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English to Italian, Italian to English

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С английского на итальянский, с итальянского на английский

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Jhumpa Lahiri and Francesca Marciano are inverted translingual doppelgangers. Each adopted the other’s principal language as her literary medium, Lahiri switching from English to Italian, and Marciano switching from Italian to English.

English > Italian / Italian > English

Moreover, the fact that each is aware of the other is clear from the Acknowledgments to *Animal Spirit*, in which Marciano thanks Lahiri — and others — for providing “precious feedback” to an early version of her manuscript. In turn, the Ringraziamenti to *In Altre Parole*, Lahiri’s first book in Italian, thanks Marciano —

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and others — for “l’appoggio e l’attenzione” that they provided. The back cover of *The Other Language* (2014), Marciano’s previous book, features a generous blurb by Lahiri praising the “extraordinary clarity and elegance” of the short stories it contains.

After spectacular commercial and critical success publishing two novels — *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013) — and two collections of short stories — *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) — in English, Lahiri’s announcement that she would henceforth write only in Italian was as startling as if Chopin had suddenly renounced the piano in favor of the flute. Born in London to immigrants from India, she first spoke Bengali. However, Lahiri grew up in Rhode Island, to which the family moved when she was three, and English soon became her primary language. It was in English that her prose earned a Pulitzer Prize, a PEN/Hemingway Award, a National Humanities Medal, and other honors.

But in 2015, in midlife and mid-career, she published a language memoir, *In Altre Parole*, that recounts in Italian her infatuation with that Romance language and her determination to adopt it as her exclusive literary medium. She was still learning Italian, a language to which she possessed no obvious ties except a passionate elective affinity. Immigration is a common incentive for translanguaging, but, though Lahiri has spent considerable time in Rome, she lives in the United States and teaches at Princeton University, where Italian is not the ambient tongue. Moreover, there is something perversely unmercenary about forswearing the commercial advantages of the world’s most widely spoken language and taking up one that ranks only 27th in number of speakers throughout the world. A bestseller in Italy might generate a comfortable income, but a place on the *New York Times* Bestseller List means hitting the jackpot. If they were willing to follow her, most of Lahiri’s devoted readers would now have to read her in translation.

The dual-language edition of *In Altre Parole / In Other Words* published in 2016 contains Lahiri’s Italian text on the verso pages, facing an English rendition by Ann Goldstein, the translator of Elena Ferrante and Primo Levi. A short “Author’s Note,” Lahiri’s only concession to English, explains that she chose not to translate her own book because: “Returning to English was disorienting, frustrating, also discouraging.”¹ Home again after a visit to Italy, she finds the sound of English repellent. “Provo un senso di estraneità,” she writes in the body of the memoir. “Come se mi imbattessi in un fidanzato di cui ero stufa, qualcuno che avevo lasciato anni fa. Non mi seduce più.” (Goldstein translates this as: “I feel alienated. As if I’d run into a boyfriend I’d tired of, someone I’d left years earlier. He no longer appeals to me”). [pp. 116 and 117]

Lahiri has since overcome her reluctance to translate, if not her aversion to English. Admiring Domenico Starnone’s novel *Lacci*, she rendered it in English in 2016 as *Ties*, explaining in the Introduction that: “My fear, before I began, was that

¹ *Dove mi trovo*. Milan: Ugo Guanda editore, 2018.

it would distance me from Italian, but the effect has been quite the contrary. If anything I feel more tied to it than ever.” [p. 19] She has since also translated Starnone’s *Scherzetto*, as *Trick* (2018), and *Confidenza*, as *Trust* (2021), and, as editor of *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories* (2020), translated six of the offerings. There is no Introduction to *Whereabouts*, Lahiri’s first novel in Italian, and apparently no need to justify her decision to translate it herself. However, the Italian version, *Dove Mi Trovo* was published in Milan in 2018, and the three-year gap between the Italian and English renditions might suggest some hesitancy by the author-translator. In fact, in an essay, “Where I Find Myself: On Self-translation,” published in *Words Without Borders*, she expressed the anxiety and self-doubts that plagued her as she – convinced that “translation is the most intense form of reading and rereading there is” — began translating her novel into English, while simultaneously revising the Italian text. Switching between languages — and identities — was profoundly unsettling but also euphoric. “I suppose the exhilarating aspect of translating myself,” she explained, “was being constantly reminded, as I changed the words from one language to another, that I myself had changed so profoundly, and that I was capable of such change. I realized that my relationship to the English language, thanks to my linguistic graft, had also been irrevocably altered.” [“Where I Find Myself: On Self-translation,” *Words Without Borders*, April 2021]

Translations of *Dove Mi Trovo* into other languages were done by other hands. The Spanish version, *Donde me encuentro*, by Celia Filipetto, the Dutch translation, *Waar ik nu ben*, by Marion Smits, and the Korean translation, *Nae ka innûn kot*, by Yi Sûng-su, all appeared promptly within a year of the original. With *Wo ich mich finde*, the German translator, Margit Knapp, beat Lahiri to her rendition by a year. Two different translations, by Ghazal Qorbanpur and Razieh Koshnud, respectively, have been published in Persian.

The Italian title of the new novel — *Dove Mi Trovo* (where I am) — could locate Lahiri’s own position in a lustrous literary career that is now, with the publication of her first Italian novel, moving in a new, uncharted direction. It is true that *The Lowland*, Lahiri’s last novel in English, begins with an epigraph in Italian by Giorgio Bassani, but where she is now — *dove si trova* — is where no one — including the author herself — could have expected her to be five years later, publishing a novel in Bassani’s own language. However, although the first paragraph of that novel begins with verbs — *supero* (I walk past), *conosco* (I know) — that announce a first-person perspective, the fictional narrator is quite distinct from her author. Never identified by name, the narrator is a middle-aged Italian who teaches an unidentified subject at an unnamed university. She has always lived in the same “run-down” [p. 55] Italian city and is the only child of a mismatched couple — a frugal and reclusive father who died when she was fifteen and a gregarious mother she reluctantly visits twice a month.

Never married and irritable conversing with a former lover, the narrator lives alone in a sparsely furnished, thinly stocked apartment. What is most notable about what is virtually the only developed character in the work is her discomfort in the company of others. She endures the tedium of an academic conference — three nights in an “ugly hotel” [p. 51] in another city listening to papers she does not find interesting enough to describe. Longing for “the great peace that lies beyond this confusion,” [p. 91] she flees the baptism party of a colleague’s daughter to wander by herself along the beach. She proclaims: “Solitude: it’s become my trade.” [p. 27] She is an independent spirit, but the spirit suffers from a deficiency of vivacity. Trying to describe herself, she lists a series of adjectives of alienation: “*Disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, uprooted, turned around.*” [p. 153]

Whereabouts is written in a minimalist style appropriate to the straitened existence of its narrator. That is not to say that the novel is entirely devoid of stylistic flourishes, as when a bunch of umbrellas on sale is described as “looking like tortured herons” [p. 120] or when the sunrise is likened to “an egg yolk that then slips from its shell.” [p. 122] The studied plainness of the prose is only emphasized by an occasional flamboyant simile. Sentences are terse iterations of subject and predicate arranged into short paragraphs that are in turn organized into brief chapters of two or three pages each. The entire novel (novella?) occupies a mere 176 pages (163 for the Italian original). An “anguished soul” [p. 33] who can recall few happy memories from her childhood or beyond, the narrator reports that she saw a therapist for about a year. But, lacking continuity, her treatment never gained traction. “Every session was like the start of a novel abandoned after the first chapter,” [p. 33] she reports. *Whereabouts* itself assumes the rhythms of those sessions.

The novel’s sparseness and discontinuity might seem natural to an author writing in a language she is still studying. A neophyte in Italian is not likely to write with the manneristic extravagance of Giambattista Marino. Switching languages was an act of self-effacement by a writer who had become a celebrity with the publication of her first book. It enabled Lahiri to create a new writing self in bare Italian sentences. While her English prose never employed the recondite vocabulary and convoluted syntax of a Faulknerian sentence, the chapters in *Whereabouts* are less than half the length of those in *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*. Its sentences avoid subordinate clauses. Because of the sheer willfulness of the forty-something author to adopt another, exotic language, it is hard to compare Lahiri to any other translingual writer. However, her prose is as terse as the poetry of Charles Simic, who writes in English rather than his native Serbian. Perhaps even more relevant is the example of Samuel Beckett, who famously explained his decision to write in French rather than English by declaring that “en français c’est plus facile d’écrire sans style.” Like the French Beckett, the Italian Lahiri writes “without style” as a spiritual discipline. It is a method to mortify the ego of a writer who found fame

both exhilarating and oppressive. She demonstrates the paradox that subjecting herself to the demands of a new language both constrains and liberates.

Lahiri provides a key to understanding *Dove Mi Trovo* in the closing pages of *In Altre Parole*, where she discusses how, in his seventies, Henri Matisse turned to cut-outs, a radically new technique for making art. Because of his infirmities, he found it difficult to create in the way that had earned him a position as a leading modern painter, by applying brushstrokes to canvas. Instead, relying on scissors more than brushes, he turned to collage, cutting up brightly colored pieces of paper and arranging them into a fibrous mosaic. Though innovative, Matisse's paintings had been generally representational, but, as Lahiri notes, his cut-out creations were abstractions. In comparison with his paintings, they were "più semplificate, grezze" ("more simplified, crude") [*In Other Words* pp. 204, 205] According to Lahiri, they constituted "un linguaggio diverso" ("a different language"). [pp. 204, 205] She admires the old man's courage in deconstructing himself and charting "un nuovo inizio" ("a new beginning"). [pp. 206, 207]

Lahiri's own attempt to start anew in a different language is a similar verbal cut-out. "I pezzi di carta sono le parole," she notes, "già definite da altri, selezionate e sistemate da me" ("The pieces of paper are the words, already defined by others, chosen and arranged by me"). [pp. 206, 207] Whereas Lahiri's Anglophone fictions are fastidious about specifying their characters and locations, *Dove Mi Trovo*, narrated by an unnamed teacher of an unnamed subject in an unnamed Italy city, is an abstract composition.

If the novel itself represents an abrupt change of direction for its author, the story concludes with a dramatic change of locale for its protagonist. Although she has never lived in another city, she decides to accept a fellowship in another country. The final page finds her alone in a train compartment on her way to a new beginning. However, instead of leaving the narrator exhilarated over her unexpected opportunity, it seems to fortify her solitude and depression. A new chapter in the history of literature of the United States in languages other than English (which includes the Lenape *Walam Olum*, the slave narrative that Omar Ibn Said wrote in Arabic, Ole Edvart Rølvaag's Norwegian novel *I de dage*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's Yiddish oeuvre, Giannina Braschi's Spanglish novel *Yo-Yo Boing!*, the Chinese poems that detainees wrote on the walls of Angel Island, and much, much more), *Dove Mi Trovo* is an audacious experiment in translanguaging. Where the train leads remains to be seen.

Reviewing *In Other Words*, Lahiri's first excursion into Italian, in the *New York Times* in 2016, Dwight Garner, who regards Lahiri's detour into Italian as a mistake, called the book "a soft, repetitive, self-dramatic and self-hobbled book." Disappointed in what he considered "a lesser version of herself, a full orchestra reduced to tentative woodwinds," Garner concluded his review by expressing the wish that Lahiri return to English and the hope "that her immersion in Italian will inform her English-language fiction and push it in new directions." However, there

has been no new English-language fiction from Lahiri, and, *pace* Garner, found her Italian-language fictional debut is, according to Jennifer Wilson, in *The Nation*, “arguably Lahiri’s most beautifully written novel.” [*The Nation* May 17/24, 2021] It certainly does push her fiction in new directions.

Reviewing *Dove Mi Trovo* in 2019, the Italian critic Alessandro Vescovi recommended the book highly and found it a significant advance over Lahiri’s earlier Italian writing — “più profonda, più vera, adatta a sondare una serie di emozioni non banali” (more profound, more true, adapted to probing a series of non-trivial emotions). [*Altre Modernità/Otras Modernidades/Autres Modernités/Other Modernities*, no. 21, 2019 May, 365-367] Reviewing Lahiri’s own English translation for *World Literature Today*, [summer 2021, p. 90] Lopamudra Basu concurred that *Whereabouts* is “a novel unlike any she has ever written.” Similarly, comparing *Whereabouts* to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Notes on Grief*, Anderson Tepper, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, maintained: “It signals a new mode for Lahiri as well, and an even more daring transformation.” [*Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2021]

However, while agreeing that the novel is a work of new departures, Giuseppe Sergio modified the metaphor with which *Dove Mi Trovo* concludes, from a train station to a wharf. Lahiri’s novel, he contends, “diventa la proda da cui prendere il largo” (becomes the shore from which to set sail). But he immediately adds: “Si spera non per sempre” (Let’s hope not forever). [“Parole, storie e suoni nell’italian senza frontier,” *Treccani*, 11 March 2020] *Whereabouts* also left Madeleine Thien, writing in the *New York Times*, more inclined to anticipate than assess. Lahiri’s novel, she said, “arrives like a holding space for work to come.” [*New York Times* April 27, 2021]

Marciano, a native of Rome who has published five books of fiction, is more experienced than Lahiri in writing in an adopted tongue. Her oeuvre includes three novels, *Rules of the Wild* (1999), *Casa Rossa* (2002), and *The End of Manners* (2009), as well as two collections of short stories, *The Other Language* (2014) and, most recently, *Animal Spirit* (2020) — all written in English, a language she began to learn at fourteen. She improved her command of the language during seven years in the United States, where she went to study filmmaking, as well as shorter stays in Kenya and India.

However, Marciano is an ambilingual translingual writer. Whereas Lahiri abandoned English to write in Italian, Marciano did not exactly give up Italian in order to write in English. Although she writes all of her prose fiction in English, she has written more than two dozen screenplays for Italian cinema and television. She won a David di Donatello Award (Italy’s counterpart to an Oscar) for her work on *Malaedetto il giorno che t’ho incontrato* (*Damned the Day I Met You*). *Io No ho paura* (*I’m Not Afraid*) (2003) might be the Marciano film most familiar to international audiences. Moreover, she also translates her own English fiction into Italian and, in 2003, even won the Premio Rapallo Carige, an award that honors

women who write in Italian, for her Italian rendition of her own novel *Casa Rossa*. Although the Italian text was a translation, the decision did not ignite the same controversy that arose in 1993 when the Canadian Governor General's Award for Fiction was bestowed on Nancy Huston's *Cantique des Plaines*, Huston's own rendition of a novel she had earlier published in English, as *Plainsong*. Marciano's own Italian rendition of *Animal Spirit* — published in Milan by Mondadori ten months after the English edition — maintains the original title. Older and more experienced in self-translation than Lahiri, Marciano did not express the same anxieties about producing a version of *Animal Spirit* in her native Italian as Lahiri did about rendering *Dove Mi Trovo* as *Whereabouts*. Like Kamala Das, the Indian writer who wrote all of her poetry in English and all of her fiction — under the nom de plume Madhavikutty — in Malayalam, Marciano compartmentalizes her literary production — English for prose fiction and Italian for screenplays. “It’s almost as if by now I have two brains that are running parallel to one another,” she told Rachel Martin during an interview on NPR. “One brain writes films in Italian and the other brain seems to be writing novels in English.” [Rachel Martin, “Characters Try On Different Cultures In ‘Other Language.’ ” NPR.com, August 13, 2014]

Language is an explicit theme in much of Marciano's earlier fiction, which, set in Afghanistan, Greece, India, Italy, Kenya, Tanzania, the United Kingdom, and the United States, transcends the boundaries of nationality, culture, and language. Many of her characters are journalists, scientists, aid workers, tourists, expatriates, and other outsiders for whom English, the lingua franca they use to communicate with one another, is not a transparent medium. *The Other Language*, her first short story collection, begins with an epigraph by Derek Walcott that foregrounds the challenge posed by language: “To change your language you must change your life.” And the title piece in the volume is the coming-of-age story of a twelve-year-old Italian girl who, while vacationing with her family in Greece, falls in love with an English boy. Over the years, the way in which she changes her life is captured in the way in which she changes her language, to English.

Set in France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kenya, and the United States, the six deftly plotted and precisely phrased stories in Marciano's latest collection, *Animal Spirit*, are as cosmopolitan as her earlier work. All are written in the Italian author's adopted language, English, but language itself is not as obviously foregrounded as it is in her earlier work. Nor have reviewers of *Animal Spirit* paid much attention, except in passing, to the fact that it is a translingual text. They have been drawn to the fictions' interspecies connections more than to the oddity of their having been written in English. Short stories tend to receive less attention than novels, and Lahiri is more famous than Marciano, so more has been written about *Whereabouts* than *Animal Spirit*. But the reception of Marciano's collection has been enthusiastic. It has included starred reviews in both *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine* proclaimed: “With this collection of radiant short stories set mostly in Rome, Marciano claims a spot beside the best practitioners of

the form.” [“28 of the Best Books to Transport You This Summer,” *O, The Oprah Magazine*, June 24, 2020]

It might be that, twenty-one years after publishing her first book and more than fifty years after she began studying English, translanguaging writing is no longer either a novelty or a strain to the sexagenarian author. By contrast, Lahiri, twelve years younger than Marciano, was inspired to take up Italian during a visit to Florence as recently as 1994. With her first novel in Italian, Lahiri is still somewhat new to the experience of composing in an adopted tongue. However, *Animal Spirit* contains no obvious solecisms or calques to betray the fact that Marciano might be thinking in Italian but typing in English. One sentence — “But she could see his daughter, whom she realized was about her own age” [p. 36] — incorrectly substitutes the objective pronoun *whom* for the nominative *who*, but confusion of the two is not uncommon among native speakers of English. And when an Italian actress says that a pedestrian “stepped down from the platform at the very last fraction of a second,” [p. 223] she probably means “sidewalk” but is thinking of the Italian *marciapiede*, which could mean either platform or sidewalk. It is likely indicative of the character’s imperfect command of English rather than Marciano’s.

“Terrible Things Could Happen to Us,” the first story in *Animal Spirit*, is set entirely in Rome among native speakers of Italian. The affair between Sandro, a married lawyer, and Emilia, his yoga instructor, becomes more complicated when her husband suddenly dies. During an anxious phone call, Sandro refers to Emilia as “*Amore*,” [p. 4] injecting some Italian into a text that, aside from a culinary reference to *pollo all cacciatora*, [p. 7] is otherwise exclusively in English. Though it might seem odd for an Italian writer to portray conversations among Italians in English, “*Amore*” serves to signal to the reader to imagine that the entire story is occurring in Italian, not English — even when, in a moment of panic, Emilia emits a notorious English vulgarity: “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” [p. 35]

In her interview with NPR, Marciano explained that she in fact began writing her first book, *Rules of the Wild*, in Italian but, realizing that it was absurd for her characters to be speaking her own native language, soon switched to English: “The story was set in Kenya, and the characters were English and spoke English. And I remember that I first started writing the first few pages of the book in Italian. And it just sounded so inauthentic. And I stopped. And then a very good friend said try to write in English and see how it goes. And I remember how the minute I started writing in English, I felt I was on this, like, highway that would take me somewhere.” [Rachel Martin, “Characters Try On Different Cultures In ‘Other Language.’” NPR.com, August 13, 2014] Her translanguaging practice has taken Marciano through three novels and two story collections. Writing in English has become so routine for her that she is not uncomfortable now with creating a story set in Italy centered on Italian characters speaking exclusively in English.

In “The Girl,” the second story in *Animal Spirit*, a rebellious young Italian woman named Ada runs off with Andor, a Hungarian snake handler, to work in

a circus that travels through Italy and into France. Although the majority are Romany, the performers are a motley blend of nationalities. We are told that Andor speaks to Ada in a foreign accent, presumably in Italian, although the entire story is written in English. About Nadya, the Romany fortune-teller whom Ada consults, we are told that: “Her Italian was stilted but rather good.” [p. 75] However, the way that Marciano represents Nadya’s imperfect command of Italian is to have the tarot-reader utter her oracular statements in simple, fractured English: “Old must die to create the new. You leave this situation. Soon, in the next future. That is very good.” [p. 78] In old World War II movies, Hollywood typically has the German high command speak among themselves in accented English, which they of course did not. It requires a willing suspension of linguistic disbelief that Leo Tolstoy did not demand when, in *War and Peace*, his Russian aristocrats often speak French, as Russian aristocrats often did in the early nineteenth century. Marciano puts English into the mouths of her Italian, Hungarian, and Romany characters the way Julius Caesar, an emperor of Rome, Timon, a gentleman of Athens, and Hamlet, a prince of Denmark, manage to speak eloquently in Shakespearean English. Readers, who do not chafe at spending hours turning pieces of paper covered with squiggles of ink, are expected to accept the linguistic illusion.

In the last three stories in the collection, it makes sense for the characters to speak English, and they do. “Indian Land” begins with a phone call from Paris for Sara, who lives in Rome. A woman speaking English with a French accent tells her that Teo, a former lover, is in trouble. Although Sara is married to someone else and Teo, who suffers from bipolar disorder, is in Taos, Sara rushes off alone to the United States to help him through a manic episode. Teo, half French and half Dutch, and Sara, fully Italian, met in Kenya, and their lingua franca throughout the story, set mostly in New Mexico, is appropriately English. Similarly, although “There Might Be Blood” is set entirely in Rome, it focuses on an American, Diana, who decides to leave her husband in New York to live on her own for two months in a foreign city. She does not speak Italian but gets along entirely in English with a landlord who speaks it haltingly and a falconer who, having spent several years in Canada, speaks it flawlessly.

Also set in Rome, “The Callback” is the story of Julian, a famous American filmmaker who auditions an Italian actress, Valeria. During the course of an evening, he comes to realize that Valeria was the one who killed Julian’s beloved sister Maya in a traffic accident when he was twelve. Because she spent time in Hollywood, unsuccessfully pursuing her acting career, Valeria speaks English almost without an accent, but Julian’s Italian is fractured. Most of the story is an intense conversation between Julian and Valeria — in English, except for a moment in which Julian tries to summon the Italian word for “welcome back.” He tries “*benetornota*,” but Valeria corrects him with “*bentornata*.” [p. 227]

The title story of the volume, “Animal Spirit,” explores the psychodynamics of two Italian couples — Carlos and Jacopo and Clare and Gabriel — during the

summer they rent a house together on a Greek island. Jacopo is a professional translator from French, but none of the four speaks Greek, and they are dependent on their housekeeper to translate for them when they attempt to converse with locals. Again, the story is written in English, although the characters experience it in Italian. The entrance into their lives of a stray poodle affects each of the four differently.

“Animal Spirit” lends its title to the entire collection because other species haunt the other stories as well. In “The Girl,” Ada discovers that when she handles a huge Burmese python she experiences “some kind of amazing, magical energy.” [p. 68] In “Indian Land,” Teo offers the animistic revelation that: “Everything we perceive as separate is part of a single intelligence! The forests, the reefs, the shoals of fish that move in sync, the swarms of bees, the waves, the tides! Everything is connected.” [p. 155] In “There Might Be Blood,” the American Diana’s stay in Rome is profoundly altered by her encounter with a family of seagulls on the terrace of her rented apartment. And in the final paragraphs of “The Callback,” the American filmmaker Julian gazes at an immense flock of starlings moving across the sky. In awe of the intricate pattern, called a murmuring, of their avian choreography, he marvels: “There was so much shared information and interdependence in the dance they were doing — heading north, then east, opening up and shrinking again in a mysterious choreography — so that the birds never collided but seemed to connect with and protect one another.” [p. 234]

Inspired by an intuition of *sprachgefühl*, Marciano’s first collection of stories, *The Other Language*, explores and transcends linguistic boundaries. If every language has its own spirit, translanguaging becomes an exercise in spiritual migration. Her new collection, *Animal Spirit*, extends Marciano’s engagement with the language of alterity to other species. It commutes not only between Italian and English but also between human language and the cryptic traces of snakes, dogs, coral reefs, seagulls, and starlings.

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