

Review: J. M. W. Turner for Our Age

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- Torgovnick has to do with the fact that she is concerned, primarily, with a fictive "Black," as opposed to "Red," primitive.
- 4 See Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 189–251; Robert Goldwater, "Judgements of Primitive Art, 1905–1965" and "Art History and Anthropology: Some Comparisons of Methodology," which are anthologized in the latest edition of idem, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 272–314; Nelson H. H. Graburn, ed., *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 1–31; and Price, *Primitive Art*, chaps. 1, 2, 6, and 7.
- 5 Similarly, in response to "Magiciens de la Terre," London-based Pakistani painter/critic Rasheed
- Araeen wrote, "There is nothing wrong with a grand spectacle, but if it ignores or undermines issues of a historical and epistemological nature then we must not be bogged down by the excitement and fascination it has produced" ("Our Bauhaus Others Mudhouse," *Third Text* 6 [Spring 1989]: 4).
- 6 Obviously I disagree with Arthur C. Danto who believes that Torgovnick's fierce cross-examination of Fry's language constitutes a "personal agenda...at work." See Danto, "Inventing Innocence," *New York Times Book Review*, June 24, 1990, 33.
- 7 In Sally Price's discussion of the ethnographic versus the formal approach to exhibiting primitive objects, she, too, failed to mention the historic
- importance of d'Harnoncourt's innovative strategy, which included (re- and de-)contextualization; see Price, *Primitive Art*, chap. 6. See my essay, "Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern: René d'Harnoncourt and *Indian Art of the United States* (1941)," in Janet Catherine Berlo, ed., *The Early Years of Native American Art History: Essays on the Politics of Scholarship and Collecting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, forthcoming).
- 8 See the selected bibliography in Barbara A. Babcock and Nancy J. Parezo, *Daughters of the Desert: Women Anthropologists and the Native American Southwest, 1880–1980*, exh. cat. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 229–41.

J.M.W. Turner for Our Age

By Marjorie Munsterberg

Anne Lyles. Young Turner: Early Work to 1800, Watercolours and Drawings from the Turner Bequest, 1787–1800. London: Tate Gallery, 1989. 44 pp.; 16 color ills., 48 black-and-white. \$14.95 paper

Anne Lyles and Diane Perkins. Colour into Line: Turner and the Art of Engraving. London: Tate Gallery, 1989. 84 pp.; 9 color ills., 101 black-and-white. \$19.95 paper

Ann Chumbley and Ian Warrell. Turner and the Human Figure: Studies of Contemporary Life. London: Tate Gallery, 1989. 64 pp.; 16 color ills., 99 black-and-white. \$19.95 paper

Eric Shanes. Turner's Human Landscape. London: William Heinemann, 1990. 382 pp.; 132 color ills., 99 black-and-white. \$75.00

The publications reviewed here are among the stream of works occasioned by the bicentennial celebration of J.M.W. Turner's birth. The books, countless exhibition catalogues, and even an entire periodical devoted to Turner (Turner Studies) have brought the painter into the sphere of English-language art history of the 1960s and 1970s. Like Edouard Manet and Paul Cézanne, Turner has seemed in need of rediscovery by each generation, seen and reseen in ways that better suit new interests. In recent decades this has meant the replacement of Turner as a proto-Abstract Expressionist (which, in turn, replaced Turner as a proto-Impressionist) with Turner as a painter of profound and symbolically complicated pictures. Not surprisingly, this latest turn has come with a new appreciation of John Ruskin, who was the first critic to find such meanings in Turner's art. Again as with Manet and Cézanne, this new interest in pictorial

meaning has been intensified by conscious opposition to earlier, formalist readings. In the same spirit, placement in the original historical context has been emphasized.

By any standard, the centerpiece of all these publications about Turner is Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll's catalogue raisonné of the oil paintings, recently reissued in a revised edition. Its concentration on exhibited works (since Turner showed something under half of the roughly 550 known oils), as well as the sheer quantity of factual information it includes about the artist in his world, make the book a powerful (even if only implicit) attack on the vision of Turner as a protomodernist painter. Andrew Wilton's catalogue of nearly 1,600 watercolors, ranging from color beginnings to detailed, topographical views, similarly documents the depth and range of Turner's relationships to the art of his time. John Gage's Color in Turner: Poetry and Truth (like his more recent J.M.W. Turner: "A Wonderful Range of Mind") argues for Turner's place in a wider historical context, while his edition of the correspondence collects Turner's written comments (albeit disappointingly few) on his contemporaries.1

These writers have established the methodological parameters of nearly all the arthistorical literature about Turner that has appeared in the last two decades. (One need only compare the literature published about John Constable during the same years to see how many different approaches have not been tried.)² This group of Englishmen has become even more influential with the opening in 1987 of the Clore Gallery for the Turner Collection at the Tate, with Andrew Wilton as its curator. The product of years-long devotion to the painter, the gallery already has made its

mark with a luxuriously rich program of publications (three of them reviewed here), the like of which would honor any artist. The Clore Gallery's projects soon will dominate scholarship about Turner, and thus its work deserves special scrutiny. At issue is not the quality of the scholarship, but the assumptions and historical methodology on which it is based.

nne Lyles's Young Turner: Early Work A to 1800, Watercolours and Drawings from the Turner Beguest, 1787–1800 is the first of a proposed six publications that will examine Turner's works on paper, decade by decade. The catalogue for an exhibition held at the Clore Gallery in 1988 (which, despite the title, included selected loans from private collections), it is an impressive introduction to the proposed series. As with the other catalogues from the Clore, the attractive size and design make reading it a pleasure. In this age of limited funds for even the most worthy of projects, the quality of the reproductions, both in black-and-white and in color, is more than respectable. They manage to convey some sense of the subtlety of Turner's color washes and the variety of his line. Both aspects of his work are crucial for understanding his development during the 1790s. Individual catalogue entries mix plentiful historical information with stylistic analyses that nicely distinguish the various manners shown.

The illustrations substantiate the argument of the text: that even Turner's early work was always visually interesting and that he was ever greedy for visual experience. Some of the pictures communicate a sense of process, the feeling that we are watching Turner search for new possibilities. They also document the remarka-

bly rigorous education that the painter gave himself, absorbing the lessons of contemporary topographical art at the same time as he discovered the likes of Rembrandt, Piranesi, and, of course, Claude. By the end of the 1790s, Turner had redefined the topographical tradition in terms of the old masters. The hauntingly shadowed space in *Transept of Ewenny Priory, Glamorganshire* (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1797, or the splendidly luminous landscape expanse in *Caernarvon Castle* (Turner Bequest; cat. no. 40) show how brilliantly he had learned his lessons.

nne Lyles, this time with Diane A nne Lyies, uns une
Perkins, also wrote Colour into Line: Turner and the Art of Engraving, another catalogue for an exhibition at the Clore Gallery (winter 1989–90). Like a decadeby-decade survey of Turner's development, a study of the nearly 900 prints made after his designs during his lifetime is an obviously worthy project. Particularly during the hegemony of the modernist reading of Turner's art, his prints were neglected. They seemed (as they did even to some nineteenth-century viewers) at complete odds with the stunningly colored and painted oils. But for his original audience, Turner's prints were the most familiar basis of his fame. Turner took his graphic proiects as seriously as he did his most ambitious oil paintings, being every bit as vigilant in buying up his own works and shaping the image that would be left to posterity.

This catalogue brings together much valuable material, some of it new. Even with the appearance of Luke Herrmann's handsome book on the subject, the publication provides the best introduction to this aspect of Turner's work. The essays and the entries clearly distinguish one project from another in appearance and interest, differences too often neglected when all those little black-and-white pictures seem only so many blurs on the page. Happily, the catalogue also escapes the dryness that characterizes so much of the literature on prints. The authors manage to include the necessary information about technique, states, and condition without losing sight of the meaning and importance of these physical facts. Various examples of Turner's corrections on proofs are included, fascinating evidence of the ways in which he trained a generation of engravers. Similarly, the small, brilliantly colored watercolors from which the engravers usually worked reveal much about Turner's understanding of the visual function and possible symbolic meanings of color.

As Lyles and Perkins constantly recognize, Turner's prints provide crucial evidence of his thinking about art. For Turner's most important aesthetic ideas of

the 1800s and 1810s, the viewer should turn to the Liber Studiorum, 71 plates published between 1807 and 1819. As Lyles and Perkins point out, the work has little in common with Claude's Liber Veritatis, despite the obvious homage intended by the name. While Claude's work is a record of his paintings, Turner's is a summary of his ideas about landscape painting and composition. The topographical series of the 1820s and the 1830s are concerned primarily with the relationship of people to physical place. Turner's illustrations to the poets, notably Samuel Rogers, Sir Walter Scott, and Lord Byron, reveal him thinking deeply about the differences between verbal and visual expressions. Finally, engravings made after Turner's exhibited pictures show many revisions caused by the intelligent, supervised translation from one medium to another.

The last of the Tate catalogues under The last of the last state of the review is Turner and the Human Figure: Studies of Contemporary Life, by Ann Chumbley and Ian Warrell, published for an exhibition held at the Clore Gallery in 1989. In many ways, this is the most interesting of the three. Turner's figures have puzzled viewers since the early nineteenth century. How could a painter of such splendid landscapes fill them with such miserable little blots of people? The authors argue that Turner's figures are just as he intended them to be. They demonstrate conclusively that Turner drew very expressive, even attractive, people when he chose to, and that he studied the human figure all of his life. Drawings range from studies made in life class at the Royal Academy, dating from as late as the 1840s (cat. fig. 5), to the quickest of sketches made on the road during his travels. Written comments by Turner about his figures also show the care he took over them (p. 9).

hese three catalogues are so handsome petent that criticism seems ungenerous. And yet, taken as a whole, they represent a troubling development in the scholarship about Turner. As Allen Staley pointed out last year in Burlington Magazine, the creation of the Clore Gallery has had the ironic (and presumably unintended) consequence of separating Turner from the realm of history.3 Now that the works of his contemporaries hang in a different building, at both a physical and psychological remove from the Turner Collection, it is impossible to envision the art in its original historical context. Whatever we may think of the quality of Turner's works in relation to those of his peers, the pictures were created for the "crowded copal atmosphere of the [Royal Academy] exhibition . . . like a great pot of boiling varnish" (as John Fisher, one of Constable's patrons and friends, described it).4 Turner often made

reference in his works to the art of his colleagues and, some said, Turner's own pictorial style was created "to become a striking point of attraction on the walls of the Exhibition."⁵

Although the terms of the Turner Bequest may dictate the ways in which the pictures are hung in the Clore, they cannot determine the character of the gallery's publications. Yet, to date, the catalogues also isolate Turner from his world. That the subjects chosen are thoroughly traditional in their formulation is not, to this reader at least, in and of itself objectionable. Study of visual material by artist, chronology, medium, and theme still has its place, and such a museum is the most obvious locus for the research. But, especially with Turner, about whom so much has been written in the past two decades, the ways in which these topics are handled seems unnecessarily narrow. The problem lies in the very conception of the scholarly enterprise, which defines Turner as its center. Turner's peers could not envision the artist we see today, and the historian must try to accommodate his or her research to that fact. Shaping all investigations around the artist we know, referring to the contemporary world only at specific points of verifiable contact, makes reclamation of that lost age impossible. If we seek the artist they knew, we must try to re-create their sense of the world and their ways of seeing. Only then can the unfamiliar figure of their acquaintance take form.

A specific example may help to make this criticism clear. In Chumbley and Warrell's entire discussion of Turner's figures, only a few stylistic comparisons are made to contemporaries like Thomas Rowlandson (p. 32) and William Mulready (p. 36), and passing reference is made to Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Francisco Goya (p. 11). But none of this really adds anything to the suggestions already made by Andrew Wilton in Turner at the British Museum, which accompanied an exhibition held in 1975. Entirely missing is anything like the sort of effort Wilton made in New Literary History ten years later. There he argued that a particular, non-Italian tradition of representation, extending from Gothic sculpture to Henry Fuseli, Turner, and Eugène Delacroix, and on to Pablo Picasso, sought to intensify emotional content with awkward, even ugly, human forms. Without changing the words they used to describe their work, Wilton points out, these artists created new ways of visual communication.6

There are many other comparisons that are much closer to home. Thinking of Turner's people in terms of expression, for example, suggests David Wilkie's art. The most popular and most influential early nineteenth-century British painter of human gesture and physiognomy, Wilkie was studied carefully by Turner. The ways in

which the two artists used their figures to communicate social class, individual psychology, and narrative are instructive. Interesting comparisons could be made to the many British topographical and landscape artists who gave their figures visual significance. Michel Angelo Rooker, Philip James de Loutherbourg, and Constable (the art of the last is not even mentioned in Chumbley and Warrell's catalogue) each peopled their landscapes with figures specific to place and class. Rooker and de Loutherbourg also created humorous incidents of the kind in which Turner often delighted. Constable, like Turner, made many pencil sketches of figures, costumes, objects, and animals that interested him.

Such comparisons were not made; this history has not been written. In the opinion of this reviewer, full discussion could change our sense of the art of the period and certainly revise our understanding of Turner's relationship to it. The Clore Gallery and its resources present a wonderful opportunity for just such research. Even ceding all claims of a more general interest in British art to other institutions (the Tate and the Yale Center for British Art, for a start), the Clore and its staff could entirely rewrite large pieces of the history of the period by defining Turner in the most generous of terms rather than the most restrictive. Turner's own nature should encourage such a largeness of vision. Drawings folded into four from being carried around in his pockets, pencil lines in sketchbooks shaky from the movement of the carriage in which Turner rode or blurred from raindrops falling on the page, show how constantly he sketched the world around him. Notes and drawings made in front of the pictures of others show that he carried the same intensity into his study of art. The historian who hopes to understand the vision that resulted must be similarly generous in his or her study.

Eric Shanes's Turner's Human Land-scape is a different kind of work altogether. First, compliments should go to the publisher for the handsome design and enviably good colorplates. Compliments also should go to the author, who tackled the most ambitious of subjects: the intended meaning of Turner's art. Shanes's basic premise can be summed up in his own words: "Imaginative reality constantly transcended the prosaic reality of arbitrary appearances [in Turner's work]" (p. 249). The theoretical underpinning for this transformation was the doctrine of ut pictura poesis, which (as used in eighteenth-century England) encouraged the coupling of poetic with pictorial values. In practical terms, this meant that subjects with literary associations were favored for works of art, a tendency recognized by the Royal Academy in 1798 when

it began accepting poetic quotations along with picture titles for the exhibition catalogue. (Typically, Turner at once took advantage of the new possibility.)

Turner's interest in "poetic painture" has been discussed by a number of authors. But Shanes takes the argument one step further, arguing for Turner's constant use of a rich, symbolic language to create profound meaning. The identification of these meanings is the most interesting and the most original part of Shanes's book. Refreshingly, he makes visual analysis the most important proof of his arguments. A few anecdotes about the painter, a few remarks by contemporaries, and a few phrases from Turner's writing are all that can be adduced by way of textual support (Introduction, passim). So Shanes turns to careful visual examination of the pictures, considering color, composition, and paint handling as well as subjects and narrative details to discover what he believes Turner intended them to mean. Shanes's career as a painter stands him in good stead here; he actually behaves as if seeing (rather than reading) is believing.

Shanes identifies a variety of ways in which Turner communicated meaning. Some are principles of composition (the alignment of forms in two or three dimensions, the opposition or the pairing of things), while others involve Turner's use of light, color, and style. Just as important are various methods of visual association, including similes, metaphors, and puns. Some of these methods can be traced to the old masters—among others, Shanes examines the influence of Raphael, Titian, and, most of all, Claude—and the example of Sir Joshua Reynolds was also important. Despite the use of some traditional methods, Turner ended with a very unconventional art, in part because of his reliance on what Shanes calls "uncodified metaphorical elaborations"-or private symbolism (p. 211).

Turner's ultimate message, in Shanes's reading, is that "all is vanity." This explains his "weak-looking figures," which become "overt metaphors for the human condition itself." The message also

can be witnessed in the subjects and contents of a great many pictures, in the very title of "The Fallacies of Hope" that he gave to the disparate fragments of verse which he appended to the titles of pictures between 1812–50, as well as very frequently in the poetic fragments and titles themselves.

Finding such meaning in so many aspects of the pictures, Shanes concluded, makes Turner "a profound moralist and humanist" (p. 337).

Shanes is surely right to search both subject and style for meaning. Considera-

tion of the whole of Turner's career shows that the idea of a steady stylistic progression, never mind one that goes from conventional topography to resplendent abstraction, is simply wrong, and subject always was important to him. Shanes surely is also right to place various associative processes at the heart of Turner's methods of building meaning. Both in a larger sense—the evocation of history in place, for example—and a smaller sense—drawing a mallard duck to stand for Turner's middle name of Mallord (p. 55)—association is central to the way he thought. As Shanes himself indicates, the overwhelming visual evidence for that case is far more compelling than the few, relatively flimsy, anecdotes in which Turner verbally interprets elements of his pictures.

But visual evidence is not Shanes's support for his final interpretation of the pictures as exhortations of a prophetic vision. For this step, he—like all the scholars of the current Turner establishment—relies on the witness of Ruskin. What is disturbing about this is not the conclusion, but the method. However persuasive Ruskin's views are ultimately judged to be, they are no more or less privileged than those of any other observer. They must be defended against other plausible interpretations, and the various difficulties they present resolved, before they are accepted as explanations of Turner's intention. In other words, the same challenge that twentiethcentury historians have applied to Ruskin's view of Turner the man must be extended to his reading of the pictures. This Shanes has not done.

A revealing passage from Ruskin's *Modern Painters* is cited by Shanes at the head of his Afterword:

There is something very strange and sorrowful in the way Turner used to hint only at these under meanings of his; leaving us to find them out, helplessly, and if we did not find them out, no word more ever came from him. Down to the grave he went, silent. "You cannot read me; you do not care for me; let it all pass; go your ways" (p. 339).

Stripping away the emotive language in the first of these three sentences ("strange," "sorrowful," "helplessly") and, for the same reason, entirely eliminating the next two sentences, leaves what presumably constituted the whole of the original incident—that Turner refused to spell out the meaning of his pictures to Ruskin. Reconsideration allows for at least one other interpretation. Perhaps "hints" were all he wanted to give—verbal hints and (since highly committed viewers often could not and cannot find clear pictorial meanings) visual hints. Perhaps all that counted for

Turner was the engagement of the viewer with the subject of the picture, not the discovery of a single, fixed meaning. Thus it would be the process, not the conclusion, that mattered. In this case, Turner's silence would be neither strange nor sorrowful, and certainly it had nothing to do with his perception of his audience.

Such a lack of interest in the particulars of the viewer's interpretation would seem to be contradicted by Turner's obvious and constant concern for specific visual details. Not just the anecdotes that Shanes quotes, but the abundance of significant, narrative detail in his pictures, prove that he cared very much. Yet it is not necessary that this detail provide the meaning of his art. Between the poles of modernist dismissal and a kind of Victorian symbolic reading lies a third possibility. The critics who wrote about Turner's exhibitions at the Royal Academy never once discussed them in the kind of prophetic terms that Ruskin made famous. 7 Even the most literary of critics—William Hazlitt or William Thackeray—did not suggest symbolic interpretations. Instead, they understood as rhetorical what Ruskin took to be intended meaning. Rather than interpret the Carthaginian pictures as allegories of modern Britain, for example, they accepted the classical subjects as evidence of Turner's grand artistic ambition.

When the question of the meaning of Turner's art came up, these critics assumed quite a different kind of aesthetic response from that used by Ruskin. Rather than model their interpretations on literary texts, specifically Evangelical texts, these writers turned to poetry and music.8 "Rainbow-toned rhapsodies, a thing like much of Shelley's poetry, [Turner's paintings are] to be felt rather than understood," wrote one reviewer. Another compared Turner's art to Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and Haydn's Creation in its capacity to overwhelm the imagination.9 In other words, what mattered was that we were transported by the pictures. They were "magical pictures by which Mr. Turner dazzles the sense and storms the imagination."10

This method of interpreting Turner's intention avoids a number of problems created by a Ruskinian approach. First, it means that the most sympathetic of his contemporaries described an appropriate response to the pictures—from the

painter's point of view. To say that no one understood the art until Ruskin, not one of the possibly hundreds of critics who wrote about his works, seems implausiblesurely one among all of them would have felt his purpose or, even, been guided by some concerned friend or colleague. For an artist who devoted such attention to the details of his images, who gave such thought to the problems of visual translation, who created such successful illustrations for the poets, complete failure to communicate with anyone in his original audience would be astounding. Such a reading also makes sense of the caprice and even chaos with which Turner's details apparently do indicate other things everything from private jokes and puns to perfectly traditional symbols. If they were never an essential part of the intended viewing experience, then their deciphering does not really matter.

As with so many other aspects of his art, Turner took the most familiar contemporary conventions of meaning and worked them to his own ends. Late eighteenthcentury ideas of the picturesque and the sublime, where association was the central process of response, mixed with Academic ideas of ambitious painting as propounded by Reynolds in the Discourses, making history and human beings the most important of artistic subjects, and a grab bag tumble of half-understood classical myths, historical subjects, and traditional symbolism, realized with an immeasurable visual brilliance: that was Turner's art. Like Delacroix, Turner wished to make the great traditions of the past alive in his present, and thus, like Delacroix, he was in many ways a profoundly reactionary artist.

If Turner's contemporaries understood his intentions, then what matters is active looking and imaginative engagement, not arriving at a particular interpretation. In this, Shanes has succeeded wonderfully. He has made a case that demands a response; his readers will look at the pictures. Similarly, the Clore Gallery will provoke us all, even those of us who are most familiar with the range of Turner's accomplishment, to look again. Upon reading the first volume of Ruskin's Modern Painters, Charlotte Brontë wrote: "Who can read these glowing descriptions of Turner's works without longing to see them?"11 Surely that is success by anyone's standard.

Marjorie Munsterberg has published on a variety of topics in nineteenth-century art and the history of photography. She currently is completing a book on J.M.W. Turner's critics.

Notes

- 1 Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll, The Paintings of J.M.W. Turner, rev. ed., 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Andrew Wilton, The Life and Work of J.M.W. Turner (Secaucus, N.J.: Poplar Books, 1979); John Gage, Color in Turner: Poetry and Truth (New York: Praeger, 1969); idem, J.M.W. Turner: "A Wonderful Range of Mind" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); and idem, The Collected Correspondence of J.M.W. Turner (London: Oxford University Press, 1980)
- 2 Examples of different approaches are; John Barrell, The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Michael Rosenthal, Constable: The Painter and the Landscape (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and Ann Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology: The English Rural Tradition, 1740–1860 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
- 3 Allen Staley, "Recent Publications on Turner," Burlington Magazine 131 (November 1989): 780.
- 4 Charles Robert Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable* (1845; London: Phaidon Press, 1951), 81
- 5 Champion, May 12, 1816, 151.
- 6 Andrew Wilton, *Turner in the British Museum*, exh. cat. (London: British Museum, 1975), and "Sublime or Ridiculous? Turner and the Problem of the Historical Figure," *New Literary History* 16 (1984–85): 343–76.
- 7 Butlin and Joll, *Paintings of J.M.W. Turner*, passim, includes many quotations from the contemporary criticism. I will make this argument in much greater detail in a forthcoming book about the various interpretations of Turner's art.
- 8 For Ruskin's use of the Evangelical text as a model of interpretation, see George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), chap. 5.
- 9 Athenaeum, May 14, 1836, 347; and Spectator, May 12, 1832, 450.
- 10 Morning Post, May 25, 1836.
- 11 Quoted in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition (London: George Allen, 1903), 3: xxxix.

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