

THE BASKET ISLANDS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

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Abstract

As part of an ancient mythology that saw an animated nature reflected in every place and thing, the island motif has long resonated with spiritual and political significance within Irish culture, and none more so than the Blasket Islands, which rose to prominence as Ireland undertook the processes of national Revival. Reverberating with the ancient significances of the island motif as a place of heightened metaphysical experience, the Great Blasket Island, home of Tomás Ó Criomhthain, Peig Sayers and Muiris Ó Suilleabháin, stirred the imaginations of those who lived upon it and of those who visited. Although the island community ceased to be more than half a century ago, the Blasket Islands continue to fascinate. This article will offer a brief telling of the Blasket story and then examine the various significances of the island motif in Irish culture that drew the Blasket Islands into the nation's story of cultural and political revival. It will then consider various representations of the Blaskets in literature written since the demise of the island community – poetry, including Brendan Behan's 'A Jackeen Says Goodbye to the Blasket', Desmond Egan's 'The Great Blasket', Dairena Ní Chinnéide's suite of poems 'An Blascaod Mór/The Great Blasket', and Julie O'Callaghan's poem, 'The Great Blasket Island' followed by two short stories, 'The Islanders' by Andrew Sean Greer and Brian Doyle's 'The Train'.

Keywords

Blasket Islands, Tomás O'Crohan, Maurice O'Sullivan, Irish literature, cultural politics

The Blasket Islands lie a few short but treacherous miles off the Kerry coast of Ireland. There are six islands in the group: the Great Blasket Island – on which most of the islanders lived, Beginish, Tiaracht, Inishnabro, Inishtooshkert and Inishvickillane. At the most westerly point of Europe, the Blasket Islands, like the Aran Islands, are stepping stones out of Europe (Heaney, 1977) into the vast Atlantic across which lies "the next parish America" (Stagles and Stagles, 1984: 13). The name, Blasket, is believed to be derived from the Norse word *brasker*, which is variously translated as 'dangerous place' or 'sharp reef'. Though it was long believed that the islands had been inhabited from ancient times, they were, in actuality, only populated for a couple of hundred years by a community of subsistence farmer-fisherfolk that never exceeded two hundred or so. After several years of extreme hardship and sharply declining population, and following the tragic death of a young man, Seáinín Ó Cearna in 1947 (Moreton, 2000); the Great Blasket Island was eventually evacuated in November 1953 on the orders of the Irish Government.

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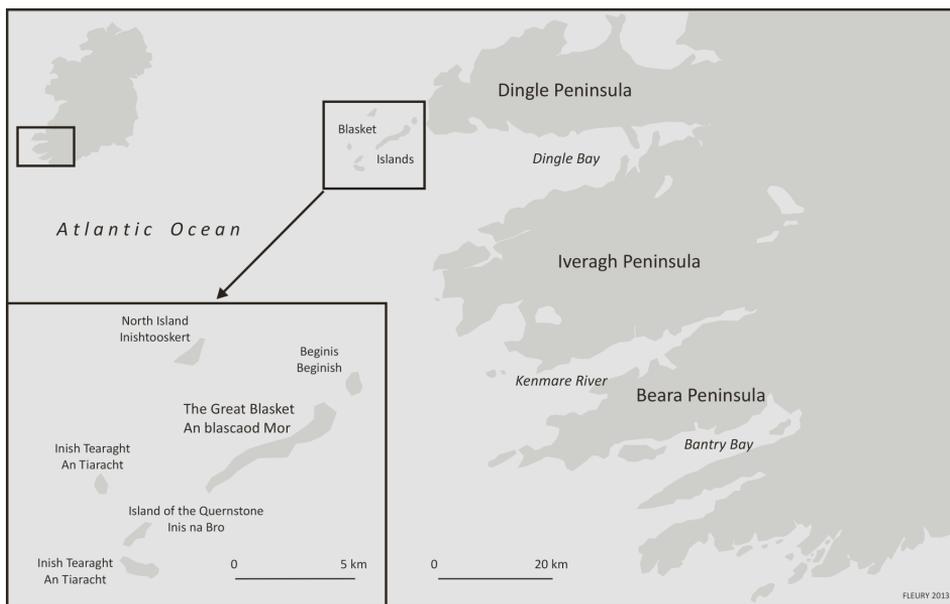


Figure 1 – Map of the Basket Islands (Christian Fleury, 2013)

The evacuation was seen as a matter of national concern and significance for, although these remote islands at Europe's edge had remained largely unknown to the world for most of the years of habitation, they had come to sudden national and international prominence in the early decades of the 20th Century when three autobiographies emerged from the tiny community. Written by Tomás O'Crohan, Maurice O'Sullivan and Peig Sayers, these books were both poignant and significant for several related reasons. They were the first texts to emerge from within a Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking community) and offered portraits of a community and a way of life that was about to end. In addition, they were rare modern documents written in the Irish language that was "hovering even then between life and death" (Mac Conghail, 1994: 11). They were all translated into English and various other languages and have been reprinted regularly in the years that have followed.

These remarkable texts appeared just as the wider Irish nation undertook its recuperation from the devastation wreaked by the combined effects of colonisation and famine. The fall of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891, a few short turbulent years after the failure of the Home Rule Bill in the British Parliament, is often described as the moment that exposed Ireland's lack of leadership and vision for the future. Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League (1893) and first President of Ireland (1938-1945), chided the nation for having surrendered its Irishness without achieving Englishness, and argued persuasively for the "de-Anglicising" of Ireland and the Revival of Irish customs and culture (1986: 153). Recognising that Ireland had all but lost its national identity, cultural groups and movements such as the Gaelic League were working to preserve Irish language, music, games and culture with the aim of restoring a distinctly Irish mentality to the devastated nation. With a recent past that was catastrophic and a future that was gravely uncertain, those working to "invent" the new Ireland (Kiberd, 1996: 1) found the material that would revive a sense of Irishness in the Western Islands

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– in Achill, in Aran and in the Blaskets. With their romantic ruins, dramatic landscape and native language, the Islands offered the Irish a tangible link to old unconquered Ireland and her mythology and so quickly came to be cherished by the Irish state as “glowing outposts of the Gaelic tradition” (Somerville-Large, 1999: 168). So central were these Islands to the politics of Irish culture at the time of the Revival that a person’s attitudes towards the Islands could be read as a reliable measure of their attitude towards Irishness itself (Foster, 1987).

The politically charged mythology that grew up around the Western Islands at this time derived its potency from ancient representations of the West as a place of decline, death and the hope of rebirth and of the Island as a liminal space that linked heaven and earth as well as the known and unknown worlds (Foster, 1977). The heady combination of these two sets of traditional associations led to the choice of the Western Islands as both site and symbol of Ireland’s national renewal. Reverberating with the ancient significances of the Island motif, the Basket Islands stirred the imaginations of visitors arriving from mainland Ireland and further afield. Depending upon what was being sought from them, the Blaskets offered their visitors a vision of an old Gaelic world or of a Garden of Eden – a vision of pre-lapsarian existence in either case.

These ancient representations of the West and the Island were part of a larger Celtic philosophy that revered landscape and saw an animated nature reflected in every place and thing. The Celtic world was “ensouled” (Pennick, 1996: 6) and every place reflected multiple meanings in both the physical and metaphysical worlds. Chief among the “ensouled” places of nature were the West and the Island. While the West, which offers the sun its nightly repose and a bed from which it awaits its daily rebirth; was read as a sign of the certainty of death and the possibility of rebirth; islands were believed capable of elevating human consciousness and increasing the possibility of receiving healing, inspiration or enlightenment. Thus they came to be associated with heightened modes of existence such as sanctuary, penance and exile (Foster, 1977), states of being that begin with a journey away from the ordinary and the familiar. Accordingly, the most profound and lasting significance of the Western Island in Celtic mythology was its association with death and the afterlife.

Death was often represented as the soul’s westward journey to a timeless paradise in the Isles of the Blest, a concept that was never entirely displaced by the Christian concepts of Heaven and Hell that superseded it. Belief in this journey and in this Island of Paradise was still in evidence on the Basket Islands when Tomás, Muiris and Peig stirred to write their autobiographies. The Islandman himself, Tomás, often colours his narration of an Island death with the journey motif, describing death as a journey on ‘the way of truth’. He uses the old image most strikingly in the beautiful valedictory passage of his autobiography where, writing of his late mother, he says:

I hope in God that she and my father will inherit the Blessed Kingdom; and that I and every reader of this book after me will meet them in the Island of Paradise. (O’Crohan, 2000: 245)

The journey motif recurs frequently in Basket writing where it is used not only to narrate death but also to signal the importance of the autobiographical material that is being conveyed. Each of the three Basket writers, for instance, narrates the passage into adult life in terms of a journey. Peig’s first journey into the Island is also a journey into married life and into life as mistress of her own hearth. Tomás and Muiris both write of

adolescent journeys back into the Island wearing new store-bought clothes or work-boots that signal the passage out of childhood. And perhaps one of the most poignant moments in all of the Blasket writing is Tomás' *account* of the first great sorrow he had known, his narration of his journey away from the Inis and the girl he loved. This fateful journey away from love also represented a journey into an arranged, unwanted marriage and a life of heavy responsibility, hardship and loss.

Although the writers and their neighbours have all long since made their journeys 'on the way of truth' and the Island community ceased to be more than half a century ago, and in spite of the fact that the utility of its image has long expired in Irish cultural politics, the Blasket Islands have continued to inspire literary production into the new millennium. Having written elsewhere of the international significance of the Blaskets (O'Toole, 1999), Irish literary critic and socio-political commentator, Fintan O'Toole has more recently considered the continuing cultural influence of the Blaskets as a particularly Irish phenomenon, writing that its "collected narrative continues to haunt the Irish imagination" (2003: 81). He ascribes its continued presence in the Irish psyche to the "special shroud" within which it was wrapped, "the sure knowledge of its imminent extinction", which he considers to be "a source of complex emotions" in Irish readers who are dominated by a feeling of guilt and responsibility for the demise of the island culture (ibid).

But such an appraisal of the legacy of Blasket Island literature may be too narrow for several reasons. First, as Kim Cheng Boey demonstrates in his important article, 'Sailing to an Island' (2008), 'the Irish imagination' has many identities and many facets. As Boey points out, the Island motif allows Anglo-Irish poets like Louis MacNiece and Richard Murphy to explore their ambivalent identity and unsettled sense of belonging. It also provides later Northern Irish poets such as Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley with a refuge from the sectarian violence of Belfast. Finally, Boey points out, the Island motif affords women poets including Eavan Boland, Julie O'Callaghan and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill an opportunity to contest the dominant discourses of Irish society and literature, so often masculinist and nationalist, and to chart a more diverse and inclusive vision for themselves and others. Secondly, a further sampling of writing on the Blaskets, drawn from myriad sources, soon reveals a surprisingly wide range of emotions and politics. It would seem then, that the 'haunting' O'Toole refers to is neither confined to the Irish imagination nor uniform in its form or impact. What we do find in many of these works however, instead of a unifying expression of guilt, is a harking back to the old traditional associations with the Island motif – exile, home, journey, death.

Dublin-born poet, short story writer, novelist and playwright, famed iconoclast and inebriate, one time Borstal Boy and political prisoner, Brendan Behan (1923-1964) took the Blaskets to his heart when he learned about the western *Gaeltachtaí* from a young Kerry man with whom he was imprisoned in the 1940s. Having learned Munster Irish and its poetry from his companion, and read the works of Tomás Ó Criomhthain and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin while in gaol, he went on to write several laments for the disappearing *Gaeltacht*, especially that of the Blasket Islands. Although his play *The Quare Fellow* (first performed in 1954 and published in 1956) is most often read as a polemic arguing against capital punishment, it also laments the vanishing world of Gaelic Ireland (Russell, 2002: 73). A few years later, he would lament the demise of the recently abandoned Blaskets in 'The Warm South', a chapter in his book of reminiscences, *Brendan Behan's Island* (1962). Lying on his bed in Mountjoy Gaol in Dublin, serving fourteen years, he imagines an idyllic Blasket that affords its community freedom,

independence and “eras of happiness” (ibid: 70).

Behan again laments the irrevocable loss of the Island culture in his evocative short poem ‘A Jackeen Says Goodbye to the Blasket’ (1973: 39). With his use of the Hiberno-English term, jackeen, to refer to the poem’s Dubliner protagonist (Dolan, 1999); Behan links the Island with the capital of Ireland in his title but does not expand upon the politics of this in the body of the poem, thus offering a muted reproach to the nation of Ireland while he makes his farewell to the lonely Blaskets. The Island he pictures lies in a state of never-ending loneliness – hung like the last golden eagle “on the edge of the world”. This Island is not shrouded in O’Toole’s “mist of imminent extinction” – the moment of extinction has passed – but is increasingly obscured by the deepening shadows of night. The traditional motifs of home and journey are invoked, only to be negated as a melancholy stillness colours the poem, as movement is called up, only to be denied. On Behan’s Blasket, there is no sail in sight, no journey and no-one there to see the ship not passing by. The “last golden eagle” hangs in suspended animation on the edge of the world. The only movement that is described in the poem is timid and unearthly – the cold fingers of the moon stretching down the quivering air to touch the desolate dwellings, the homes that have lost their people. Images of emptiness describe them – the famished hearth without heat, without protection, without hope, are now crumbling emblems of the people who once tended them.

In contrast to Behan’s muted reproach to the politics surrounding the fate of the Island community, Westmeath-born Desmond Egan (1936-), a poet praised for his ability to “marry the local intensity of Kavanagh with the knowledge of Yeats” (Arkins, 1992: 22), reflects explicitly on the relationship between the Blaskets and the nation of Ireland in his poem ‘The Great Blasket’ (1996). For Egan, the loss of the Island community is a matter of national loss and responsibility, the abandoned Island a symbol of a “collapsed Gaelic vision”. Modernist in style and practice, Egan customarily eschews the use of punctuation in his poetry, allowing the language to wash over the reader unimpeded. Here, the lack of capitals, commas and full-stops conveys the fluidity of the poet’s experience as he stands waiting on the cliff-height, suspended in time and place like Behan’s last golden eagle, waiting. It also communicates the timelessness of the Island, of the waters that flow ceaselessly over the ships of history now sunken from sight. Modernist technique notwithstanding, he summons up traditional motifs associated with the Western Islands – the lives lived large, heroically, in exile and the impossibility of mediocrity – and counter-balances these with images of emptiness, collapse and submersion. The juxtaposition of the modern, modernist technique and age-old cultural tropes further contributes to a sense of the Island’s timelessness. Though not quite expressing the guilt that O’Toole postulates, Egan certainly rebukes the nation of Ireland for having failed the Island, “the dear dear place” whose “blank windows endure the winds of Europe and wait in vain for a sign from mainland Ireland”.

A very different response to the islands is evident in *An Blascaod Mor/The Great Blasket*, a suite of six poems by Dairena Ní Chinnéide (Ní Chinnéide, 2006), bi-lingual poet from the West Kerry *Gaeltacht* of Corca Dhuibhne, whose practice is to write in Irish and immediately translate her work into English. Her poems contradict the images of unearthly stillness and emptiness offered by Behan and Egan, and completely ignore the politics of culture that continue to swirl around the Island so many years after it was abandoned. Ní Chinnéide’s Blasket Island is a busy place full of life and sound. The poet places herself at the centre of Island life and claims it as her own home place, using an image that recalls the infancy of the Islandman himself. Just as Tomás Ó Cíomhthain recalled his mother cosseting him like a bird in the nest and throwing food

from the pot to feed her children in the manner of a mother bird feeding her chicks (O’Crohan, 2000), Ní Chinnéide experiences the Blasket as a “bosom island” (2006: 27) that draws her into its shelter, allowing her to nest like the birds that live around her. In so doing, she restores to the Island its lost identity as home place. Her Blasket, far from being the bare and exposed place imagined by Behan and Egan, and seemingly free of the perils of hardships faced by the Islandman and his neighbours, is the ‘ensouled’ sanctuary of ancient myth that offers a freedom of soul and a refuge from worldliness similar to that experienced by Robin Flower who visited the Island so often, many years ago. She identifies her kinship with the place as the source of her delight and stresses her own at-home-ness on the island where she finds peacefulness in nature and communion with her ancestors. She takes pleasure in the music around her, in the symphonies of birds and choirs of ancestors, and is appreciative of the mists and midnight darkneses that protect her. Though her poems centre on the poet herself and her sense of communion with the Island, thus restoring to it its old identity as a sanctuary or home place, Ní Chinnéide makes it clear that, with or without her, the Blasket is never an empty lifeless place. But it is not the visitors who come each day in their noisy little boats that give it life. Its life is in its haunting, in the choirs of ghosts who welcome their children who come back seeking shelter.

We also have an account of a journey back in ‘The Great Blasket Island’, a poem by Julie O’Callaghan (1954-), a Chicago-born poet now resident in Ireland. Her poem, written after watching *Oileán Eile* (1985) Muiris Mac Conghail’s Irish television documentary about former Islanders returning to the abandoned homes of their childhood, offers both an example of, and a challenge to, the emotionally complex response to the Blaskets that O’Toole posits (O’Callaghan, 1991). O’Callaghan shows us six old men who left as children returning to confront their crumbling and roofless homes, and we hear the ghostly voices of Island life “nagging, praying, scolding, giggling, crying, gossiping”, voices now heard only in the memories of the old men. We see them blinking back their tears as they contemplate the ruined houses and the horizon beyond which they now live. We begin to sink into the pleasant familiar melancholy of another elegy for the Blaskets until, abruptly, defiantly, the poet refuses to perpetuate this customary sentiment, undercutting it all with an impatient, disrespectful address to one of the men: “listen mister, most of us cry sooner or later over a Great Blasket Island of our own”. Devoid of any political significance, this Island is now a symbol of personal loss rather than communal or national loss. Their story, their loss is now just personal and those who observe it are indifferent to their sorrow, lost in bereavements of their own, in bereavements that inevitably come to us all.

The journey back is also considered in a poem that reasserts the old link between the Blasket Islands and the politics of Irish culture, ‘By Dingle Bay and Blasket Sound’ (1993) by Steve MacDonogh (1949-2010). Born in Dublin but a resident of Dingle from 1982 until his death, MacDonogh calls up the sad history of the Blaskets and represents the loss of the Island community as a deadly contagion now spreading to its mainland neighbours on the Corca Dhuibne peninsula. Home here is always under threat, infected with the knowledge that the journey away is inevitable. “No-one grows up in Ballyferriter”, he writes, “without one eye on the horizon”. He contrasts the proud forts of the past that safeguarded community with the present-day ruins that now watch over the scattering of the young, and the deaths of ancient sailors who lie in the Sound with the “new death” of emigration. It is no longer the sea but the air that steals the young away through the new gates of farewell at Shannon, Cork and Dublin. They will only know their native place as home after they have made the journey away and the journey back, when they will at last be able to let their gaze wander away from the horizon and

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to experience home as a deep and healing well. But MacDonogh's Dingle Bay and the Basket Sound are now places where the old world is upside down, where the old culture has become a commodity to be enjoyed by visitors or exploited by opportunists, who "reap funds in the name of heritage and co-operation" and "bray like satisfied donkeys", places where "language is turned on its head" and "money gives power to liars".

The implications of the commodification that MacDonogh complains of are explored at some length in 'The Islanders' (2004), a short story by American novelist and short story writer, Andrew Sean Greer (1970-). The story, which was adapted for the stage in 2011, concerns two American tourists, old friends who make their way to Dun Chaoin in order to see the Basket Islands. What is first presented as a long-held and serious desire to engage with the Island culture is quickly shown to be a whimsy. The Islands, soon little more than the scenery behind a story about two old friends trying to heal each other's wounds, are first glimpsed from a car window, and then subject to the interpretation offered by a dodgy guide book, and finally encountered and considered ever so briefly through the viewing of a video presentation in the Basket Heritage Centre. This Basket Island is completely unmoored from its associations with the old mythology, and its history, cultural significance and connections with community now brought face to face with throw away culture. Under the uncomprehending, disinterested and disrespectful gaze of these visitors, the proud Islanders are mocked as "Blasketees" (2004: 2), members as a defunct Gaelic 'Mickey Mouse' Club, exhibits in a theme park and, as such, they disappoint and lose the short-lived and tenuous respect of the visitors who, within a few minutes spent in the interpretive centre, find that they are "not into them anymore". As they continue on their way, they mock the Islanders and the video presentation, imitating the brogue of the voice-over with commentary of their own: "Let us consider the mystery of the Basket Islanders. Why were they so dumb?"

While Greer's story shows the fate of the Blaskets in the hands of the here-today-gone-tomorrow culture that we see around us, 'The Train' (2003), a short story by Canadian writer Brian Doyle (1935-), reconnects the Islands with the enduring ancient motif of the soul's westward journey at death, offering a most striking and multi-layered instance of the Blasket "haunting" (2003: 81) of the literary imagination that O'Toole wrote about (2003: 81). It explores an intimate communion between its unnamed protagonist and Island mythology, centring on Maurice O'Sullivan's autobiographical text, *Twenty Years A-Growing* (1953), which comes into focus just as the man's morning commute by train from the most eastern point of the line becomes his journey to death in the west. His journey west is a journey through a heart attack, a journey through dying, that is punctuated with railway stations and remembered lines of Gaelic poetry that spring to mind unbidden at first and are then deliberately called up as a refuge from his crushing pain.

Doyle's short story rewrites and echoes O'Sullivan's account of his train journey to Dublin after leaving the Island to become a civic guard. Doyle's protagonist shares certain concerns with the young Maurice of O'Sullivan's text. They each worry that they might not reach or recognise their destination, and indeed they do not realise that death awaits them both at the end of the line. And although their journeys are so significant, they worry about the impressions they are making on their fellow travellers, even as they endure the greatest crises they have ever faced. There are also structural similarities in the two narratives. In both cases, for instance, the paragraphing reflects both the stop-start progress of the train and the recurring cycles of distress and relief of the traveller; and in both cases, the alternation of landscape and townscape punctuates their

progress ever further from their familiar worlds.

Maurice enters the mind of Doyle's traveller just as he realises he might be dying. Watery imagery colours the account of his falling face down on the floor of the train and reminds us subtly of Maurice's death by drowning far from his island home. The man's spinning mind returns repeatedly to Maurice and the weeping over his death. He recalls his wife meeting him at the station to tell him of the Blasket man's death, the staccato representation of his thoughts mimicking the irregularities of his failing heart: "Ethel weeping. Another Blasket man dead. Blasket Islands dead. All dead" (2003: 5). We know, as he does not, yet, that death will bring her weeping to the railway station again today. As his pain increases, he feels "as if his mind was in a country far from his body" (ibid) – and as he reaches journey's end, life's end, that country is the Great Blasket Island. It is his refuge, his shelter from the roaring pain. As his pain gets worse "he falls all the way into Gaelic" (ibid), the language he says he detested for twenty years. As he blesses himself with words of Irish, lines of Gaelic poetry come unbidden into his mind: *Níl einne beo bhfluir oilean, is trua a chas ma theigh* – "each of the living has found an island and he who left it is lost" (ibid: 6).

Many years ago, Tomás Ó Criomhthain wrote that his purpose in writing about his life on the Blasket was to ensure that his island and its people did not slip from human memory. A few short years after his death and not long before the final evacuation, Daniel Corkery wrote:

Tragic it is to look out at the Blasket Islands and know that human life itself is ceasing on them, even if we think that living souls should never have had to shelter themselves at all on such windswept rocks... all that seaboard is a silent land, or so we have felt it, as we walked the roads of it. It is however a silence that excites rather than assuages: there are always presences. (Caball, 1987: 7-8)

The writings discussed so briefly here and other writings that have occurred since the little community left the Blasket Islands demonstrate several things. They show very clearly that the old Islandman and his fellow Island authors achieved their aim, and that they and the people they lived among have not slipped from memory. They also demonstrate several of the limits of Fintan O'Toole's hypothesis in that they were not all composed by Irish writers and in the range of emotions they express. Finally, they confirm Corkery's view that the potency of the ancient symbol of the Island continues to adhere to the Blasket Island even in its emptiness. More than half a century after its evacuation, the Blasket Island continues to provoke responses to something archetypal that lingers in the psyche, something 'haunting'.

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