由詮釋學的角度探析《序曲》
第 14 篇的宗教意涵

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摘 要

《序曲》第 14 篇可說是全詩一個富有宗教色彩的結論。英國大詩人華滋華斯指出與無限、超越並為大自然所莊嚴表徵的上帝的屬靈交通，能醫治並恢復歷經人生危機的心靈。本論文擬用詮釋學探討第 14 篇的宗教意涵。論文之主體分三部分。首先，在引言部分，我簡略介紹國內外關於《序曲》的文學批評，指出論文神學探討的貢獻。其次，比較詮釋學的各家觀點，介紹「詮釋循環」的概念。再次，我運用詮釋學探討第 14 篇的神學意涵。

關鍵詞：華滋華斯、葛達謨、詮釋學、《序曲》、屬靈交通、浪漫主義。

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A Religious Significance of Book Fourteenth of *The Prelude*: A Hermeneutic Approach

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Abstract

Book Fourteenth of William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* serves as a religious conclusion which signifies that a spiritual communion with God, infinite and transcendental and magnificently expressed by Nature, can heal and restore man’s mind in his crises of life. This article aims to employ hermeneutics to explicate religious significances of Book Fourteenth. And this article can be divided into three parts. First, I make a brief survey of literary criticisms on *The Prelude*, pointing out what contributions this article intends to make. Second, I make a comparison of the views of certain major hermeneutic theorists, introducing the concept of “the hermeneutical circle.” Third, I apply hermeneutics to explicate the theological significances of Book Fourteenth.

**Key words:** Wordsworth, hermeneutics, Gadamer, *The Prelude*, spiritual communion, Romanticism.
A Religious Significance of Book Fourteenth of *The Prelude*: A Hermeneutic Approach

I. Introduction

Book Fourteenth of *The Prelude* serves as a religious conclusion which signifies that a spiritual communion with God, infinite and transcendental and magnificently expressed by Nature, can heal and restore man’s mind in his crises of life. Besides being philosophical and associated with the tradition of Romanticism, Book Fourteenth conveys a religious significance, which will be hermeneutically explained and interpreted in this article. Accordingly, the universal truths in *The Prelude* can be explicitly manifested.

*The Prelude* is associated with the tradition of Romanticism, which more often than not upholds the value of Nature and imagination. The strongest passages in Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem are devoted to Nature’s ministry of fear rather than her ministry of beauty. His poetry, with its emphasis on the “infinite variety of natural appearances” can enrich mind (Abrams 123-24). Nature and human consciousness are interdependent or “correspondent powers.” Especially in the first two books of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes the education—mainly by natural influences—of a young boy. From the age of about five to thirteen consciousness of self is merged with nature-consciousness. And the last book of *The Prelude*, in symmetry with its first book, opens with a literary walk which translates itself into a metaphor for the climatic stage of both of the journey of life and of the
imaginative journey which is the poem itself. Actually, Nature and imagination are two key words frequently recurring in this autobiographical poem.

In addition, Book Fourteenth serving as a conclusion of *The Prelude* is a paean to the Romantic Imagination, which to Wordsworth was the mystic experience. The climatic vision is taken from his walking tour of Wales with Robert Jones in 1791. In moonlight, from atop Mount Snowden, Wordsworth beholds a gigantic spectacle of sky, mountains, and ocean that to him is “the emblem of a mind/ That feeds upon Infinity” (Book Fourteenth, lines 70-71). This ecstatic experience is vouchsafed by the Almighty as a symbol of Its Imagination, and within Wordsworth’s spirit is the divinely implanted Imagination that can thus create universal truths (Day 345). Actually, Book Fourteenth reflects the history of a poet’s mind of which rational 18th-century Nature is discarded for an intuitive Nature in which the poet is one with the cosmos, fully prepared for all of life and eternity.

As W. B. Gallie put it, *The Prelude* is a philosophical poem. It is of course a reflection of the poet’s life story containing profound reflections on psychology, education, and politics; and there are passages of an almost purely lyrical character. And it also contains philosophical poetry (Abrams 663). Furthermore, Gallie pointed out that besides being philosophical achievements, the greatness of *The Prelude* lies, like that of all Wordsworth’s successful poetry, in its passion, its humanity, its conscientious realism (Abrams 664).

In addition to all the literary comments of Western critics, I make a survey of the domestic studies on *The Prelude* which were published in recent two decades. A total of ten M. A. theses working on this epic-like poem were produced from 1995 to 2009. A variety of literary approaches including

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1 On the one hand, infinity here refers to boundless Nature. On the other hand, in theology, infinity means eternal life. “He hath made everything beautiful in its time; also he hath set the world in their heart, so that man findeth not out from the beginning to the end the work that God doeth” (Ecclesiastes 3: 11). Here “the world” a Hebrew theological jargon can also be translated into “the infinite.” Therefore, it can be seen that God set the eternal life in men’s heart.
psychology, deconstruction, postmodernism and Buddhism were applied to the study of this work. Besides, Pauline Ling-hui Wu’s Ph. D. dissertation with the title “Circle, Torsion, Virtue, and the Zero Optic World: A Study of The Prelude and Lyrical Ballads as Cartesian Mechanism” was produced in 2010. “This dissertation aims to investigate Wordsworth in the perspective of physics/psychology. It looks into Wordsworth’s world as an optic worlds and as a mechanical world” (Wu 5). And Kuo-shi Chen produced the other Ph. D. dissertation entitled “Let the Moon Shine on the Dog—A Deconstructive Reading of the Subjectivity in Wordsworth’s The Prelude” in 2005. “Based on Derrida’s deconstruction and other methodologies, this six-chapter thesis aims at effecting a valid re-reading of self manifested in Wordsworth’s The Prelude” (Chen 5). These domestic studies make an important contribution to a literary dialogue between the local scholars and the Western critics.  

Here, I will contribute to these dialogues by applying hermeneutics to the reading of Book Fourteenth of The Prelude for three reasons. First, there are few studies concerned with the theological meaning of this work in the past two decades. So, this article will put emphasis on a biblical and theological analysis of the text to supplement the insufficiency of the past studies at home and abroad. Second, it should be noted that the oldest and the most widespread understanding of the word “hermeneutics” refers to the principles of biblical interpretation. It is worth mentioning that the advent of classical philology in the eighteenth century had a profound impact on biblical hermeneutics, leading to the historical-critical method in theology. And later the interpretative methods applied to the Bible were also precisely applicable for other books. In other words, hermeneutics is derived from the biblical exegesis, aiming to bring the meaning of the text to light. And since I intend to employ biblical verses to

2 Generally speaking, the Western critics such as M. H. Abrams and Harold Bloom tended to made literary criticisms on William Wordsworth’s The Prelude in terms of Romanticism. However, the local current trend of literary criticisms on this epic-like poem focuses on the innovative application of new literary theories. This makes a difference from the Western traditional approach.
interpret the text, which could be divided into individual parts to form a
hermeneutical circle, hermeneutics is considered to be a proper literary approach
well designed to explicate the theological significances of the text. Finally, the
application of hermeneutics is not only based on the biblical exegesis but life
experience. Because experience is intrinsically temporal, we understand the
present really only in the horizon of past and future. So, by using hermeneutics,
we can compare our own life experiences with Wordsworth’s to figure out
whether understanding of experience is in commensurately historical categories
of thought. More important, we can apply the discovered universal truths to
our own real life, realizing the spiritual principles. In this way, literature which
is life can be real to us.

Therefore, I will manifest the theological significance of *The Prelude* on the
axis of Logos\(^3\), which is letting-something-be-seen (Heidegger 56). I intend to
reveal the theological significance. Since the Logos is a definite mode of letting
something be seen, the universal truths contained in Book Fourteenth of *The Prelude*
can be manifested, highlighted, and even applied to our real life.

II. Methodology: a hermeneutical approach

In this article, the theologically universal truths will be interpreted by a
hermeneutical approach. And on the part of its application, I will introduce a
concept of “the hermeneutical circle.” Here, in an attempt to arrive at a better
understanding of “the hermeneutical circle,” I will make a comparison of the
views of certain major hermeneutic theorists.

Indeed, the word “hermeneutics” has undergone a revision and expansion
of its traditional meaning in recent years. There are two sides to this historical

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\(^3\) The literal meaning of Logos, a Greek theological jargon, is God’s word. It originates
from Gospel John 1: 1—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.”
conditioning: both the ancient text and the modern interpreter have their own historical conditionality. The task of hermeneutics is to facilitate a meaningful interaction between the author’s horizon and the interpreter’s horizon, that is, in Gadamer’s words, a fusion of horizons. In other words, hermeneutics is the science of understanding a thought or event from one cultural context to another. This principle calls for the interpreter’s pre-understanding, which plays an important role in interpretation. Nevertheless, the pre-understanding of the interpreter does not mean that the focus has now shifted entirely from the past to the present.

In addition, the insight that individual parts are supposed to be dealt with in relation to the whole marks a significant step in the development of hermeneutics. The anti-dogmatic self-understanding of early Protestant hermeneutics did not escape a hidden dogmatic: the presupposition of the unity of the Bible apparent in the hermeneutic principle of considering parts within their whole. And remarkable is the attempt to incorporate the “specific hermeneutics” of biblical exegesis into a “general hermeneutics” that aims to provide the rules for any interpretation of signs whether they are of profane origin or not.

Dilthey, a German scholar, is the namer of the concept of “a hermeneutical circle.” The operation of understanding is seen by Dilthey to take place within the principle of the hermeneutical circle. He argued that the meaning of the constituent parts of a circle can be understood only if the whole has a prior meaning, and only when those constituent parts are understood can the meaning of the whole be grasped. A whole sentence, for instance, is a unity. We understand the meaning of the individual parts by reference to the whole and at the same time grasp the sentence’s entirety by reference to its parts. This then involves a progressive clarification of mutually conferred meanings. Furthermore, meaning is something historical; it is a relationship between a whole and parts observed by us from a certain standpoint. It is not something outside history but a part of a hermeneutical circle that is always historically
defined. In other words, meaning is contextual; it is a part of the situation. It could only be understood through reference to life itself in all its historicality and temporality. And the meaning of any context can come only through historical understanding.

Indeed, the “hermeneutical circle” was first described in the early nineteenth century by German theologian Scheleiermacher, and was so named later by Dilthey. According to Scheleiermacher, a hermeneutical circle describes a paradoxical fact:

Understanding is a basically referential operation; we understand something by comparing it to something we already know. What we understand forms itself into systematic unities, or circles made up of parts. By extension, an individual concept derives its meaning from a context or horizon within which it stands; the horizon is made up of the very elements to which it gives meaning. By a dialectical interaction between the whole and the part, each gives the other meaning; understanding is circular then. Because within this “circle” the meaning comes to stand, we call this hermeneutical circle. (Palmer 87)

Heidegger, however, contends that “the hermeneutic circle” is an interplay between the interpreter and a tradition in an open dialect. Following Heidegger, Gadamer holds that the interpreter must be closely associated with the tradition. Thus, once the tradition changes, the interpretation of the text will differ, too (Hoy 41-42).

III. A hermeneutical explication of theological significances

For it is the whole of scripture that guides the understanding of the
individual passage; and again the whole can be reached only through the cumulative understanding of individual passages. The circular relationship between the whole and the parts is not new (Gadamer 154). Accordingly, as I put it right at the beginning, Book Fourteenth of The Prelude signifies that a spiritual communion with God, infinite and transcendental and magnificently expressed by Nature, can heal and restore man’s mind in his crises of life. This presupposition or pre-understanding as a whole can be supported by the following interpretation of the individual parts of Book Fourteenth.

The hero of The Prelude restored and built up himself by “beholding the emblem of a mind/ That feeds upon infinity” (Book Fourteenth, lines 71-72). The poet “recognized the transcendental power/ In sense conducting to ideal form” (75-76). It is the infinity which nourished and restored the mind of the poet. “He hath made every thing beautiful in his time; also he hath set the world in their heart, so that man findeth out from the beginning to the end the work that God doeth” (Proverbs 3: 11). The poet sought his salvation and healing via infinity, which embraces transcendental power in Nature.

In addition to the Romantic tradition, the Western civilization is characterized by Christianity, which has its absolute temporal moment in the unique redemptive event. God’s chosen people are destined to be restored to the “immediacy of God.” And theology was concerned with the biblical tradition. The poet, a hero in the biblical tradition, remembered “that glorious faculty/ That higher minds bear with them as their own./ This is the very spirit in which they deal/ With the whole compass of the universe” (Book Fourteenth, lines 89-92). Instead of seeking what is its own, the poet turned to the transcendental and glorious God who is the compass of the universe. Indeed, all individuality is a manifestation of universal life, so the poet went further to recognize the divine sovereignty of God after experiencing redemption in his communion with Infinity in Mother Nature.
Just as Arthur O. Lovejoy pointed out in *The Great Chain of Being*,

God willed that man should in some measure know him through his creatures, and because no single created thing could fitly represent the infinite perfection of the Creator, he multiplied creatures, and bestowed on each a certain degree of goodness and perfection, that from these we might form some idea of the goodness and perfection of the Creator, who, in one most simple and perfect essence, contains infinite perfections.

(91)

Furthermore, the Psalms 8 of David, a well-known Hebrew king and poet, found its theological resonance in Lovejoy’s and Wordsworth’s cosmology.

O our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Who hast set thy glory above the heaven. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger. When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him (man) to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet; all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beast of the field; the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the path of the seas. O Lord our lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

In addition to being characteristic of the Hebrew world view, this poem also explicitly portrayed Wordsworth’s cosmology. Just as God is the center of the universe, man rules over all creations. The created world is confined to an absolute patriarchal power frame in which God is “the compass of the universe.”
This theological conception of Wordsworth is consistent with Alfred Tennyson’s lines in his poem—“Crossing the Bar” in which he depicted God as an infinite pilot in his life journey.

For though from out of our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.  (Bloom 638)

Regarding the infinity and sovereignty of the transcendental God, I tend to accept Hegel’s explanation of world history by the concept of Spirit. “The movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to extend in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding” (Gadamer 259). Wordsworth’s language that speaks to us is inseparable from a theological understanding of the following lines:

To hold fit converse with the spiritual world,
And with the generations of mankind
Spread over time, past, present, and to come,
Age after age, till Time shall be no more.
Such minds are truly from the Deity,
For they are Powers.  (Book Fourteenth, lines 108-13)

The theological understanding of these lines is the interplay of the movement of the biblical tradition and the movement of the interpreter. “The grace of the Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen” (2 Corinthians 13: 14). The poet’s conversation with the spiritual world is essentially a communion with the Holy
Ghost. Apostle Paul highlighted the divine communion especially in Galatians. For example, he pointed out the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5: 22-23: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; against such there is no law.” Through the divine communion with the Holy Spirit the poet can be recovered and rebuilt and led out of his own crisis, eventually reaping the heavenly blessings. In addition, “for he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting” (Galatians 6: 8). “Such minds are truly from the Deity./ For they are Powers” (Book Fourteenthh, lines 108-13). Everlasting life is truly from the Deity, and the fruits of the Holy Spirit are powers. The poet conversed with the Holy Spirit just as Abraham talked with God like a friend in the 18th chapter of Genesis, in which the forefather of Israel argued with God about the fate of a sinful city which had fallen from grace. The divine conversation with the spiritual world leads to eternal life, which can definitely redeem an individual’s crisis in his history of life.

Understanding tends to be a reproductive attitude. Hence the hermeneutically trained mind will also include historical consciousness. If we fail to place ourselves in this way within the historical horizon out of which the biblical tradition speaks, we shall misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us. The spiritual communion with God in Nature leads to a poet’s theological education and mental growth. M. H. Abrams argues that “the Bildungsroman (Wordsworth called The Prelude a poem on “the growth of my own mind”) and the Kunstlerroman (Wordsworth also spoke of it as “a poem on my own poetical education,” ) were specifically “of a Poet’s mind” ( 580). In other words, the role of The Prelude is to recount the mental growth of a “transitory Being,” culminating his achievement of a life philosophy.

All affections in the divine communion are “from earth to heaven, from human to divine” (Book Fourteenthh, lines 117-19). And the vision goes with the holy words of Scripture, which saturates the poet with peace and freedom,
enlarging him in the vision of Apocalypse, in which the Lamb will be in a union with His chosen people.

And all affections, by communion raised
From earth to heaven, from human to divine;
Hence endless occupation for the Soul. (Book Fourteenth, lines 117-19)
...
Our hearts—if here the words of Holy Writ
May with fit reverence be applied—that peace (125-26)
...
Oh! who is he that hath his whole life long
Preserved, enlarged, this freedom in himself?
For this alone is genuine liberty. (130-32)

It should be noted that the “communion raised from earth to heaven, from human to divine” is “after the Spirit” which a soul’s mind is spiritually set on. And to be spiritually minded is life and peace. This can be proven by Romans 8: 5b-6—“but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”

Furthermore, a spiritual mind results from a meditation of “the words of Holy Writ.” This theological principle can be well supported by Psalms 1: 2-3a—“But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season.”

And then because of meditating on the law of the Lord, the poet’s life is “preserved and enlarged,” and gains “freedom in himself.” This echoes 2 Corinthians 3: 17—“Now the Lord is that Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

“Horizons change for a person who is moving, and the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is
always in motion” (Gadamer 271), but we can reach “a fusion of horizons” by applying the biblical verses to the interpretation of the poet’s lines.

Furthermore, because understanding is a particular case of the application of something universal to a particular situation, the universality of experience passes into the new universality of the logos. The particular situation of the poet can be universally interpreted by the logos. Judging from the poet’s concepts such as “communion,” “the words of Holy Writ,” and “the freedom in himself,” we can reach a better understanding of the universalities which are proven and supported by Scripture. In his life of journey, the poet contacted the Creator in Nature via a divine communion which set him free from the bondage of the past tragedy and crisis. In addition, his meditation of the holy logos “enlarged” and “preserved” him, restoring and rebuilding him. And this poetical education eventually led to the growth of his own mind.

In fact, *The Prelude* is based on the life experience of the poet. And from the angle of hermeneutics, experience here is something that is part of the historical nature of man. That is, true experience is that of one’s own historicality.

Hermeneutics is a conversation with the text. In addition, it is the whole of Scripture that guides the understanding of the individual passage; and again the whole can be reached only through the cumulative understanding of individual passages. The circular relationship between the whole and the parts is not new (Gadamer 154). As mentioned before, the fore-understanding of Book Fourteenth is that the poet had been rebuilt and restored mentally and spiritually via a communion with the Creator in Nature. And the following quoted lines can show us how the divine conversation has been conducted. Indeed, the individual parts of the poem maintain a circular relationship with the fore-structure or fore-understanding.
Yet—compassed round by mountain solitudes,
within whose solemn temple I received.
(Book Fourteenth, lines 139-40)
...
Love that adores, but the knees of prayer,
By heaven inspired; that frees from chains the soul,
Bearing, in union with the purest, best. (183-85)

According to these lines, we can see that the poet’s conversation with the transcendental, infinite Creator is conducted by prayers in solitude. In moonlight, from atop Mount Snowden, Wordsworth beholds a gigantic spectacle of sky, mountains, and ocean that to him is “the emblem of a mind/ That feeds upon infinity.” It’s in his solitude that he prays on knees to experience infinity. This can be echoed by Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane where he prayed to God to seek his will in solitude (Matthew 26: 36-44). Prayers in solitude lead to the mysterious experience of a divine communion, which surely builds and educates the poet during his journey of life.

After indicating the way of conversing with God, the poet further points out the fruits of the spiritual communion.

This spiritual love acts not nor can exist
Without Imagination, which, in truth,
Is but another name for absolute power. (188-90)

According to these quoted lines, we can see that the poet’s divine communion with the eternal God produces spiritual love, which is well defined by 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8—“Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up; Doth not behave itself unseemly, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never
faileth.” Moreover, the spiritual love proves to be absolute power, which can be explicitly understood by Song of Songs 8: 6-7—“Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.” Since whoever has language has the world, the poet’s language is intimately associated with the biblical world. And the fusion of horizons cannot be complete without religious faith.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, first I would like to point out that this article aims to contribute to the studies on Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* by applying hermeneutics to explicate its theological significances. It is expected that the biblical and theological analysis of the text can supplement the insufficiency of the past studies at home and abroad. Second, the operation of understanding or interpretation takes place within the principle of the hermeneutical circle. This principle calls for the interpreter’s pre-understanding or fore-understanding as a whole. Furthermore, the individual parts of the text are supposed to be dealt with in relation to the whole. It is the whole of the text that guides the understanding of the individual passage; and again the whole can be reached only through the cumulative understanding of individual passages. Third, the pre-understanding of Book Fourteenth is that the poet has been rebuilt and restored mentally and spiritually via a communion with the Creator in Nature. And the insight marks a significant step in the development of interpreting Book Fourteenth, which can be divided into certain constituent parts understood when the meaning of the whole can be grasped. Fourth, I attempt to incorporate the “specific hermeneutics” of biblical exegesis into a “general hermeneutics” that
aims to provide the rules for any interpretation of signs. Thus, I make efforts to facilitate a meaningful interaction between the author’s horizon and the biblical horizon. Hopefully, a fusion of horizons can be reached. Finally, the spiritual principles based on the life experience of the poet are applicable to the real world. The hermeneutic experiences such as meditating on God’s words, praying in solitude, and practicing a spiritual communion with God in Nature can serve as practical rules to help us with any life crisis.

Actually, theology was concerned with the biblical tradition. And based on a theological understanding via a hermeneutical circle, we can see that all individuality is a manifestation of universal life, and that texts are expression of life. And *The Prelude* is “the history of a poet’s mind” (Book Fourteenth, line 415), which has been restored and rebuilt by religious faith.

And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought
Of human being, eternity, and God. (203-05)

Thus, through a divine communion in faith, the poet can voice his inspiration. He is like a prophet of his age and race, and his revelation can be eternally preserved as cultural legacy and conventional wisdom.4

4 Here, I need to pay special thanks to two anonymous reviewers of this article, who have made wise suggestions and comments.
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