

and Uganda, the results were sur-
realistically lethal. In a few cases the
economic forces of the old inertial
system provided a temporary period of
prosperity, which faded as the distance
from the old days lengthened. With the
possible exception of Kenya, in no case
has the condition of a neo-colonialized
people improved over the long term; in
a majority of cases it has worsened,
often catastrophically. If a despot was
benevolent it made no difference to this
tendency. The much-loved and
respected Julius Nyerere managed to
destroy the economy of Tanzania with
his "socialist" policies. Here as
elsewhere, dependence on extra-African
help has not diminished but increased.

The single African exception to this
dismal continental condition has been
South Africa. The economic difference
between this state and the rest of Africa
is huge, but Mr. Ungar will have none
of that. He prefers his economics to
have a moral flavor, and claims that the
South African statistics are "skewed by

internal disparities." The reader is
never told exactly what this means, any
more than the author explains his con-
tention that Soviet goals and Cuban
goals in black Africa are "not always
congruent." He never admits that any
such goals exist in South Africa. As
elsewhere in the book, the reader is left
with nothing but bum-rumble to in-
form his judgment.

Given the Soviet backing for Oliver
Tambo and the African National Con-
gress, it seems obvious that one Soviet
goal will be served by the destruction
of the present Pretoria government.
The area will thus pass violently out of
the Western orbit. Our righteous pro-
testers do not like to think much about
the implications of this. In fact, like
Leon Wieseltier of the *New Republic*,
they rather like the idea of sudden
change which would involve a bit of
bloodshed. This would be the in-
evitable result of a black takeover, and
to put it bluntly, our anti-Boer crowd
would love to see those Afrikaner

bigots get it in the neck. Their pleasure
at contemplating this result obscures
any incidental consequences. Like Mr.
Ungar, they are pleased to demand
disinvestment and allude to "a number
of South African black leaders" (as I
say, Mr. Ungar is fond of a vague
reference), quoting their claim that
"whatever temporary harm blacks may
suffer, it is worth the ultimate rewards
of freedom."

A great deal of space in *Africa* is
given to describing the rewards in ques-
tion: economic disaster, corrupt elites,
intertribal slaughter, utter dependence
on outside aid which is skimmed by the
elites, a worsening of internal oppres-
sion, and starvation, all for the locals.
For us, *pace* Mr. Ungar, they include
a real danger to our oil-shipping life-
line around the cape; uncertainty of ac-
cess to mineral supplies in southern
Africa, and the necessity of expending

our own resources in danegeld (i.e.,
"aid") payments to hostile regimes in
an area where we once traded profit-
ably. If this trade rests now upon the
success of a system we dislike, we can
note that the system is changing in
response to that dislike, if not as quick-
ly as the protesters wish; furthermore,
a great part of the profit we take
elsewhere in the world comes from
equally bad or rather worse systems,
none of which are decried by liberals
in the emotive terms applied to our
relations with South Africa. If this
pressure builds and succeeds in cutting
us off from Pretoria, and destroys the
government there, then our vicarious
revolutionaries may indeed get what
they lust for; we will all have the harsh
experience of watching one more
bloody and tragic chapter unfold in the
contemporary annals of smug, pious,
well-meaning stupidity. □

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THE OLD GRINGO

Carlos Fuentes/Farrar Straus Giroux/\$14.95

Anita Susan Grossman

In a letter to his nephew's wife short-
ly before he disappeared into Mexico
in 1913, Ambrose Bierce wrote pro-
phetically, "Good-bye—if you hear of
my being stood up against a Mexican
stone wall and shot to rags, please
know that I think that a pretty good
way to depart this life. It beats old age,
disease, or falling down the cellar steps.
To be a Gringo in Mexico—ah, that is
euthanasia." Bierce was seventy-one,
suffering from asthma and perhaps
loneliness as well, since his long-
estranged wife had died in 1905, and
his two sons had also died young. If
Bierce's literary career had not been en-
tirely disappointing, he had clearly
reached some kind of turning point in
his life. By 1912 he had seen his twelve-
volume *Collected Works* into print and
ended his long association with the
Hearst press, for which he had been a
columnist and crusading reporter.

The following year, with seeming
deliberateness, he took leave of his
earlier life, touring the battle sites
where he had fought in the Civil War
and paying farewell visits to friends and
relations. Mexico was in the throes of
its own civil war, and Bierce intended
to act as an "observer" of Pancho
Villa's rebel army. In his last letter, writ-

Anita Susan Grossman is a writer liv-
ing in Berkeley, California.

ten on December 26, 1913 in
Chihuahua (then occupied by pro-Villa
forces), he announced that he was go-
ing to Ojinaga the next day. Most like-
ly he got there, to be killed in a battle
which took place on January 11, and
was buried in an unmarked grave. At
any rate, no one—Mexican or
American—has ever claimed to have
seen him after that date, although his
disappearance caused a sensation and
prompted numerous investigations.
Ironically, Bierce became better known
for the mystery surrounding his death
than for any of his published
writings—an irony he himself would
have been quick to appreciate.

It should not be surprising that Mex-
ico's leading novelist, Carlos Fuentes,
has taken Bierce's strange disap-
pearance as the subject of his latest
book; the wonder is rather that it took
so long to inspire a work of serious fic-
tion. In Fuentes's recounting of the
story, Bierce's journey into Mexico is
the occasion for a larger meditation on
U.S.-Mexican history, as reflected in the
shifting relationship between the "Old
Gringo" and two fictional characters,
an American schoolteacher and a Mex-
ican peasant-soldier. Thirty-one-year-
old Harriet Winslow finds herself
stranded in rural Chihuahua when she

discovers that the promised employers she has come to meet at their hacienda have already fled the Revolution; Tomas Arroyo, a self-proclaimed "general" in Villa's army, likewise has a personal interest in lingering around the Miranda estate since he is the late owner's bastard son, and wants to revenge himself on a family that never acknowledged its kinship but let him grow up as an illiterate servant.

This ill-assorted pair turns out to have more in common than one would first suppose, for Harriet too has been abandoned by her father, an army colonel who disappeared in the Spanish-American War years before. Officially he is assumed to have died in battle; in fact, Harriet secretly knows that he abandoned his family for a Negro mistress in Cuba. Both Harriet and Arroyo, in different ways, find a second father in the Old Gringo, who is never called by name except at the very end of the book. With Harriet the old man is courtly, treating her with the affection he denies his own living daughter, and with something of a lover's tenderness as well. Towards Arroyo, Bierce is as much the rival as the father-figure, vying with him for Harriet's affections and challenging his authority in front of his troops: When Arroyo demands that he shoot a captured enemy officer in the back, he contemptuously refuses.

A man rigidly faithful to his own code of honor, the Old Gringo carries around a copy of *Don Quixote* as his traveling companion and bears a certain resemblance to the Knight of La Mancha. Even more strongly, he resembles one of his own characters; life imitates art as the parricide described in Bierce's famous tale, "The Horseman in the Sky," is re-enacted with Bierce playing the Confederate officer shot down from a high promontory by his own son, a Union scout. In the short story, the son has no choice but to kill the enemy soldier, whose identity he knows all too well; in Fuentes's version, the emphasis is on the father's—that is to say, Bierce's—quest for death: having failed to find death in battle, the Old Gringo finally goads Arroyo into killing him by burning some old papers which the unlettered general has endowed with mystical significance. (He sees them as not only proving his claim to the Miranda estate but also giving the Mexican peasantry title to the land they had worked for centuries.) But as it turns out, Bierce's corpse has a larger part to play in the story, being dug up, shot by Villa's firing squad—this time from the front, not in the back—and finally interred in the empty grave reserved for Captain Winslow in Arlington National Cemetery. In the meantime Harriet and Arroyo have had a brief affair,

during which she discovers her long-suppressed sensuality and the impossibility of any lasting union between them. It is for revealing these things to her, as much as for killing Bierce, that Arroyo provokes Harriet into setting in motion a train of events which leads to his death. But then, in a sense she was doing him a kindness: he did not want to die an old man, like the Gringo.

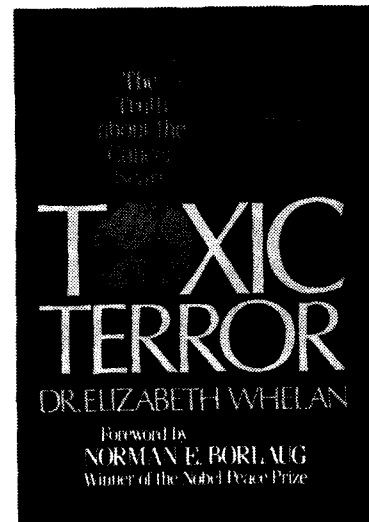
Even from this rather bald plot summary, one can see that *The Old Gringo* is an enormously ambitious novel which attempts to invest its characters and actions with mythic dimensions; ultimately it is about the intertwined fates of America and Mexico in a time of historical crisis. Significantly, Fuentes has moved forward the date of the action several months to April 1914, the time of the so-called "Veracruz

massacre," when American marines invaded the city and inflicted heavy losses on its defenders. (A bungled attempt by Woodrow Wilson to hasten the downfall of General Victoriano Huerta, the attack only managed to rally the citizenry behind him.) The shady dealings of Harriet's father and her beau, Delaney, have obvious symbolic implications, as does Harriet's own affair with Arroyo, a figure of

ASXTTX1

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larger-than-life proportions who seems to personify Mexico's tormented history.

This is the first time that Fuentes has portrayed Americans as protagonists in his fiction, and he finds Bierce, the "Devil's Lexicographer," a sympathetic figure. At the same time, one should note that Fuentes has deliberately fictionalized several aspects of Bierce's life—that is, apart from having him alive and kicking during the first four months of 1914. For example, Bierce's father is recalled as a stern officer in the Mexican War, with his son Ambrose repeating the father's experience in crossing the border. In fact, Marcus Aurelius Bierce was an impoverished Ohio farmer struggling to support thirteen children (of which Ambrose was the tenth) and never set foot in Mexico; Fuentes here is rather portraying the father in "The Horseman in the Sky," placing Ambrose this time in the son's role. Then, too, the adventures of Bierce's corpse echo an episode in Mex-

ican history: In early 1914 an Englishman, William Benton, was murdered by one of Pancho Villa's officers, provoking an international scandal; when his relatives demanded the body, Villa had the corpse dug up and shot to disguise the fact that Benton had been clubbed to death.

Playing on the theme of conflict between parents and children—a metaphor for the entire Mexican revolution—Fuentes hints at gloomy mysteries surrounding Bierce's relationship with his own three children. In the novel one son is said to have been a hopeless alcoholic who committed suicide (perhaps in order not to be a burden on his family), while the other son seems also to have willed his own death, albeit more passively; in both cases, their father's writings are somehow implicated. In the words of the Old Gringo, "I think my sons killed themselves so I wouldn't ridicule them in the newspapers of my boss William Randolph Hearst." As for his

daughter, she has sworn never to see Bierce again for having indirectly caused the deaths of her brothers. In fact, the lives of Bierce's children were tragic enough, but not in the way that Fuentes has portrayed them. Bierce's elder son, Day, far from being a washed-out alcoholic, was a mere youth of sixteen when he shot himself after killing a rival in a gunfight over a girl; the younger son, a newspaperman like his father, died of pneumonia at twenty-seven; the daughter, Helen, remained on good terms with him despite the many vicissitudes of her life, and Bierce visited her shortly before his trip to Mexico.

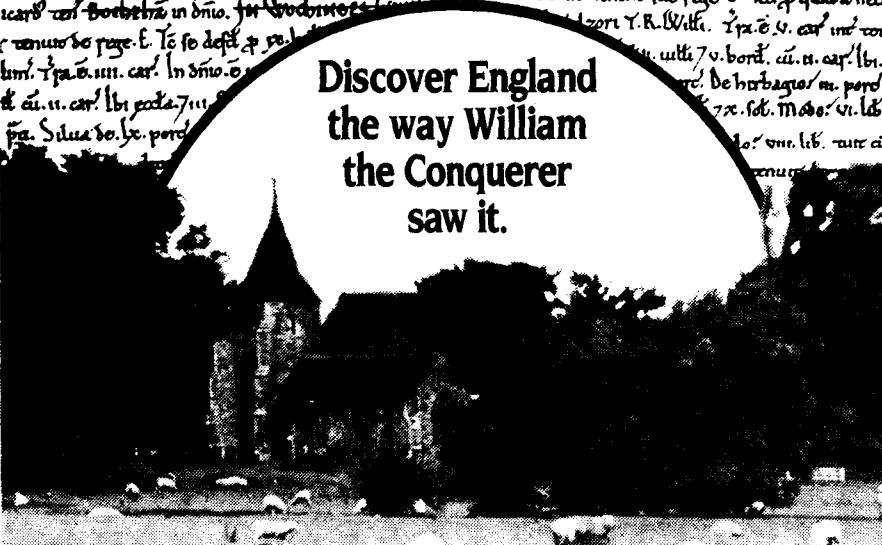
Fuentes fictionalizes to less purpose in his treatment of the writer's professional life. Bierce's single greatest triumph as a journalist was his battle with the corrupt railroad magnates who dominated not only California but national politics—figures such as Mark Hopkins, Collis P. Huntington, Charles Crocker, and Leland Stanford (whom Bierce variously called Stealand Landford and Leland Stanford). In 1896 Huntington, the last survivor of the California "Big Four," lobbied for a bill that would have allowed his Southern Pacific Railroad to write off an enormous debt to the federal government, at a cost to the taxpayers of some \$130 million. Bierce, through his writings for the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *New York Journal*, helped defeat the bill; when Huntington attempted to bribe him—on the steps of the Capitol in Washington!—Bierce replied that his price was \$75 million, to be paid over to the treasurer of the United States. Mystifyingly, Fuentes has Bierce making his reply to Leland Stanford in his office, rather than to Huntington—which makes no sense, since Stanford had died in 1893. In another apparent gaffe, Fuentes has Bierce recalling old times in the *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial office, whereas Bierce actually wrote for its arch-rival, the *Examiner*, and attacked the editor of the *Chronicle* every chance he had.

Since Fuentes is not writing a biography but fiction, one can argue that his departures from historical truth aren't terribly serious, particularly since Fuentes is not even a conventionally "realistic" novelist, but instead employs history as the raw material of a myth or fable which calls attention to its own artifice: evidently we are meant to recognize the allusions to Bierce's "Horseman in the Sky" in the portrait of Bierce's father, and the real-life episode behind the exhumation of the Old Gringo's corpse. (The huge estate of the Miranda family likewise recalls the enormous holdings of the

Terrazas clan in pre-revolutionary Chihuahua; by changing the name to "Miranda," Fuentes may be playing with the Spanish word meaning "to gaze upon," since the glittering mirror-filled ballroom of the ruined hacienda plays a major role in the story.) Still, readers familiar with Bierce may be disturbed by some of the liberties Fuentes has taken because they seem so pointless, suggesting a negligent indifference to historical fact—the kind of thing which Latin Americans find so unforgivable when exhibited by Yankees concerning matters south of the border.

In any case, it seems odd that Fuentes should have been attracted to write about Bierce at all, considering their dissimilarities as writers, apart from a common interest in the supernatural and macabre. Bierce was a classicist who eschewed experimentation in literature, distrusting any style that called attention to itself. Favoring brevity, he naturally gravitated to the epigram and the short story form. In all these things he differs from Fuentes the novelist, whose mannered prose is full of self-conscious rhetorical flourishes, and whose subordinate clauses frequently run away with the sentences, as antecedents recede into misty vagueness. Frequently, too, the plots in Fuentes's novels multiply and split with dizzying speed, as in his aptly-named novel *The Hydra Head* (1978). Perhaps, then, it is Bierce the bitter moralist who appeals to Fuentes, since the Mexican novelist often attacks the vices and corruptions of his native land, and may share with Bierce a certain pessimism about the human condition. Moreover, the Bierce Fuentes portrays in *The Old Gringo* is an exile from America, just as Fuentes himself is something of an exile from Mexico, having lived most of his life abroad, chiefly in France and the United States. (He is currently at Harvard, and has had a string of American university posts since 1977.)

Whatever Fuentes's personal affinities with Bierce, *The Old Gringo* ultimately demonstrates his abiding preoccupation with Mexican history, a topic he has long explored in his fiction. In particular, this latest novel can be seen as a kind of companion piece to its immediate predecessor, *Distant Relations* (1982), which concerns the links between the Hispanic New World and France. Now Fuentes has turned his attention to geographically closer, if spiritually more distant, neighbors during this turbulent revolutionary period. We are made to understand that Fuentes's representative Americans are both driven to Mexico by their private demons, and that their "crossing the border" has psychological and even metaphysical dimensions. It is not



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merely that Harriet Winslow, as she gives up her somewhat tarnished virginity, explores a realm of experience which she has hitherto avoided, but that her encounter with Arroyo represents the irreconcilable otherness of the two nations: Discovering the reality of Mexico, Harriet encounters sex and violence, often together; on the other hand, the America that she and the Old Gringo are fleeing from seems a land of flabby vices—of prudery, venality, and most of all, hypocrisy.

But to say all this is to make the novel appear more discursive and analytic than it really is, since Fuentes narrates principally through a succession of juxtaposed images, and his characters converse through interchanged soliloquies rather than naturalistic speech. (Although dedicated to William Styron, the novel seems closer in style to William Faulkner, with language so densely metaphoric that vehicle frequently merges with tenor.) Moreover, just as the novel mingles fact and fiction, it occasionally jumps abruptly into fantasy, with the literal

reality of narrative assertions left up in the air: Arroyo speaks nonchalantly of having “willed” his father’s legal wife to barrenness, and we are told that Harriet has had her *mother* buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Equally confusing are the many references to her father’s Negro mistress, who may have known Harriet in Washington, or may be merely a product of the latter’s imagination. For that matter, the entire story is more or less the imaginative re-creation of Harriet and others who recall the Old Gringo, so that its veracity is called into question within the frame of the novel itself.

The Old Gringo is an intriguing performance. One might question, however, whether it all adds up to a coherent work of art, or whether Fuentes, in his improvisation of a historical theme, has merely performed a clever conjuring trick. At one and the same time he convinces us of the non-referential nature of his fiction and the dead-serious historical import of what he has to say. Can he have it both ways? □

INTO ETERNITY: THE LIFE OF JAMES JONES, AMERICAN WRITER

Frank MacShane/Houghton Mifflin/\$18.95

Terry Teachout

This is a lousy time to be a compulsive reader. It’s not just that we’re going through what Joseph Epstein likes to call “a bad patch” in our serious fiction. Our popular fiction has also become horribly debased. It used to be possible for a first-rate book reviewer to read a new novel every day without going crazy in the process. (Diana Trilling used to keep that kind of schedule forty years ago when she wrote her “Fiction in Review” column for the *Nation*, and it doesn’t seem to have done her any lasting harm.) Lots of bad novels got written and published, of course, but quality control in the popular fiction business was still significantly tighter. Veteran craftsmen like John P. Marquand were writing novels that could be taken more or less seriously by the intelligent reader; even the steamy blockbuster novel could be counted on more often than not for a good read. Remember *A Rage to Live*? Or *From Here to Eternity*? Compared to the reeking garbage in which our great publishing houses currently

Terry Teachout is an assistant editor of Harper’s.

specialize, those old war horses look better and better with each passing bestseller list.

The trick, of course, is not to go too far with this line of reasoning. Mrs. Trilling certainly didn’t, not even after reading several tons of junk. Her final verdict on Marquand, for example, is as dispassionate a statement of the case for popular fiction as can be found:

Without transcending the high-grade commodity level, he has done a great deal to raise our standards of what a literary commodity can be. Without urging us to regard his novels as “important,” he has done more than any writer of our time to close the dangerous gap between important and popular fiction.

The absence of this sane and judicious perspective is all too typical of a distressing new phenomenon on the American literary scene: the current group of academic biographers who cull the checklists of our second-string novelists with unseemly enthusiasm. Witness Frank MacShane, a professor at Columbia University whose previous books include uncritically admiring biographies of John O’Hara and Ray-

mond Chandler and whose new book, *Into Eternity: The Life of James Jones, American Writer*, opens with the profoundly wrong-headed pronouncement that James Jones “deserves to stand in the first rank of American writers in the second half of the twentieth century.” Nor is Mr. MacShane at a loss for superlatives in subsequent pages:

He had appeared like a comet from the heart of America, and he wrote with a directness and truthfulness that recalled such distinctly American writers as Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. . . . His whole life was an education in books, and in the work of such writers as Teilhard de Chardin, Stendhal, Conrad, and Yeats he searched for an understanding of life. His reading nurtured his philosophical nature, and without cant or illusion he confronted the nature of love, sex, and mortality.

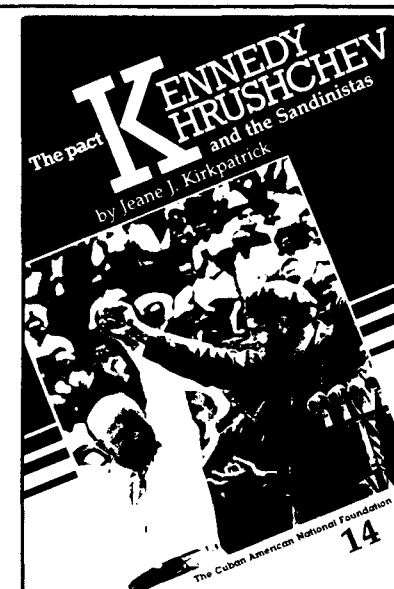
That’s pretty strong stuff, especially when applied to the man whom Wilfrid Sheed once described as “the king of the good-bad writers” and whose eleven books are studded with hideous examples of paralyzing syntax. (“The unspeakable loneliness of self-pity that is blind and tongueless rose up hot in her, trying to bring tears.”) But Frank MacShane can almost always be relied on to get the facts straight, and he has done so once again with this book. As an example of the critical biography as high art, *Into Eternity* is nothing special; as a secondary source of factual information about the author of *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line*, it is a solid, eminently reliable performance.

Which begs the question: why would anyone want to read a three-hundred-page biography of James Jones in the first place? The details of his life—a rough childhood, a miserable stretch in the Army, a tempestuous but happy marriage, a disastrous second novel, a tour of duty as Parisian expatriate, an early death brought on by the excessive consumption of alcohol—have the vaguely familiar ring of a dozen other literary lives. The really remarkable thing about Jones, one feels after reading *Into Eternity*, was the distance he was able to travel on sheer nerve alone. One day he read *Look Homeward, Angel* and concluded, like so many other sensitive young men before him, that “I had been a writer all my life without knowing it or having written.” Unlike most of those other young men, though, he promptly sat down and started to act on this wildly optimistic conclusion. The result was a long, clumsy, enthralling novel about the peacetime Army that is still in print after thirty-five years, one surprisingly good Hollywood adaptation, and God only knows how many copies sold.

From Here to Eternity is a textbook example of the very best sort of popular novel, the kind that went out with Brylcreem and the nuclear family. The plot is solid, the detail convincing, the macho romanticism smoky and fragrant. (It isn’t surprising that Jones, a devotee of the hardboiled detective story, actually broke down and wrote one when he needed extra money to keep his Paris residence afloat.) Hearteningly ambitious in its scope, *From Here to Eternity* is warmed by a dignity so transparently authentic that Whittaker Chambers was moved to comment:

To my grotesque way of thinking, one of the great moral moments in current U.S. writing is the quarry scene in *From Here to Eternity*—the scene in which one of the prisoners takes his crowbar and, on request, breaks the arm or leg of a fellow prisoner. That is the moment for which the great muck heap of that book exists. . . . *From Here to Eternity* is essentially a moral book.

The problem is that Frank MacShane is either unable or unwilling to make this kind of distinction in his critical discussions of Jones’s work. His treatment of *From Here to Eternity* is all too typical: he ranks it above *Guard of Honor* and *The Naked and the Dead* as the “most successful” American novel to come out of World War II. For most readers, the very thought of ranking *From Here to Eternity* anywhere near a masterpiece like *Guard of Honor* will be jolting. Jones’s gauche prose style is enough to prevent all but the most committed Dreiserites



Former U.S. Permanent Representative to the U.N. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick analyzes the “Kennedy-Khrushchev Pact”, the 1962 agreement that guaranteed the security of Fidel Castro’s regime, and asks what the implications of a similar accord between Washington and Managua would be for the Western hemisphere. In English and Spanish. \$3.00.

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