

**JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN**

**ABTEILUNG FÜR KULTUR
Working Paper No. 73/1995**

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**The Politics of Nationalism in Recent
American Literary Historiography:
The Case of the New Cambridge History**

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Volume one of the Cambridge History of American Literature was published at the beginning of 1994, a decade after the organizing conference that in February, 1984, brought together two-dozen planned contributors for shared discussion at the project's outset; by Christmas, 1994, volume two will appear. The Cambridge History, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch, is the fourth and last of the major histories of the literature of the United States to appear in the twentieth century, and it is much the largest. The Literary History of the United States of 1948 and the Columbia Literary History of the United States of 1988 are each about 1200 pages total, while the Cambridge History of American Literature will, when completed, run in eight volumes to over 5000 pages. Most of us had the chance to write a contribution the size of a shortish book. That's why it was so exciting to participate and why it has taken so long. After the explosion of literary theory in the American academy of the 1970s, this new project challenged us to reinvent techniques for extended historiography, yet to do so in a discursive protocol that asked us to write without footnotes and without references to secondary works. Let us then go behind this smooth surface.

To illustrate the role of theory in the process of defining what was to be done, let me quote from a document I produced in early 1984, as a preliminary planning statement to circulate among contributors:

"My major guiding hypotheses include the following three: First, whether personal,

¹ I am very pleased to be here, as the guest of a great research institute, to honor Ursula Brumm; I thank Heinz Ickstadt and Winfried Fluck for inviting me; and I am especially grateful to Winfried Fluck for encouraging me to address the Cambridge History of American Literature even though I am trying to devote my energies to completing a book on Huckleberry Finn and the Functions of Criticism (a topic he may already have tired himself of). It is especially comforting that two colleagues from the Cambridge History project are here; Phil Fisher and Dick Brodhead can be counted on to make sure no one mistakenly believes my reflections on the Cambridge History are official or authoritative: they arise only from my own participant-observation.

fictional, or historical, narrative is a means of negotiating cultural antinomies that are related to social contradictions. (This derives . . . from Levi-Strauss on myth, Althusser on ideology, and Fredric Jameson on the 'political unconscious.') Second, probably all actual narratives, certainly any that will interest us, are complexly overdetermined and will therefore manifest discontinuities rather than perfect coherence or integration. Third, and finally, there is a productive social tension in the relation between works and their readers: each forms the other. Narratives exercise social power through establishing 'positions' that define their reading subjects; and readers exercise social power through interpreting works--which is to say by establishing 'positions' of their own vis-a-vis the work. These three hypotheses will provide beginning points for the problem of relating individual subjects--author, reader, character--to the national subject."

In a related document, I invoked recent theoretical work to distinguish our undertaking from that of the 1948 Literary History of the United States: "The LHUS barely responds to the new skills of reading developed in New Criticism [which is now mistakenly often thought to have been the dominant professional mode by the 1940s]; it follows too directly from the 1928 Reinterpretation of American Literature. From Matthiessen's essays on Poe and [on] modern poetry [in the LHUS], it seems clear that policy forbade integrating close reading into the essays, since he at least could have handled the matter differently. In other words, the distinction between 'literary history' and 'literary criticism' is too rigorously in place. If the 'New Literary History' project [alluding to Ralph Cohen's journal] of the last fifteen years means anything, it means some supersession of that dichotomy." I can say now that I believe this is one of the crucial ways in which our greater space has indeed helped.

My contribution is in volume two, which has begun to be advertised but has still not appeared, so I hope you will be interested in a little preview. Devoted to Prose Writing, roughly from 1820 to 1865, the volume includes four contributors. Barbara Packer treats high intellectual prose, the writings of religion, philosophy, and the Transcendentalists. The other three of us all have much to do with fiction, but with quite differing emphases. Michael

Davitt Bell focuses on "Conditions of Literary Vocation," which turns out to mean literature in the marketplace, more as an object of sale than of reading. Eric Sundquist treats the writing of exploration and expansion, of politics and of slavery; from his perspective works appear frequently as polemics, more likely to be studied for their positions than for their composition. My rubric is "Prose Narratives."

Let me pause to reflect concerning a particular micropolitics of work on the History. Each contributor has substantial room to work in, enough so that we may feel that what we produce is "our own work" rather than simply a piece in a mosaic composed by the editor. Nonetheless, there are also crucial ways in which what we have done is marked by our collaboration. I mean not simply moments of invigorating collegiality with our fellow-contributors, but something both more fundamental and alienating. We have been working under constraints of scale and scope. By contract, the standard contribution size was set at 60,000 words. In fact, many of us have ended by doing more or much more, sometimes at our own urging, sometimes at the Editor's. I know that what I finally produced was strongly affected by my initial and ongoing understanding of how much space I was supposed to take.

Inseparable from the constraint of scale was the constraint of scope. By a decision made very early in the process of planning, Michael Bell was assigned primary responsibility for the women writing fiction at mid-century. Why was this? As best I can reconstruct our logic, there were two reasons: first, the emergence in the 1970s of feminist critical recovery of these writers had formed part of a social movement (and thus harmonized with the sociological orientation of his topic) and second, the long stigmatization of many of these writers as merely successful, to gloss Hawthorne's now infamous mention of the "damned mob of scribbling women," made it seem appropriate that their restoration to a position of value be treated from his perspective of the marketplace. At the same early stage, Eric Sundquist was assigned primary responsibility for writing by African-Americans.

So I was responsible for "Prose Narratives," but with the understanding that I could not give primary attention to women's fiction or to slave narratives, nor for that matter to

Walden or Summer on the Lakes, because they were written by Transcendentalists. None of these topics were forbidden me, but they had to be limited. On the other hand, we decided that Poe would be mainly my responsibility, even though I argued that he was better seen from the perspective of the marketplace and the institutions of literary journalism. These constraints on scale and scope meant that I was writing something that was only partially "mine" and that lacked the possibility of achieving "wholeness" or an "organic" composition. These constraints made clear the need for certain argumentative and compositional rationalizations and silences.

Let me reach back to another of the early planning documents to define my initial conception of what it would mean to write, thus enabled and constrained, on "Prose Narratives, 1820-65":

"The large problem area within which I set my undertaking is this: It had been expected that when the United States came fully of age as a nation, it would produce a representative national literature. In these years the continental nation was consolidated (as United and American) politically through the Civil War and economically through the establishment of a national market structure, of which the railroad is the major symbol. Moreover, the practice of literature was successfully secured--but only at a felt distance from the national life as a whole that has never ceased to provoke investigation and controversy."

"My guiding questions will be, then, what were the relations of narratives to American life at this time, and with what consequences both for that time and for our own? How did these relations compare to those in established national cultures (England, France), in developing national cultures (Germany, Russia), and among peoples first aspiring to nationhood (in the Habsburg Empire or Latin America). How did literature's relative institutional autonomy come to pass, and with what effects?"

My formulations of these issues point to a crucial fact of my intellectual and professional formation. If they sound rather like a comparatist's questions, the reason is because I am not an Americanist. At Harvard, in a time when it was very clear what an

Americanist must study, I chose instead to focus my doctoral training mainly in British romanticism and Victorianism; my dissertation was directed by Harry Levin, himself a comparatist who also wrote on American topics; my first book, Commissioned Spirits, devoted many pages to Carlyle and Dickens, with hopes of changing the understanding of Hawthorne and Melville; after a decade as a faculty member, I had taught no more than seven or eight classes in American subjects; and at the moment that I was invited to participate in the Cambridge History, I was in the midst of a book treating Hawthorne and Henry James, but also Goethe, Flaubert and George Eliot.

Sacvan Bercovitch made an important decision in selecting the contributors to the Cambridge History. He aimed to construct a team somewhat--in this as in all else, compromise was required--outside the main lines by which the American study of American literature had institutionally reproduced itself. As Bercovitch's recent autobiographical reflection on "The Music of America" emphasizes, his own understanding of his subject is deeply marked by his Canadian-Russian-Jewish perspective, and it seems that he wanted to keep alive some comparable dissonance in this collective undertaking. Yet I must also confess: even though I think that I have brought a considerably more internationally-oriented practice to bear than was the case in the three earlier major literary histories, more also than has yet become common in the monographic literature, nonetheless, the final work is not so radically internationally comparative as I had hoped. I attribute this result to three causes. First, the constraint of space. Second, the particular lacunae the Editor pointed to for further work in my drafts involved beefing up the treatment of standard American texts, rather than further developing international topics. Finally, I failed to develop sufficient expertise in what is still only now beginning to be recognized as the crucial topic of comparative emergent national (literary) cultures.

Let me sketch the plot of my contribution. My starting point comes to me equally from Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault: it is the transformation of the notion of "literature." In the late eighteenth century, literature meant all culturally valued writing,

including what would now be distinguished as non-fiction, such as history, travel, philosophy, science. By now, in the United States of the late twentieth century, the most widely accepted meaning of literature, as may be witnessed in innumerable bookstores nationwide, is fiction that does not fit any defined marketing genre (science fiction, western, crime, romance, etc.). In the US, mid-nineteenth-century prose narrative was a crucial place for the emergence of a new meaning--imaginative belles-lettres--that is now becoming residual. As a result of this transformation, it is now expected that literary culture and national culture will stand at a tense distance from each other. This historically limited conception often makes it difficult to understand the value of works that enact differing relations to the national.

The event that shapes my literary history of mid-nineteenth-century American prose narrative is the emergence, around 1850, of works, pre-eminently The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick, that still count as literature for many readers of the late twentieth century. Other important prose narratives of the time, such as Uncle Tom's Cabin, still trouble many readers now because there is no valued conceptual category into which they fit ("it's not literature, it's propaganda"). My fourth chapter addresses the newly emerging genre of literary narrative. Chapters one through three define the competing, earlier generic types in relation to which the specificity of literary narrative may be understood, and chapter five sketches the fate of literary narrative in the period of its first emergence. Although literary narrative dominates late-twentieth-century views of this period, the works that are now valued did not immediately establish themselves, and the very genre of literary narrative almost disappeared in the intense national crisis of the Civil War.

The dominant narrative type that preceded literary narrative, and which continued to flourish after literary narrative had appeared, I call "national narrative." From the standpoint of America's present existence as an independent Union, national narrative told the story of America's colonial beginnings and looked forward to its future as a model for the world. This story, which still has much force in the United States--but not in what we now consider literature--began to take on fully articulated form around the presidency of Andrew Jackson. It

could be told with equal power through fiction, especially in the work of Fenimore Cooper, beginning in the 1820s, and through history, especially in the work of George Bancroft, beginning in the 1830s. When it first took shape, there was no fully operative national culture. National narrative was part of the process by which the nation was forming itself, not merely a reflection of an accomplished fact, yet it defined the ground against which the other major narrative types stand out.

Articulated in contrast with national narrative, two important smaller types flourished and competed with it. First, in the 1830s, came what I call "local narratives." These are more restricted than national narrative, either geographically or in the scale of human experience that they deal with. Following the example of Washington Irving's New York sketches, local narratives include the "southwestern humorists," the northeastern tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the works of Edgar Allan Poe which began to define the city as a new American locale. In the 1840s, what I call "personal narratives" became prominent. Rather than the collectivity of a nation, these works foreground a single first-person narrator. Yet contrary both to Puritan tradition and to twentieth-century expectations, this "I" is a rather extroverted reporter, not so much exploring inwardness as bringing news from the margins of the dominant culture. This form includes work by travelers such as Herman Melville, Richard Henry Dana, and Francis Parkman, and also narratives by escaped slaves, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.

Literary narrative emerged together with a political crisis over slavery around 1850, which threatened the Union's continuing existence and produced a Compromise intended to subdue controversy. At this moment, Hawthorne and Melville newly emphasized certain elements from their own earlier work and that of Poe and set their work apart from national narrative. The "Custom-House" introduction to The Scarlet Letter illustrates this distancing from national concerns. In contrast to national narrative, but also to local and personal narratives, all of which forms both addressed and reflected the concerns of everyday public life, the literary narrative of The Scarlet Letter turns away to develop a freely imaginative

space. This turn of American literary narrative was not unique. Since the later eighteenth century, Romantic writers in England and Germany had elaborated a new understanding of the place that highly skilled writing occupies within a culture. Conceptions such as originality, genius, and imagination defined literature as independent from the public world rather than interrelated with it, and the notions of psychology and development defined new areas of attention and techniques.

Such works not only differed from, but seemed also to transcend and, implicitly, to criticize the world of common, public life. Yet their critical authority depended on their limitation to elite audiences, esoteric subjects, and indirect means. The possible glory of forming a "world elsewhere" through writing was often felt by the authors themselves as the deadening activity of repetitive, solitary labor. This moment in which the "literary" writer was redefined as an "artist" marks a crisis in the relation of narrative to its public, for the work of the "artist" was understood to draw its primary value from its private relation to a writer's self.

The fifth chapter is entitled "Crisis of Literary Narrative and Consolidation of National Narrative." This chapter immediately follows extended discussions of The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick at the conclusion of chapter four on "Literary Narrative." Chapter five begins with a section on "National Narrative in 1851," which treats at some length Francis Parkman's The Conspiracy of Pontiac and then Uncle Tom's Cabin. The next section, "Uncle Tom's Echoes," argues the impact of Stowe's alternative national narrative across the generic system: on personal narratives such as Frederick Douglass's My Bondage and My Freedom and Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl; on local narratives such as Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills"; and on literary narratives such as Melville's Pierre.

This sequence across the two chapters, some twenty thousand words in all, places in a single plane of discourse and a single argumentative frame, at comparable levels of attention and detail, works that have, I believe, been separated for the whole history of American culture, so different have their generic and canonic values seemed. I anticipate controversy from readers who will charge me with promiscuously mingling masterpieces with matter of

purely historical significance, and from readers who will charge me with homogenizing works of very different political valences. When I have sketched my approach to audiences elsewhere, aesthetic readers have felt that I have favored the national, while political readers have felt that I favored the literary. These responses encourage my hope that I have produced, through such unease, a historical distance from these categories which may aid in producing possible alternatives for us now.

There are four particular procedures by which I have tried to produce this disquieting distance. First, and most emphasized in my presentation so far, I treat the "literary" not as a given, by which I may measure and evaluate the materials I study, but as the object of my historical inquiry. In our century defined by films, radio, TV, video, and spiraling new electronic developments, the standard of postromantic high literacy is no longer self-evident. As the contemporary American literature discussed in the pages of the New York Times Book Review or the New York Review of Books is more and more evidently of no interest to anyone who might be imagined as a "general" reader, it seems reasonable to inquire into the beginnings of this mode of writing, which once was thought persuasively to define the human, but which now finds so much of humanity alien to it.

The second procedure is to choose as my fundamental unit of intelligibility not the author but the generic system. The canonical major authors are there; even had I wished to exclude them, my editor and publisher would have prevented me. But they are scattered across the chapters: Poe and Hawthorne in chapters two and four on local and literary narrative; Melville in chapters three and four on personal and literary narrative; Hawthorne and Melville in chapter five, along with Douglass, who is also treated in chapter two, and Parkman, who also appears in chapter three. Literary history, I venture here, is less a history of authors or works than of a system that produces and distributes kinds of writing.

The third procedure is to make of the nation a problem, rather than both a presupposition and a goal ("We are already American, and this history reveals to us what this means"). In contrast, the Literary History of the United States, legibly on its pages and as

retrospectively spelled out by its chief editor, Robert Spiller, arose from "cultural nationalism" at a moment of "world power," such as "has followed every successful American war--the Revolution, the Civil War, and the two World Wars" (604). [How much discussion it might take to determine why the Civil War should be called successful, and the Mexican War not even mentioned.] In this spirit, Spiller's editorial group defined its audience as neither "professional" nor "popular," but precisely as "a National public," made up from what we might now call the New-York-Times-reading class "of intelligent lawyers, scientists, journalists, etc.," as well as "specialists in the literary field" (612).

In preparation for our planning meeting ten years ago, Sacvan Bercovitch sent us a lot of materials from the history of American literary historiography, but the 1974 "History of a History" by Spiller, from which I have been drawing, was not included. So the following analysis from my 1984 working papers was a speculative interpretation, but it shows that I sensed deep political differences that might separate the Cambridge History from the 1948 Literary History:

"The LHUS is marked by the euphoria of America's newly central place in the postwar world. However little we may prove to agree with each other, I'm sure we all differ from that both in our mood and in our geopolitical map."

To comment before proceeding further: In fact, no colleague took me up on this issue, either to agree or disagree, but to speak for myself, the Vietnam War not only deeply angered and shamed many citizens of the United States, for many different reasons; it also symbolized a redrawn world map--contoured as well by the petroleum crises of the 1970s and by the emergence of Germany and Japan as full economic rivals of the United States-- which made it impossible to put America in the center any longer. Continuing to reflect on Spiller's model, we recognize that there are now some powerful voices who may themselves feel, but in any case would like to persuade others to feel, that the United States has won victories in the Cold War and the Gulf War that once again put America in the center.

I continued in 1984, "Over the last two decades it has become clear that 'American' has

as a major meaning 'WASP patriarchal capitalist' (otherwise, for example, 'American' Studies would have played a different, more positive role with regard to Black Studies, Women's Studies, ethnic studies)

"The concrete issue that arises for us from this second point can be put most simply: how closely can we correlate the 'American Renaissance' with the Civil War? (I've done an essay on Matthiessen that studies his disconnection of the two.) This will at once shift the canon to include at least Stowe and Douglass."

Of course the largest institutional fact about the field of American Studies in the last decade has been its capacity to bring in the areas whose exclusion I was criticizing, and the published work of Eric Sundquist, even before the History volume appears, has already made widely compelling the links of the "Renaissance" and the War.

Compared to the first three procedures--problematizing the literary and the national while focusing on a generic system rather than on authors--the fourth procedure seems slight, microlinguistic rather than conceptual: I have avoided the first-person plural. Spiller's group practice links literary art, literary author, and national literature--that is, literary nation--in an expressive identity with the literary historian and the national reader by its use of the key terms we, us, our. This is the structure that in a different context Bercovitch designated the "auto-American." I have tried, within the limits of culturally-produced human error, to eliminate from my contribution to the Cambridge History the words we, us, and our.

In part, this procedure arises from my wish to make something out of the scandal of the Cambridge History of American Literature. What does it mean that a British publisher is sponsoring this deepest exploration of the literary culture of the United States? Have "we" not simply fallen back into the colonial cultural trap? I have tried to imagine this scandal or paradox as an opportunity. We, the Cambridge History authors, are writing for the world, not for one nation alone. In particular, Cambridge has more effective outreach than any American publisher in all the parts of the globe that were once colored red--I refer not to Communism but to the British Empire. That is, by writing for Cambridge, I am writing not only back to

the old world, but also forward to a newer world, to nations, colonies no longer, where an indigenous intelligentsia, competently anglophone, is trying to come to terms with the formation of a national culture after imperialism. Although I cannot claim that I have crafted my address precisely to this global public of intelligent lawyers, scientists, journalists, etc., its imagined readership has exercised some force on my pages.

This evasion of the national first-person plural proves a point of substantial political sensitivity. For example, I find this practice brings me uncomfortably close to a position with which I disagree. In a brilliantly provocative set of recent papers, Walter Benn Michaels has argued that the pluralist notion of culture, as introduced in the 1920s and long since become a liberal, or even radical, dogma, logically is inseparable from the racism that it believes itself to overcome. For, according to Michaels, only the fiction of race can effectively join me to past others in a "we." I believe that Michaels and I differ over issues of politics, as opposed to culture; issues of identification (a process), as opposed to identity (a condition); over distinctions between the verb to remember and the noun memory; and over what I find his strangely all-or-nothing definition of culture, but his work has helped make clear to me the intense and complex controversiality at stake in the discursive protocols of "we" and "us."

This same topic--the necessity to take pride in identifying, rather than distancing, oneself nationally and grammatically in relation to certain predecessors--provides a thread by which a pre-emptive critique of the Cambridge History joins the most painful current trends in the contemporary politics of the United States. Back in 1986, Sacvan Bercovitch produced several essays and edited volumes which announced and characterized the project of the Cambridge History. In response, James Tuttleton in the New Criterion--the cultural fighting arm of American neoconservatism--warned that "Our new Cambridge authors are apparently going to demystify patriotism." The Cambridge History, as Tuttleton read Bercovitch's representation of it, seemed to be preparing "an assault on a number of personal, social, and political values which the American people, on the whole, have cherished, lived for, and at times died for" (8). Against such an envisioned attack, Tuttleton closed his essay by

announcing that he would "hang onto the 1948 Literary History of the United States," for "it does not scruple to affirm those American values, celebrated by some of our [the key word] best writers, that are still worth cherishing" (12).

This past winter, Richard Rorty, as part of his ongoing attempt to renew the pragmatic liberalism of John Dewey, published in the New York Times an Op-Ed piece entitled "The Unpatriotic Academy." As Tuttleton had ended with the first-person plural, Rorty begins from it. He asserts that "most of us," despite our "outrage" at "governmental cowardice or corruption" and despite "our despair" at "what is being done to the weakest and poorest among us," nonetheless, "still identify with our country." The major exception are those with "left-wing political views," primarily found "in colleges and universities." Rorty says that he is happy to have a left, but there is a problem: the left "is unpatriotic; . . . it refuses to rejoice in the country it inhabits." Rorty pointedly imitates in his own language the refusal of solidarity that he condemns, treating the left as he charges "it" with treating America. He concludes, "A left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country's politics, and will eventually become an object of contempt."

And Rorty was right in his last prediction, if not in the other details. For Newt Gingrich, rejoicing in a Republican victory after forty years in which the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives, used his first interview after becoming Speaker-of-the-House-Apparent to express just such contempt. It is not just those impotent in the university that he finds contemptible. It's the "left-wing elitists" in the White House whom he calls "counterculture McGovernicks." Gingrich's model of recent American history is rather intricate in constructing his enemies. In his national narrative, the course of American history to have been "on the right track . . . from the 1770s to the mid-1960s, before America got . . . the welfare state and hippies." At least in this interview, he does not name the War in Vietnam, though his periodization inescapably conjures it. The "welfare state" of the mid-60s is the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson, while the "hippies" are those who dropped out from Johnson's attempt to mobilize both domestic liberal reform and anticommunist war abroad,

and the "McGovernicks" are those who stayed within the political system to try to preserve Johnson's social vision while ending the Vietnam War. All of these, it seems, are to be scorned: "We spent a generation in the counterculture laughing at McGuffey's Readers and laughing at Parson Weems's vision of Washington," charges Gingrich, apparently confusing H. L. Mencken with Mr. Natural and Captain Trips.

"If, by moral tone," he continued, "you mean teaching the truth about American history, teaching about the Founding Fathers and how this country came to be the most extraordinary civilization in history, the vast majority of Americans are for it." He concluded this portion of the interview by asserting, "I think part of national leadership is to offer national ideas." Intellectually, if not politically, I can take some pride in my decision, ten years ago, to foreground the issue of national narrative.

A fundamental problem in contemporary American cultural politics, in which the Cambridge History plays some role, is precisely what emerges as the common thread of Rorty and Gingrich: must attempts to change the politics and society of the United States use a language that asserts positive identification with what is being changed? Politically, those who are not revolutionaries are loyal citizens of the state that we hope to transform. But is it possible, or desirable, to distinguish between the constitutional state and a national culture? I think it should be, and since giving this talk have found work by Juergen Habermas to support my conviction, but in the United States many progressive voices suggest otherwise.

Martin Luther King some thirty years ago succeeded in identifying his project of transformation with powerfully "American" values, and recently Ralph Ellison's commitment to "America" has been taken up with new vigor. For example, in Charles Johnson's address on receiving the National Book Award, he defined Invisible Man as "about--quietly about--patriotism" (quoted in Bercovitch 17). Drawing from Ellison, Shelley Fisher Fishkin has argued in Was Huck Black? that the "voice" long considered most representative of "America" is really African-American. Such concerns have achieved the change in the discipline of American Studies in the United States to which I referred earlier. Nonetheless,

as a starting-point for further discussion, let me speak against this strategy. It is far preferable to try to defuse the rhetoric of patriotism than to try to win at it, and this is no less the case in one's scholarly work than in one's other forms of politics.

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