without the latter being nourished by it. The cost is the destruction of the other poles. But there is also a price for Faust, who cannot overcome the original opposition of light and darkness in a third, higher element. He constructs himself as ego, but cannot do so as nature, remaining trapped in his own powerful finiteness.

In Goethe’s terms, Faust’s actions are unilaterally – and stereotypically – masculine: he wants, he wants to possess, to create, to know, and he wants everything immediately, without patience, without waiting; to this aim he deceives, he fights, he destroys. He completely lacks the feminine aspect of welcoming, of mediating, of letting grow, of waiting. What the lack of the feminine ultimately precludes is love.¹¹ While love is the mediation of opposites, Faust is only capable of unilaterally confronting opposites, and his efforts often result in the contrary of what he was aiming for: he wants

⁹ FA I/XXV 143.

¹⁰ HA II 83.

¹¹ On Goethe and love see Pareyson 2003, pp. 92-95.

light and finds himself in darkness, he thinks he is God and discovers he is a worm, he seeks the company of the earth spirit and obtains that of Mephistopheles, he thinks he is saving Marguerite and witnesses her execution. This is because he lives in a perpetual *aut-aut*, a succession of “highs and lows” (1772), of highest enthusiasms and deepest depressions, and is consequently condemned to physical and metaphysical solitude, like God in the empty space opened up between light and darkness in *Wiederfinden*. For God, as for Faust, the way out is represented by colour. In *Wiederfinden*, the possibility of escape from solitude is offered by Aurora, the first female figure in creation, who, through a play of colours, enables the birth of love between the divided elements.¹² Several decisive, interrelated themes come into play here: a female character, colours, love. To grasp their connection, before returning to *Faust*, we need to go through some key elements of Goethe’s theory of colours.¹³

The latter’s general assumption is “that the emergence of a colour requires light and dark, or, in a more general formula, light and non-light”.¹⁴ In a bitter controversy with Newton, for whom colours were created by the splitting of a ray of light, Goethe claimed that colour did indeed require light, but in its willingness to weaken, i.e. to meet with shadow. Uncoloured light cannot be seen, only thought: “Any attenuated light can be thought of as coloured, and indeed we would be justified in calling any light coloured as it is seen. Colourless light, colourless surfaces are in a sense abstractions”.¹⁵ Colours are a case of the positive, creative meeting of two poles, giving birth to a “new, superior, unexpected third thing”. The meeting of light and shadow does not lead to a simple cancellation of opposites, but to their reunion in something higher. The occasion of the birth of colour is, in the *Theory of Colours* as in *Wiederfinden*, the encounter with a *trübes Mittel*, an opaque agent or medium in which light gradually weakens, giving rise to yellow and blue. From the union of these two fundamental colours, which are respectively closest to light and darkness, all other colours are born. The red of the dawn (*Morgenröte*) is the first poetic meeting of the two poles. The second moment of creation has thus begun: whereas in the first a male and powerful God painfully separated the elements, in the second it is a female and compassionate divinity carrying out a loving reconciliation through the production of colour. From the cosmic meeting the poem then moves on to the

¹² HA II 83.

¹³ On which see in general Troncon 1999.

¹⁴ HA XIII 326.

¹⁵ HA XIII 476.

earthly meeting of the two lovers who were previously separated; it is the human world that enters the scene of creation, completing what God could not, by finding each other again, as announced by the title *Wiederfinden*. In this seeking and finding, the second act of creation is completed, giving shape to eternity in a moment.¹⁶ The lovers' couple – Hatem and Suleika, new Adam and Eve – is elevated to a paradigm of the human being: “At once the most perfect and the most imperfect creature, the happiest and the most unhappy”.¹⁷ The relationship between polarity, female agency, colours, reconciliation and love is now clarified, allowing us to follow the path of Faust's redemption.

It is Mephistopheles, in his constant attempt to convert Faust from his idealism to his own nihilism, who proposes a counter-theogony in which polarity takes an extreme, irreconcilable form (1349-52): there can only be opposition and struggle between light and darkness. To Faust, who is seeking a place in nature fit only for a god, Mephistopheles suggests, with the intention of destroying his lofty intentions, that he stick to what is human: God has reserved pure light for himself alone, confined the devil to eternal darkness, and assigned to man the alternation of day and night (1782-84). We have seen that there is a connection between human existence and the polarity of light and darkness that produces colours. But Mephistopheles is not alluding to colours here: he is only proposing a half-truth, a phenomenon of a lower order. The two poles of which he speaks do not grow together dialectically into something higher, but give rise to a zero. This zero is the perpetual alternation of day and night reserved to man, an alternation which does not contain the possibility of a superior third, but the necessity of a relapse into an undifferentiated and indifferent whole. Here is the root of Mephistophelian nihilism: humans are condemned to watch the sun rise and set until death, without being given the chance to create and situate themselves in a higher order of meaning. But this is how Mephistopheles saves Faust: in the imperious invitation “laß alles Sinnen sein,/Und grad' mit in die Welt hinein!” (1828-29) is contained for Faust the possibility of opening a way for himself into the world and discovering that he belongs to it. To do so, he must renounce *Sinnen* (in the sense of reflecting and judging) and, instead, “den Sinnen [...] trauen”, trust the senses,¹⁸ meaning readiness to see, to perceive, to welcome, and ultimately to love.

¹⁶ HA II 84.

¹⁷ HA IX 352.

¹⁸ HA I 370.

3. *From Reflection to Correspondence: Two Goethean Landscapes*

The space for this readiness opens up at the beginning of *Faust's* second part, in the beautiful scene *Anmutige Gegend*,¹⁹ immediately following the conclusion of Gretchen's tragedy that closes the first part, and constituting a striking piece of landscape poetry (the title could be translated as "graceful/pleasant region/landscape"). The protagonist of *Anmutige Gegend* is nature; Faust's activity is suspended in a regenerative sleep. Nature first appears in the guise of elves and good spirits: it does not judge but feels compassion. The elves help Faust to rest and forget, preparing him for a new life. In doing so, they reveal the presence of the moral element in nature. The central theme of the first part of the scene is the effect of nature on a man in his most passive state. Faust is unable to think or act, but is entrusted to the benevolent embrace of nature, which does not judge him but treats him as a part of itself. Nature is thus revealed in its divinity: humans cannot place themselves outside of it, but find their space for action within it. This is why Faust is depicted here in a sleep that reunites him with nature: he is a chrysalis, his sleep is "Schale" (4661). Faust's awakening, with the monologue that follows, is a true rebirth in a divine, airy, sunny nature, the opposite of the gloomy, gothic landscape at the end of the first part. If in the first half of *Anmutige Gegend* the spectator sees nature directly in its action, in the following monologue nature is seen through Faust's eye. Reborn in the light, for the first time he actually contemplates the world around him, of which he is a part: in the four stanzas in which the monologue is divided, this is expressed with increasing awareness. Faust watches the spectacle of the aurora: the sun awakens all beings and colours, painting a "paradise" (4692-94). He looks up at the sun rising behind the mountains but, blinded by the direct light, he is soon forced to lower his eyes. In averting his eyes, Faust discovers for the first time that he is a man and not a god, and makes a significant shift from "I" to "we". He suddenly realises the impossibility of one man alone taking on the whole contradiction of humanity: the alternation of pain and pleasure is now defined as monstrous, meaning that humans cannot look directly at the sun, i.e. the divine, but must do so through a veil (4712-14).

The idea that human beings can only know in a mediated form, and thus never have direct access to the divine itself, is present throughout Goethe's work, e.g.: "The True, identical with the Di-

¹⁹ On which see Michelsen 1983.

vine, never allows itself to be recognised directly by us, we see it only in reflection [*Abglanz*], in example [*Beispiel*], in symbol [*Symbol*], in isolated and conjoined appearances [*Erscheinungen*]; we become aware of it as an incomprehensible life [*unbegreifliches Leben*] and cannot renounce the desire to grasp it anyway”.²⁰ Elsewhere it is Prometheus who states that humankind is “destined to see what is enlightened, not the light!”.²¹ Faust, too, eventually realises that he cannot directly grasp “the true, identical with the divine” and that he must relate to it in a mediated way. This mediated way is symbolised by the rainbow (4721-47), which, with its ever-changing reflections of colour, becomes the symbol and signifier of human life.

Life, “incomprehensible” in itself, opens up to us in the coloured reflections of the sun on the murky medium of water. In this vision, Faust “discovers” nature; indeed, colour and light are in a relationship that is not merely mechanical, but which from the outset opens up a horizon of meaning in which the elements of nature take on “human”, even “personal”, characteristics: “Colours are actions of light, actions and passions”²² as well as “nature conforming to the sense of the eye”.²³ A thrill of amazement and a holy terror seize Faust in this recognition, at the very moment when, observing the transformation of light into colour at the limit set by an opaque medium, he understands his own limitation in relation to nature and at the same time finally discovers his own capacity to situate himself in this natural order of sense by participating in its infinity. But the final realisation of this possibility still lacks a fundamental element that should appear together with the colours: love. His inexorable action in life has enabled him to finally receive it, even if only after death. For in his failure to constitute himself as the absolute ‘I’, he has at least succeeded in constituting himself as an ‘I’.²⁴ At this point the other pole is no longer obtainable through mere *Streben*, and in fact with Faust’s death Mephistopheles’ task also ends. *Anmutige Gegend* – as well as, of course, the entire work – finds its fulfilment only in *Bergschluchten*, Faust’s closing experimental landscape. If the mediating principle of the first landscape

²⁰ HA XIII 305.

²¹ HA V 362.

²² HA XIII 315. On the connection of *Faust* and the theory of colours see Matthaei 1947.

²³ HA XIII 324.

²⁴ It is this awareness, born in *Anmutige Gegend* and then increasingly stronger, of the space for action given to human existence (11433-52) that saves Faust from plunging into despair and annihilation, as Mephistopheles would have wished (1851-67). At the end of his life Faust opposes this awareness, which guides him like an inner light, to the outer physical blinding brought about by the female spirit called *Sorge* (“care”, “anxiety”, “preoccupation”), the omen and cause of his earthly death (11442-43 and 11499-510).

is reflection and allusion, the principle of the second is total correspondence. Here, what Faust foresaw at the sight of the rainbow is made real by love, the real protagonist of the scene. The individual Faust is dead and seems to have lost the wager, having deluded himself into believing that he could achieve the supreme moment in a utopian vision of social and political transformation of humanity. But he is saved in a higher sense: his immortal core is taken away from Mephistopheles (i.e., from annihilation) and carried into eternity by the angels. The possibility of salvation has been constructed by Faust himself on earth through his relentless action, which has prepared him to finally encounter love (11936-41).

In the fulfilment of the reunion of the poles after death and through the feminine principle, something miraculous takes place: “Alles Vergängliche/Ist nur ein Gleichnis;/Das Unzulängliche,/Hier wird's Ereignis;/Das Unbeschreibliche,/Hier ist's getan;/Das Ewig-Weibliche/Zieht uns hinan” (12104-11). The unattainable (*das Unzulängliche*) becomes an event, i.e., etymologically, it presents itself to the eyes (*Ereignis/Eräugnis*). Here, “the True, identical with the Divine”, which Faust had only seen in its reflection, becomes reality before his eyes. In revealing itself, that “incomprehensible” eternal life shows all that is transient as an allusion, a symbol of divinity. The divine-natural whole that Faust could not have during his life shows itself to him here, in the final conciliation, in the desire with which the “eternal feminine” draws him – and all humanity – “hinan”, toward something superior. The finally pure gaze, “nicht mehr Getrübte” (12074), can grasp the infinite life of the divine nature, which earthly gazes could only foresee through a veil. Faust, who almost against his own will discovers the essential bond of human and nature, is in a position to participate in its infinitude, in the correspondence of interior and exterior. It is an awareness that Goethe matured personally and is expressed, significantly in relation to *Faust* and the *Theory of Colours*, in a famous passage of the conversations with Eckermann from February 26th, 1824: “If I had not already carried the world within me as an anticipation, I would have remained blind, even though I had eyes capable of seeing, and all experience and all research would have remained a vain toil. Light is there and colours are around us, but if we did not carry light and colour in our eyes, we would perceive nothing like that outside of us”.²⁵

²⁵ FA II/XII 98. It should be noted here that both such expressions and, in general, the whole *Theory of Colours* have a strong, explicit platonic (and neoplatonic) ascendancy, the main reference being the *Timaeus*. See among others Cassirer 1995 and Siani 2011.

4. Sense-Mediation and Sense-Making: The Role of Aesthetics

The liberating awareness of limitation begins with sight, which reveals the correspondence of inner and outer light and colour. It is in this correspondence that humans exist, experience and know, beginning with the contraction of the eye in relation to the large, white parts (light) and its expansion in relation to the small, black parts (darkness). The contradiction that is immediately revealed in the action of the eye mirrors that of the universe, an eternal sequence of separation, reunion into something higher or relapse into undifferentiated, new separation.²⁶ This implies, to return to where we started, the elimination of all transcendent levels. The idea that there is no god outside nature but only *in herbis et lapidibus*, and that nature is therefore god is, as we have said, fundamental for Goethe²⁷. Insofar as it is divine, nature is self-sufficient and not dependent on anything else; everything that happens in it happens by the force of its laws in the connection of the whole:

Fundamental property of living unity: dividing itself, unifying itself, passing into the general, persisting in the particular [...]. Forming and destroying itself, creating and annihilating, birth and death, joy and sorrow, everything acts through everything, in equal manner and measure; therefore also that which is most particular presents itself [*sich ereignet*], always appears as image and symbol [*Bild und Gleichnis*] of that which is most universal.²⁸

Nature, in its infinite diversity and constant polarisation, is a unique horizon. The human being, the living being in which contradiction manifests itself in the highest degree of will and consciousness, is the link between the lowest particular and the most sublime universal, the only one capable of understanding, if he manages to, that “alles Vergängliche/Ist nur ein Gleichnis”. A necessary condition for this understanding is the cooperation of all the poles: even the most negative, Mephistopheles, who wishes the destruction of the whole, is an essential counterpart to the pole that always creates and loves. For humans, then, evil is not the presence in the universe and at their side of a nihilistic devil, but their own one-sidedness, that is, seeing themselves as separate, independent poles. Just as light needs a boundary, an opaque medium in order to produce colour, and love needs a mediating boundary in order to enable the encounter, so humans need to acknowledge their boundary, not only for the sake of their vision, but also for the sake of their

²⁶ HA XIII 488.

²⁷ “Nature is always Jehovah. It is, it was, and it will be” (HA XII 365).

²⁸ HA XII 367-68.

knowledge and action. Only in the existence and awareness of limits can human possibilities be realised.²⁹

This holistic, continuistic view, as mentioned at the beginning, is the result, or rather the counterpart, of the cooperation between artistic creation, scientific research, and philosophical elements. The co-presence of all these opposites on the same level, in the same world, on the same stage, is accompanied by an awareness of the irreducibility of the world and of the human being himself to the Faustian subjective pole alone, and of the inevitable correspondence of inner and outer life. This awareness and this correspondence, interpreted primarily through colours (along with rainbows, auras, etc.), are not merely abstract theoretical acquisitions, but are entrusted to the senses. Not, however, as an immediate, raw sensual pleasure, but in so far as the senses are capable of *making* sense, of establishing a meaningful order that reflects this awareness and correspondence. *Faust's* "experimental landscapes" are instances and indeed *media* of just such an institution.³⁰ It is important to stress that the institution itself does not pre-exist the media: it happens *through* them, and media creation is guided by the purpose of such an institution.

I want to conclude by underscoring two implications of such reading. The first is rather theoretical-heuristic, concerning the role of aesthetics. The organising, leading role in the potentially infinite plurality of construction possibilities of such mediation process can neither unilaterally be assigned to raw sensation nor to abstract reflection, but to *aesthetics*. The latter, however, needs to be conceived in the broad sense of the investigation as well as construction of the perceptual, experiential interaction of the human and the non-human, rather than in the narrow sectorial sense of a philosophy of art and beauty. Such an aesthetics is above all a philosophy of immanence and continuity, of the inseparable correspondence of subject and object, human and nature, mind and body, etc. Aesthetics understood in this way is not only an aesthetics of the immanent (of the unity of life-nature and its multiple manifestations), but an aesthetics that is itself immanent in the concept and in the articulation in different practices that it substantiates, contributing to the continuous process of concretisation (i.e. co-growth), adaptation, development, goal-setting necessary for a human life that *makes sense*. For such aesthetics, Goethe's theory of colours, with all its scientific inaccuracy, takes on a truly para-

²⁹ See Pareyson 2003, pp. 113-121 and pp. 224ff.; Bodei 1984.

³⁰ The landscapes composing Goethe's *Italian Journey* are other obvious examples: see Siani 2019.

digmatic role, because it represents a central point of connection not only between art, science, and philosophy, but also between unreflective trust in the senses and fully conscious cognitive and practical participation in the world in its unity and differences. The second implication is rather practical. Goethe's experiential landscapes can help defining an urgent alternative to both pitfalls of, on the one hand, a self-proclaimed "neutral", scientific point of view not taking into account the always present cultural mediation and, on the other hand, of a (Faustian) subjectivist anthropocentrism, a view bearing consequences that Mephistopheles, the devil who still and always accompanies us, could finally look upon with a grin of victory. Both pitfalls stand in the way of a more concrete and sustainable formulation of the relationship between human beings and the world they inhabit and experience.

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