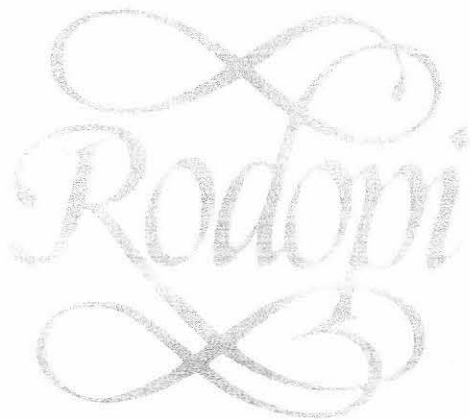


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HENA MAES-JELINEK

‘Otherness’ in Wilson Harris’s Fiction

*The Dark Jester*¹

The wall that had divided him from his true otherness and possession was a web of dreams (*Palace of the Peacock*)

Who is the other? Does he or she exist? Does absent deity, absent other, live within the complicated abysses that are opening up within the body of our civilisation?²

FROM HIS VERY FIRST NOVEL, *Palace of the Peacock*, Wilson Harris’s fiction has been a search for ‘the Other’ and an attempt to retrieve its eclipsed existence from the abysses of history, exploitation and oblivion. As his own contribution to this volume makes clear, “resisting alterities” can mean resisting *to* alterities, denying the reality and specific nature of the other, the worst evil denounced in his fiction and the source of violence and destruction in the modern world. But this ambivalent expression also refers to the enduring existence of the other – often represented in his work by the vanquished pre-Columbian Amerindian peoples – either in reality or in the very unconscious of those who deny them. In *Palace of the Peacock* the penetration into the Guyanese interior (a metaphor for an inner journey) by the conqueror Donne and his crew in pursuit of exploitable native labour is transfigured into a spiritual quest when they come home “to the compassion

¹ This is a largely modified version of a paper read at a conference on “Wilson Harris and Caribbean Literature” which took place at the University of Liège on 30 March 2001 to celebrate Wilson Harris’s eightieth birthday and the publication of *The Dark Jester*.

² Wilson Harris, “The Fabric of the Imagination,” in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup & Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992): 20.

of the *nameless unflinching folk*³ (the enduring Other), though they never actually come upon the flesh-and-blood Amerindians. But at one stage they are “on the threshold of the folk” and pass “the door of inner perception like a bird of spirit breaking the door of the sky.”⁴

In subsequent novels, notably *Heartland* (1964) and *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965), the protagonists also travel beyond a frontier of existence into a territory, both actual landscape and the unconscious, and ask the question of “who” or “what” lies in the mysterious dimension they are exploring with misgivings and an incipient terror. The nameless narrator in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* meditates on the nature of the enigmatic reality embodied in the ghost settlement of Raven’s Head which he and his engineer friend have been commissioned to locate:

The question arises – who or what indeed is this medium of capacity, this rift uncovering a stranger animation one senses within the cycle of time?⁵

The Guyanese interior in *Palace of the Peacock* and *Heartland*, the elusive location of Raven’s Head in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* or the bottom of the sea in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, from which the character Ghost emerges, are the metaphorical seats of otherness and of all, alive or dead, who are confined to an abyss of apparent non-existence. In *The Infinite Rehearsal*, they are referred to as “a deposit of ghosts relating to the conquistadorial body – as well as the victimized body – of new worlds and old worlds....”⁶ The “stranger animation” in the quotation above alludes to the livingness of these ghosts, of all past experience, historical and individual, that may seem alien and fixed in a rigid frame of interpretation but can surface of its own accord or be revived by the exploring consciousness. This is what Harris calls a “re-visionary potential within texts of reality,”⁷ now explored in *The Dark Jester*.

³ Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960; London: Faber & Faber, 1998): 110 (emphasis mine). “Nameless” and “unflinching” express a persistence very unlike the assertion of one’s difference and entrenched identity associated with “resistance literature” and themselves conducive to binary oppositions. Harris calls this “self-righteous deprivation.” See Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, ed. Alan Riach & Mark Williams (Liège: L3 – Liège Language Literature, 1992): 37–38, 40.

⁴ Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock*, 76.

⁵ Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965): 14.

⁶ Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987): 1.

⁷ Wilson Harris, “The Fabric of the Imagination,” 19.

In this novel,⁸ Harris reverts to his initial theme of conquest and its aftermath, not of Guyana as in *Palace of the Peacock*, but of the Inca kingdom by Pizarro. If ever an historical character denied the foreign Other a right to exist, it was the Spanish conquistador who did his best to destroy the Inca culture and art and melted its golden treasures. The novel re-creates his encounter with the last pre-conquest Inca, Atahualpa, and the latter’s treacherous execution in spite of the promise that his life would be spared if he paid a ransom amounting to a roomful of gold. The narrative, however, in no way claims to be an accurate historical account but rather, *through* and *beyond* historical facts, opens onto forms of multiple otherness and allows the “immanent substance” of past experience and fictional material to arise from the Dreamer’s unconscious into his narrative. As in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, it evinces “an approach to the ruling concepts of civilization from the other side, from the ruled or apparently eclipsed side of humanity.”⁹ This is what Emmanuel Levinas calls “the other side of being,” “the unreal reality of persecuted men in the daily history of the world.”¹⁰ As in *Palace of the Peacock* and Harris’s later novels in which the major character experiences his quest in a Dream-book, so *The Dark Jester* takes place entirely in the territory of dream. The novel opens with a “Fragment of a Dream” which confronts the reader – without a personified intermediary as in earlier novels – with both the Dreamer and the substance of his Dream. Apart from Atahualpa, Pizarro and the Bishop named after his function, all the characters are nameless, since they move in the state of “negative identity”¹¹ distinctive of the unconscious. The Dreamer is the vessel through whom history plays itself out again and who meditates on the possible meanings, previously ignored, it elicits, as well as on man’s position in the universe and his relations with its concrete forms. The introductory “Fragment of a Dream” makes us wonder “who” or

⁸ Wilson Harris, *The Dark Jester* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001). All further references are given in the text.

⁹ Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal*, vii.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l’autre homme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972): 110 (translation mine).

¹¹ Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 101. In *Palace of the Peacock*, the loss of a separate identity in men and the aspects of nature and life on the other side of the “door of inner perception” are called nameless. In *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, when the narrator reaches the territory beyond the frontier of existence he calls himself “Idiot Nameless” (108).

“what” is dreaming,¹² for the fragment seems to be both part of the Dream that initiates the narrative and the partial Dreamer himself, sometimes visited, as he explains, by “the personality of Dream” (1). His is not a disembodied voice but that of a material/ immaterial being (14) who appears to move on an intermediate plane between concrete living nature and a shadow world of forms or, in his own words, of “live fossil organs” (vii), “dusty... buried... but still alive” (50) and re-activated “in dream-design” (86).

Like Francisco Bone in *Jonestown*, the Dreamer (or shall I say W.H.?) is obsessed “by cities and settlements in the Central and South Americas” that are still an enigma today, and he too dreams “of their abandonment, their bird-masks, their animal-masks.”¹³ Such enigmas, the incomprehensible surrender of the powerful Inca to Pizarro and his handful of men but also the abandoned sanctuaries of Vilcabamba in Peru and Palenque in Mexico, have been absorbed into a shadow world theatre through which the Dreamer attempts to approach, if only in some degree, the riddles of history and the unseizable origins of creation. In his backward and forward reconstruction of events, he dialogues with the Dark Jester, a persona who already appears in Harris’s early work as an artist prepared to risk identifying himself “with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples.”¹⁴ If I understand rightly, he is called “dark” because, like the narrator at the end of *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, he moves in a “dark [nameless] room of identity.”¹⁵ He speaks to the Dreamer in “the darkest tone” (51) and his voice sometimes fades “in the darkness of the void” (52). But he is himself a medium and “[a] foreignness beyond him, beyond me [the Dreamer], a nameless foreignness... [speaks] through him” (48), a foreignness that represents a deeper stage

¹² David Punter asks a fairly similar question about *Palace of the Peacock* in *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000): 44.

¹³ Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996): 4.

¹⁴ Wilson Harris, *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas* (Georgetown, Guyana: The National History and Arts Council, Ministry of Information and Culture, 1970): 17. The Jester is a different version of the “Fool” or trickster who appears in earlier novels and finds his origin in the West Indian spider or trickster. On this subject, see Helen Tiffin, “The Metaphor of Anancy in Caribbean Literature,” in *Myth and Metaphor*, ed. Robert Sellick (Essays and Monograph Series 1; Adelaide: CRNLE, 1982): 15–52.

¹⁵ Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, cit., 107.

in the process of infinite rehearsal.¹⁶ In a sense, then, he is a mythical and archetypal ‘Other’. Half-man, half-god, through whom the laughter of the gods resonates, the Jester is also a major performer, a creator of “diverse arts” (16) in the Play of world theatre. His art is variously described as “reversal” (12; see example below) and as a capacity to “see and to read a mute, indescribable signal” (18), and is also “an attempt to bridge the apparently unbridgeable” (vii).

In his capacity to move between worlds, the Jester guides the Dreamer between the divisions, paradoxes, opposites and adversarial forces in the Dreamer himself, in the historical characters he evokes and in the reality he plumbs. His art also lies in an irony that dislodges or melts frozen, one-sided assumptions, and a dialectical humour he shares with the archetypal Translator whom the Dreamer sees in Palenque and who interprets aspects of immanent reality.¹⁷ The Jester, the Translator and the Dreamer are thus related allegorical figures of the “underworld imagination”¹⁸ at work in the dreaming process, each of them a “partial” interpreter who attempts to answer the existential multi-faceted inquiry echoing through the narrative: “What is jest?” “what is history?” “what is art?” “what is prophecy?”

There is not one answer to these questions but probings into a variety of interpretations and a determination not to invest in a single line of thought. The very title of the prologue, “Fragment of a Dream,” already suggests a partiality or limitations of perceptions, while the Dreamer confesses to the need to apprehend a multiplicity of forms:

I am judged for acts I performed without understanding the shapes of
just I mistook for a whole being... Other facets, other faces, other sides to
nature begin an immense liberation in breaking absolutes into partial
organs. (vii; my emphases)

History, “approved by a dominant culture,” is one of those absolutes, but it possesses a door or doors “within the self” (1) that give access to perceptions of “Non-Self,” here to a vision of the Inca retrieved from the womb of time and from his near-extinction “on the edge of death or of

¹⁶ This process is not mere repetition or deferral nor, as has sometimes been pointed out, a process of eternal return, but rehearsal with a change at an always more remote or deeper level of exploration.

¹⁷ The Translator is at first Pizarro’s actual translator transfigured into the Watchman/Translator in Palenque. On the significance of translation in Harris’s work, see Stephanos Stephanides, “Goddesses, Ghosts and translatability in Wilson Harris’s *Jonestown*,” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 2.1–3 (Spring 2000): 233–41.

¹⁸ Wilson Harris, *History, Fable and Myth*, 17.

life" (2) in the chasm generated by colonial history. At first Atahualpa strikes the Dreamer's imagination as a "spark" which ignites his meditation, and at a further remove the reader's, or as a distant "seed" which generates the reconstitution of the past. The spark or seed induces the same kind of reversing visionary process¹⁹ the Dreamer admires in masterpieces of painting and sculpture: a Byzantine icon in which the Christ-child gives birth to Its mother's soul and Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà* with Christ supporting the unfinished form of His mother. The spark is also a quantum particle spreading out and engendering the waves of time and a myriad of forms of being. This isn't just a counterpoint to a conventional history of mankind. The spark triggers off in the dreamer the process of reversal the Jester explains when he says that, offering the Spaniards "a courteous welcome" (9), Atahualpa "reversed the endemic ruse of history, the endemic Gift of history, the Wooden Horse that is more ancient than the times of man" (12). The "ruse" is a comparative allusion to the Trojan horse of Ulysses.²⁰ Pizarro enters the square in Cajamarca with two horsemen, his wooden heart blind and indifferent, like the Greeks in Troy, to the immaterial processions welcoming him and the hospitality he receives. The scene brings to mind colonial encounters all over the world when many native populations unsuspectingly welcomed their conquerors. Nevertheless, the narrative in no way claims to be an accurate account of history. On the contrary, uncertainty is conspicuous in the Dreamer's questioning journey, tentative intuitions and intimations of the infinite.

Except in a few early novels in which the historical dimension is implied through its consequences rather than represented in its own right, the investigation of history – especially its hidden side and the eclipse of its victims – is central to Harris's art, an art that "transcends the material of which it is made" (11) and "offers [...] reversals, for it lies in a consciousness of timelessness we cannot seize" (12). Indeed, the Dreamer explores history "across ages" (vii). He keeps asking himself questions about his own "Self" "before he knew [himself]" (vii), ages before when "Non-Self [was] seeking its Opposite called Self" (7), "before we knew ourselves as we are" (15); questions also about the nature of reality and of art "before the times of man" (13). But in spite of such "swinging across times" (x), timelessness remains inaccessible except as

¹⁹ Vera Kutzinski, "Realism and Reversibility in Wilson Harris's *Carnival*," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 2.1–3 (Spring 2000): 147–67.

²⁰ For a comment on Harris's various re-writings of this Homeric myth, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Ulyssean Carnival: Epic Metamorphoses in Wilson Harris's *Trilogy*," *Callaloo* 18.1 (Winter 1995): 46–58.

an evanescent perception, "Time was and time was not in a Wounded timelessness" (7), when in a privileged instant of revelation "our lips unfreeze for a moment in the translation of reality" (20). Harris's rejection of any linear perception of history partakes of his vision of man not in a given society but, predominantly in *The Dark Jester*, in the universe and of his rendering of *another* world-view, different from Western intellectual attempts to explain the universe and existence generally in scientific terms only. Hence his frequent recourse to myth, both pre-Columbian and Greek, to express a non-Cartesian apprehension of life.²¹ In *The Dark Jester*, this takes the form of a contrast between what he calls "Atahualpan Form" and "Cartesian Form."

Atahualpan Form represents a pre-Columbian cultural otherness. It eludes the common-sense, rigid differentiations between sensorial perceptions and their usual representation in Western art. One penetrates a dimension in which all boundaries between categories of being and between the senses dissolve:

I found myself staring into the Sky of Dream. *Black*. Black sky. Black Dream Sky like Wood. Wood in which sparks and stars appeared. I had never seen fire in this imaginative context before, matching new word (or original wood) and ancient, visionary light. The Black of the Sky, the Wood of dream, changed to particles of gold. Not the gold Pizarro had seen. Wounded, yes, but each wound was a window into a tree of life. Constellations formed where nothing had been seen before across the ages. A Wooden Horse was sculpted with fine delicate lines in the tree. A Dog barked. A Bull lifted its horns. A Bird with incandescent wings nested in the tree. They seemed monstrous in one flame, monstrously beautiful, immaculate but evasive, in another veined root or leaf that blazed. The lighted fanfare arose in a tree that blossomed. (13)

In his search for the lost resources of humanity, the Dreamer participates in a ballet of creation in which emotions take on tangible shapes. Thus conflicting moods, like anger and laughter, materialize into a Bird (4) which may be part of the Dreamer's fossil antecedents, for its song, also a "theme of opposites" (22), stimulates his understanding of an ancestral parentage between all creatures (5). A famous violinist said recently that

²¹ In several essays, Harris underlines the distinction between "the mimicry of fact and the originality of myth." See, among others, "Some Aspects of Myth and the Intuitive Imagination," in Wilson Harris, *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles, 1966–1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1981): 100.

music is what comes between the notes.²² The silent music “threaded between space and time”²³ gives the narrative its formal imaginary structure. It is the living essence that informs the creatures on the Moon, the animals, the rhythms and tones of the orchestrated ballet or, to use one of the Dreamer’s expressions, “the blood of infinity” (3). In a remarkable passage, the Bird’s music turns into an “elusive chord of snake-like sun,” then into “*Feathered Serpent*” (22), a South American version of the Mexican Quetzalcoatl, now a metaphor for the unseizable immanent substance underlying all existence.

Atahualpan form also conveys the Inca’s predicament in mythopoetic serpent-imagery. The Dreamer evokes Atahualpa’s appearance, unarmed, with his retainers, all soon to be massacred on the big square in Cajamarca. His robe is covered with golden serpents, “beads of waving sun” (25) intimating the mythological affiliation of the Inca with the Sun, his father. But the serpent also embodies Pizarro’s reptilian, cold-blooded intensity (8). On the other hand, when, in his reconstruction, the Dreamer attempts to warn Atahualpa against his incautious welcome of Pizarro, he is first threatened by the mythological serpents but then spared – unlike Laocoön, who had warned the Trojans of the Greeks’ wooden horse and was smothered by snakes along with his sons.

All through the narrative, hard, inanimate matter comes alive, informed by the immanent Spirit at the core of all life.²⁴ Stone and rocks were never inanimate in Harris’s fiction. Here again, they are humanized and the ruined stone walls of Tiahuanaco “echo [...] with the shadow of flesh and blood” (59). Gold arouses only greed and ferocity in Pizarro, who melts the treasures of the Inca’s ransom – in his eyes, mere pagan idols. But for Atahualpa gold is “a map of the stars [...] of the Sun” (12) and “possesses a sensation of innermost sparkling fire” (73). It lives in the cross Atahualpa had rejected when the Bishop tried to force it on him and blends with the rope around his neck after his execution, the embodiment of his victimization. Above all, it lives in El Dorado, the ‘man of gold’, whose glittering body can be bought or sold. In the underworld of the Americas the Dreamer discovers, beneath that glitter,

²² Isaac Stern, “La musique, c’est ce qu’il y a entre les notes,” *Le Vif/L’Express* (22 December 2000): 40.

²³ Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Andrew Bundy (London: Routledge, 1999): 40.

²⁴ On the subject of “Spirit,” see Paget Henry, “Wilson Harris and Caribbean Poeticism,” in *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York & London: Routledge, 2000): 90–114.

flesh on a plank in the belly of a slave-ship sailing the Middle Passage. Art is rooted in that suffering ‘other’ flesh:

Then it was that I saw the first work of art (was it the first, had I forgotten the others?) in the inner Underworld of the Kings of America. Half-flesh, half-work-of-art. A stretched figure, cruelly placed on a plank, in the belly of a slave-ship. A man of gold. I jumped as I flew and watched myself from above. El Dorado, the King of Africa and America, in a slave-ship. (98–99)

The slave and victim of conquest, then, is also El Dorado, the inaccessible immanent Other towards whom all of Harris’s protagonists move in their spiritual and artistic quest, although he is not an idealized ‘Other.’

The three men who at some stage are emblems of power, the Inca, Pizarro and the rigidly orthodox Spanish Bishop, have a chink in their armour. Pizarro was himself assassinated, and the Dreamer detects in the Bishop an “innermost buried face,” a “vestige of otherness, of strangeness” (50), while his inner face opens to reveal a “deep-seated crack” leading into the void (51). Thus they share a vulnerability which could have been a source of creative reciprocity. For vulnerability implies opening and, as Levinas again suggests, a relation with the other resides in it.²⁵ The major images in the novel are all of divisions, abysses, chasms, both in men and nature, expressing a kinship between humanity and what Harris calls “the life of the earth,” its wounds also “before time began” (57).

Such ontological vulnerability opens the way to hidden sources of creativity: “each wound was a window into a tree of life” (13). And, further, “I sensed [Cortez] infirmity as a complex window through which I looked into possibilities [...] of a constant soul” (91). Similarly, the darkness of the void subsequent to Atahualpa’s fall, a void dense with his unseen sorrowing people and their silent voices, the precipice in Palenque where the Dreamer penetrates the darkness of Oblivion, all are the variable seats of the Dreamer’s discovery of the frontiers of regeneration (51) and the possible transmutation of ruin into origin (41).

When the Dreamer moves imaginatively to Palenque in his reconstruction of history, he sees the other ruthless conqueror, Cortez, “with the memory of the future” (88). Failing in the twentieth century to persuade him, a typical dictator (89), to “desist from Conquest” (87), he

²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Dans la vulnérabilité gît [...] un rapport avec l’autre,” in *Humanisme de l’autre homme*, 105 (emphasis in the original).

fires at him, but both his hand and the gun fail to act with “factual violence” (88):

The precipice of freedom takes us beyond the seals of language but we become aware of an *otherness* when we slip and find ourselves unable to do what our wills dictate to us as the inevitable ground of fate. I had slipped and found *another hand* acting within the hand of fate. (89; my emphases)

If I understand rightly, this is when the reversal of history becomes possible in the twentieth-century imagination, when a spiritual Other, a composite of “other cross-cultural selves” (89), prevents the usual resort to violence:

The hand that intervened had been sudden, abrupt, but it brought home to me that violence is not an unvarying absolute though it appears to be so in the narratives we employ. (92)

The last chapter of the novel is an imaginative, metaphorical re-enactment by the Dreamer of the tragic plight of conquered peoples in the Americas. It is also a “rehearsal” in Harris’s fiction of his unfinished quest for the origins of art and creation. When the Dreamer awakes plagued by a void he cannot shake off, he awakens to the full creative potentialities of the void, to the possibility of converting the deprivation left by the fall of a civilization and a people into the kind of vision that might give birth to a non-violent world. The void is both “a series of well-nigh unbearable thresholds [...] into alternative universes” (93) and a “Hidden City of values [...] pregnant with many languages of art and partial fictions of universality” (94). In other words, its want of fixed, absolute and self-enclosed premises makes it a “womb of space,”²⁶ the cradle of the many-faceted otherness that is the source of Harris’s art.

The Dreamer’s complete identification with the victims of dominant history, who were hurled into an actual and psychological void, involves him, like Harris’s earlier protagonists, notably Francisco Bone in *Jonestown*, in a process of self-judgement (102). This implies an acknowledgement of one’s responsibility for others *in oneself*,²⁷ for “Non-exis-

²⁶ Briefly, this is Harris’s metaphor for the expanding consciousness and the seat of the “non-verbal arts of the [cross-cultural] imagination”; Harris, *The Womb of Space* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1983): xix.

²⁷ See, in one of Harris’s essays: “personality is cognizant of many existences [... who] become agents of personality”; “Interview with Wilson Harris,” in *Kas-*

tences threaded into complex being are the characters of the Play of the arts” (103). Harris’s original ontological conception of the self as a juxtaposition and fusion of non-being and being, “opposites that are merged and still not merged” (104), partakes of his view of existence as an unending natural and cosmic flow, a process of life and death, union and separation. When the Dreamer becomes Tupac Amaru, the last legitimate Inca and executed like his uncle Atahualpa, he is seized and stands on the scaffold: ie, on the brink of extinction. But he then becomes aware of a “shape” in himself,

A wound in the body of art as delicate as a sail [...] Flimsy as it is it sings of a Ship, a hidden Ship in a Hidden City no one has yet found though it still endures with the promise of creation on Land and on the Sea. (109)

Through his complete immersion in the victim’s trial, the Dreamer moves, like the protagonist in *The Tree of the Sun*, “from the strangest living nothingness into the strangest living otherness.”²⁸ But the Dream in which he and the reader have taken part does not end there. The “personality of Dream” (1) continues its endless journey towards the inaccessible “who” and “what” at the core of the universe.

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