

LEAKY PRESS
presents

TITUS LUCRETIVS
CARUS

*The fruitfull
Science*

*extract from
DE RERUM NATURA*

*translated by
LUCY HUTCHINSON*

Lucretius

Two thousand years ago, a poet reading in the morning light absently fiddles with a ring whose inscription has worn away. Later, in the afternoon heat, he watches a wet garment steaming in the sun. At supper time, he opens the door of his pantry and is floored by the pungent aroma of an aging cheese.

We cannot see the agents of these transformations. Yet, if we follow the evidence of our senses, we know they must exist. But what are they?

Around 50 BCE, Titus Lucretius Carus drew on his poetic powers to explain these invisible forces, inspired by the philosophy of Epicurus. Lucretius imagined a universe made of ‘nature’s agents’: invisible particles also known as atoms. It was these ‘seeds’ that drive the transformations of water, the emanations of smell, the wear of time. Lucretius’s epic poem *De rerum natura* (‘On the Nature of Things’) outlines the physics and ethics of a materialist universe. A cosmos without creator, formed only of atoms eternally falling in the void.

Who was Lucretius? Not much is known of him, apart from what can be drawn from the poem itself. His close reading of Epicurean philosophy (c.300 BCE) implies that he was well-versed in Greek; his complex poetic structures demonstrate an immersion in Latin literary culture. We don’t know if Lucretius was part of an intellectual milieu, but his near-contemporaries Cicero and Virgil both attest to his talent in their writings.

Lucretius' descriptions of plant and animal life hint at an intimate relation with nature; it is likely that his family, like many wealthy Romans, maintained a country estate. He also employs vivid marine imagery throughout the text: ships, sandy beaches, storms. With the port of Ostia only a day's horse-ride from Rome, it's possible that Lucretius visited the coast. When he writes of a setting sun being 'quenched' by the sea, we can imagine that he once gazed at these rays from a cliffside, his toga rippling in the breeze.

The fruitfull sence

This selection from Book 4 of *De rerum natura* explores the testimony of the senses. Lucretius asks: should we trust our sensory organs, when the world is filled with illusions? The night sky doubles in a puddle of a muddy water. Voices echoing on a hillside imitate terrifying crowds. How can we navigate the world based on such dubious evidence?

Lucretius begins with shadows. What are they made of? Why do they follow us? Shadows are spun from bodies like a skein of wool, Lucretius says. They do not move, but are constantly re-made. Vision alone cannot explain how shadows work: we must use reason. If we critically engage with the senses, we can arrive at astonishing conclusions about the world around us.

Dreams and optical illusions come next, in a list that includes the wonky pleasures of dizziness, warp,

and perspective. It's a delight to imagine this first-century poet squinting at, for example, an oar entering water. Although he knows the oar is straight, it appears to bend. Should we trust our reason (straight), or our senses (bent)?

The rest of the passage examines the operation of hearing, taste, and smell, according to the Epicurean theory of atoms. Lucretius outlines the materiality of each, often in hallucinatory detail. For example, taste seems to be determined by the shape of atoms – round, square, triangular – flowing through corresponding channels in the human body.

Throughout this selection, Lucretius employs playful metaphors to explain each 'fruitfull sence'. A juicy morsel on the tongue feels like a crushed sponge. Shadows are sable, as velvety as a fox-fur. Smell has a cool, slow touch. The poem is a wild meditation on matter; it recalls the pleasure, wonder, and power of the sensory world.

The translation

Lucy Hutchinson's English translation of the poem, written in London during the 1650s, transforms Lucretius's elegant Latin into bouncy rhyming couplets. The reader might notice her seventeenth-century spelling, in which extra vowels and consonants multiply across the page, recalling recombining atoms. As a devout Puritan, Lucy Hutchinson, would not have appreciated

this characterisation: for her, the Epicurean theory of the universe was ‘ridiculous’, its atoms falling in a ‘foppish, casual dance’.*

Lucy Hutchinson was the first person to translate the poem into English. However, her translation didn’t see a readership until 1996, in an edition that is now out of print. We first came across Hutchinson’s version in an excerpt published in *Revolution: A Reader* (2012). Oxford University Press have since released two scholarly volumes. With this publication, we hope to play a small role in the continued reappraisal of Lucy Hutchinson’s work.

The edit

De rerum natura is a work of both philosophy and poetry; it is at times necessarily complex and didactic. We have chosen the most concrete and vivid verses from Book 4, focusing on the sensory world.

Inspired by Lucy Hutchinson’s original margin notes, we have annotated the poem throughout for clarity and context.

We hope these editorial choices make the text easier for a reader to enter, allowing for a fresh encounter with this two-thousand-year-old epic poem.

* pp.12, *Hugh de Quehen*

I tread the muses by paths yett untrac't
 And at those wells which none did ever tast
 Delight to quench my thirst, delight to crowne
 My head with a fresh wreath of flowers new blowne,
 Such as noe muse hath ever worne before,
 Because I first doe weightie things explore
 And superstitions tangled knotts untie
 With which she kept minds in captivitie.
 And next because with such sweete verse I sing
 In easie words, soe difficult a thing.

*This is the first verse
 in Book 4 of De Rerum
 Natura.*

*Lucretius, garlanded
 as a muse, announces
 his method: he will use
 'sweet words' to sing his
 'difficult' argument.*

[...]

Here in the sunshine, shaddows on us waite,
 Which all our steps and gestures imitate.
 If you believe ayre unenlightned can
 Performe the acts and motions of a man.
 For only ayre depriv'd of light, is all
 That which we commonly doe shaddows call.
 For when our bodies interpose betweene
 The earth and the sunbeames, these shades are seene.
 But when we passe away, and that ground leave
 It doth againe fulnesse of light receive:
 And where our bodies other places hide,
 The shaddow seemes to travell by our side;
 As wool by spinsters drawne, soe rayes ensue
 Each other, and the vanisht light renew.
 For earth, of light is easily dispossess,
 Whom bright rayes doe as easily reinvest,
 When as her sable shaddows are dispell'd.
 Nor can we here the sights deception yeild,
 For wheresoever light or shaddows be
 They may be seene, but the reallitie
 Of lights, to judge whither one shaddow doe

*The following verses
 come from later in Book
 4. They concern the
 senses, beginning with
 sight. Lucretius talks
 about shadows, dreams,
 and other visions.*

*Shadows are air absent
 of light, we know this by
 observing how our bodies
 block the sun.*

*Rays of light move as
 quickly as a spinning
 wheel. They succeed each
 other, like one length of
 yarn following another.*

*Shadows don't 'move',
 they are ceaselessly
 remade by falling rays
 of light.*

Only reasoning can explain shadows: sight alone is not enough.

Here follows a long list of optical illusions.

A boat's sail might flap as the boat itself seems motionless.

Celestial bodies give the impression of stasis, yet they are in orbit.

Distance blurs.

To dizzy children, the house turns.

Setting sunrays graze mountains, even though the sun is thousands of miles away.

Still moove with us, or, as we taught, a new
Be allwayes made, reason alone descries,
But th'eies discerne not natures misteries.

Againe lett not your sight your mind deceive,
At sea the mountains and fixt shores men leave,
When strong gales doe their fliing canvas fill,
Appeare to moove, the vessell to stand still.
In the etheriall arch each glorious starr
Seemes fixt, yet all in dayly motion are,
And driving their bright charriots through the skies
Againe in their declining spheares arise.
The sun and moone appeare unmoovd, though we
Are certeine they in constant motion be.
Two cliffes which such a channell doth devide,
As whole fleetes may betweene the mountains ride,
Though farre asunder plac'd, att distance doe
Present but one whole island to our view.
So, to boyes, giddie with much turning growne,
The whole house seemes in whirling motion,
The fixed columns turning round, and all
The turning rooffe threatens a suddaine fall.
When nature doth that glaring torch advance,
Whose purple rayes on the high mountains dance,
The sun appeares no higher then they, and seemes
To crowne their steepe heads with his flaming beames.
And yett, those hill topps, which decieve us thus,
Are not two thousand flightshots of from us:
But betweene the neere-seeming sun, and these
There are vast distances of skies and seas,
And many thousand leagues of earth stretcht wide,
Where sundry sorts of men and beasts abide.
Now in the highwayes litle shallow drills,
Which every raine amongst the pibbles fills,

Scarce a foote deepe make th'heavens seeme as farre
Beneath the ground, as they above it are,
Deepe sunke in earth celestially bodies shew,
The whole ayre, clouds, and space, appeare below.
Then when your horse in a swift river stayes,
If you upon the flowing waters gaze,
Your horse, which mooves not, by the rapid tide,
Seemes driven back unto the further side,
And to whatever place our eies wee turne,
All things appeare so mooving, and so borne.
So, in a gallerie on pillars rays'd,
Whose long walls are at equall distance plac'd,
Who from the upper end the whole length sees
Will find the prospect lessen by degrees,
Till rooffe and sides and floore all met in one
Contract the veiw into a narrow cone.
To men at sea, the sun from th'ocean seemes
To rise, and there to quench his setting beames,
Nor is't a light deception of the eies,
For all they there can see, is seas and skies.
A ship which rides at anchor, seene by those
Who are unskilld, maimd and unperfected shews,
The sterne, and that part of the oares our sight
Above the waves discernes, seemes streight and right,
But all which lie within the salt flood seeme
Broke and reverst, i'the upmost waves to swimme.
During nights reigne, when winds the thin cloudes chase,
Those splendid lamps, which then in heaven blaze,
Contrary to those cloudes, seeme to persue
Another race, then what in truth they doe.
Part of one eie being with the finger held,
A double view of every thing shall yeild.
Two shining flames shall in the lamps give light,
All housholdstuffe shall double in your sight,

Tiny puddles seem to contain vast cosmoses.

Racing currents make other things race. An old meme: if you stare at a spinning spiral for a minute, and then look at your hands, they warp and morph.

Lucretius imagines one-point perspective as a cone stretching out from the eyes. Perhaps he had seen the magnificent frescos of Villa Boscoreale, near Naples. These paintings used perspective playfully to depict architecture.

A ship seems intact above the water, yet in its reflection it disintegrates. Its straight oars seem to bend.

Stars and clouds appear to move in opposite directions.

Here Lucretius gives us instructions on how to cross our eyes.

And soe beheld, all persons shall appeare
With double bodies, and shall double faces weare.

Last when sweete sleepe doth weary men release,
Refreshing their toyl'd limbs with gentle ease,
Yett even then; in nights obscuritie
Wee seeme to walke and moove, and thinke we see
In that enclosed roome, the suns bright beames,
The lustre of the day, seas, mountains, streames,
We thinke we wander through the spatious plains,
And while nights silence in all quarters reignes
Heare sounds, and though wee speake not, answers give
And many such like visions doe receive.
All which in vaine strive to disparedge sence,
While our illusions doe not rise from thence,
But from th'imagination by which wee
Thinke wee behold the things we doe not see.
For tis most noble to discerne betweene
Reall, and dubious, even by thoughts unseene.

Now if some say, that nothing's to be knowne,
They know not that, who gen'rall ignorance owne.
Wherefore I shall not here strive to confute
Those who on falsehood ground their whole dispute.
But if this knowledge should be granted, yett
I aske, since things no certaintie admitt
From whence then doe their owne discoveries flow,
Which shew what tis to know, or not to know?
For you will find, men from their sence derive
That knowledge which doth just distinctions give
Whats certaine, or uncerteine, false, or true:
And none can contradict what sence can shew.
Wee can trust nothing with more confidence
Then what doth, of it selfe, by truth, convince

Visions plague us, even in darkness, even with closed eyes.

Dreams produce sounds so realistic we speak back at them.

Dreams make fun of reason.

Yet we must apply reason to dreams.

Some say it is impossible to be certain of anything. This is a classic opinion of the Skeptic school of philosophy (3rd Century BCE).

But if we cannot be certain of anything, how can we reason?

Things which are false; what then shall be believ'd
Before the sence? shall that which is receiv'd
By a false sence, those reasons overthrow
Which wholly doe from the true sences flow?
All reason's false, unlesse a certaintie
Be in the sence. Can th'eare, the sight denie?
Shall th'eare, or tast, the feeling sence oppose?
Or shall the eie, dispute against the nose?
It cannot be, for severall powers remaine
In all the sences, each of which retainne
Their proper faculties. Thus severally
We doe, what's hott, cold, hard, or soft, descrie,
Colours, and what to colours do pertaine
Are different wayes discern'd, and soe againe
Peculiar manners to our sences bring
The tast, and sound, and smell of every thing.
Hence springs this necessary consequence,
Sences each other neither can convince,
Nor be themselves deceiv'd, wherefore we must
Ever adhere, firmly unto their trust,
Since whatsoever they declare is true.
And though, reason cannot explaine that view
By which square things farre off to us seeme round,
Twere better, where the true cause is not found,
That he who wanteth reason, should suppose
False causes of both figures, then to loose
That ever certeine hold out of his hands,
On whose firme basis, even the first faith stands.
Which fast foundation shaken, will make all
The strong supports of life and safetie fall.
For if the sences credit be made voyd,
Not only reason, but life will be destroyd.
Tis sence alone, which guides us to eschew
Steepe precipices, and safe pathes persue;

The senses are the foundation of all our knowledge: we must have faith in them.

We cannot favour one sense over another, we must trust all the senses equally.

The senses do not conflict each other, rather they work together to build a complex picture.

If the senses give an ambiguous impression, it is not because they are themselves false. Rather, we should assume the image is deceptive for a reason, even if we cannot work out what that reason is.

If we cannot trust the senses we cannot live: they help us avoid danger. Even the most Skeptical of philosophers wouldn't walk into incoming traffic because they don't believe what they see.

We must trust the senses because they are a solid basis from which everything else flows.

If we interpret a sense wrongly, the reasoning that follows will also be in error.

Sounds is material because it has physical effects: speaking wears out the mouth, shouting raises the pulse.

As words rush through the mouth and teeth, they jam, we stutter.

Voice must be corporeal because speech is physically taxing.

A delightfully homo-erotic scene: men talking from dawn to dusk to the point of exhaustion.

The voice takes away from the body.

Wherefore in vaine these arguments abound.
Last, as in buildings when you marke the ground
If there be falsehood in the first drawne lines,
If any side to crooked-nesse inclines,
That error thoroughout the structure goes,
Which so awry, confusd, uneven grows,
That, by its erring principles betreyd,
The whole house is a heape of ruine made.
Soe fares it with the reason of all things
That must be false, which from false sences springs.

And now th' account's not difficult to give
How each of th' other sences doe perceive,
Their proper objects; first sounds pierce the eare
And all the vocall bodies enter there.
Which prooves, sounds are corporeall, since they may
Themselves so feelingly to sence convey.
For th' issuing voyce, oft grates upon the jawes,
And lowd cries, roughnesse in the arteries cause,
When as the principles of voyce arrive,
In throngs at those streight passages, and strive
To force their way through the mouths crowded gate,
Which they in their tumultuous issue grate.
If words and voyces then, hurt as they goe,
They doubtlesse from corporeall seedes must flow.
Know alsoe, that continued speech doth wast
Mens strength, and nerves, if the discourses last
With vehemence, from that time the ruddy east
Displays the mornings glorie, till nights mist
Obscures the world, whereby the voyce appears
Corporeall, since it, with much utterance, beares
Away part of the bodie whence it goes.
Nor is the eare in like forme piercd, with those
Attons which make the trumpetts murmuring sound,

Its hoarce, lowd voyce, that ecchoing hills rebound,
And the sweete songs, with which in the darke vale
Of Helicon, sad swans their death bewaile.
Now when the voyce doth from the bosome rise,
Immediately into the mouth it flies,
Which there the mooving tongue articulates
And, with th assistance of the lipps, creates
All distinct words. Harsh voyces doe proceed
From the rough principles, and smooth ones breed
The sweeter tones, and if the space be neere
To which words flie, all accents reach the eare
In the same forme they're utterd, sounding plaine
While their first native figures they reteine:
But if much space be interposd, ayre drownds
The accents of the undistinguisht sounds,
Soe that the eare only perceives a noyse,
But no plaine words of the confounded voyce.
Againe, when criers single words proclaime,
A thousand eares at once receive the same.
Wherefore voyces in utterance multiplie,
Which singlie issuing, unto many flie,
And, unto every new created word,
Peculiar formes and distinct sounds afford.
Some parts of voyce dispersed in the ayre
Never approach the eare, but perish there.
Part fall upon hard rocks, which while they beate
Back the vayne voyce, its images repeate.

All which, will, being considerately beheld,
A reason to your selfe and others yeild,
Why rocks and woods distinctly render all
The words we speake, when we with lowd cries call
Our lost companions, in the mountains strayd,
Where I have knowne seven repititions made

Different sounds arrive differently in the ear.

What do harsh and sweet voices mean for Lucretius? Women, non-Romans, the unfree...

Distance fuzzes the shapes of words.

Yet you can communicate to many people by shouting a single word.

Sound dies over distance, unless geological features bounce it back...

...as an echo.

Mountains create echoes.

Folk wisdom says these sounds are caused by the partying of woodland spirits.

The mischievous forest deity Pan makes music with a bare reed, not with pipes.

In a desert, there is no echo.

Echoes are like rumours, hearsay. Are Pan's pipes such an example of exaggeration?

Sound can give us information that vision can't. We can hear through a shut door, but we cannot see through it.

Sound passes obliquely, vision straight. Is sound queer?

Sound is multitudinous, spacious. It shatters, bounces, spreads. We can feel sound.

Of the same words, repulst from hill to hill
Which th' ambient ayre with ecchoing voyces fill.
Hence th' ancient borderers on such places sayd,
Goatefooted Satirs there inhabited,
That fawns and Nymphs did often there resort,
Breaking nights silence with their clamorous sport,
Oft did themselves with musick recreate,
Whose noates shrill pipes and sweete songs imitate.
Here clownes report Pan with his pine bound head
Is oft heard playing on a hollow reed,
Which he betweene his ugly lips doth use,
Instead of pipes t'expresse his rurall muse,
And many such like fictions they devise,
That desarts might not want their deities,
Whose fames with boasted miracles are spred,
As vulgar men by vaine beliefe are led.
For humane kind, still covetous of news,
Too greedily all strange reports persues.
Nor let it here againe your wonder rayse,
That voyce, it selfe unto the eares conveys,
Where objects cannot to the eies intrude.
So shutt doores lett in sounds, which sights exclude,
Because the voyce through oblique pores can goe
And passe unbroke, but th' image cannot soe,
That falls to peices, if it doe not passe
Thorough streight pores, like penetrable glasse.
Againe sound often into severall parcells flies,
And many voyces out of one arise.
As one fire into many sparks devides,
So voyces fill each place, and from all sides
All parts that lie behind, all that surround,
Wee feele th' approaches of the piercing sound.
But images still goe in lines direct,
Whatever way the bodies them eject.

Nor can men any species see above,
But voyces from exteriour places moove.
Yet when the voyces passage is not cleare
Tis damp't, and doth confusdly pierce the eare,
And rather noyse, then words sound there.

The reasons of the tast, now are more plaine,
More action to its organs doth pertaine.
Our jaws presse forth the juices of all meate,
As we the water from crusht sponges gett,
This juice prest forth, is then diffusd among
The perplext veins, about the porous tongue,
And all the concaves of the pallat, where
Those pleasant juices, whose first bodies are
Of nature smooth, sweetely approach the sence,
And to those humid pallaces dispence,
A pleasant relish, but those who ascend
From harsher principles, the tast offend.
Last only in the mouth sweete juices give
The tast delight, but when the veines receive
The nourishment that flows downe from the jaws,
No other part from thence a pleasure draws,
Nor matters it, whatt food the members take,
Soe that the stomack due concoction make.

Proceed wee now the reason to declare
Why meates which pleasant to some persons are,
Others distast, for theres such difference
That some are poysond with that meate, from whence
Others suck nourishment, soe serpents by
Licking mans spittle, eate their flesh and die.
Soe Hellebore fatts quails, and plover, though
It poysons man; wherefore that you may know
Whence this proceeds, you must recall to mind

If material gets in the way (a wall, a fog, a cold) the voice is muffled and becomes noise.

To create the sensation of taste, the body must work.

Mastication reduces solid food to 'juice', which filters through the pores of the tongue and mouth.

'First bodies' like 'seeds' or 'principles', is a term used for atoms. Lucretius says that smooth atoms give a sweet taste. Atoms with more texture give 'offensive' flavours.

The stomach and intestines cannot taste.

Food which is delicious to one may be unpalatable for another.

Hellebore is a highly toxic plant.

Atoms come in different shapes and sizes. They are variously mixed together.

All animals feed differently, according to their kind and to the shape of their intestines.

Some atoms have 'many angles'. Hexagons, octagons, dodecagons...

Differently shaped atoms filter into corresponding channels in the body.

The gliding of atoms through smooth passages produces a sweet taste; textured channels create friction and therefore more startling flavours.

Sickness causes total confusion; the patient begins to desire tastes previously disliked. Perhaps this is why those with colds long for citrus – an 'acid relish'.

The Romans used honey in a variety of medicinal contexts. This could explain why Lucretius says it has both an acid and sweet flavour.

What we before expland, that every kind
Of nature doth containe a mixed seed,
And further, that all living creatures feed
According to their severall shape and race,
And th outward forme that doth their entrailles case;
And as the seeds themselves doe differ thus
In their owne figures, soe as various
Are th'intervalls, pores, channells through which they
Into the mouth and limbs themselves convey;
Therefore some of them lesse, some greater are,
Some of square figures, some triangular,
Some round, some into many angles run,
According to their shape and motion.
They then must differ in their passages,
Whose severall formes force them to severall wayes.
And hence doe some a bitter rellish meete
In that, which is to other pallatts sweete.
To those in whom the pallatts pores are wide,
Through which the equall attoms smoothly glide,
The rellish must be sweete, but where they grate
On passages uneven, rough, and straite,
They leave a rellish full of harsh offence.
All which is most apparent to our sence.
For when abounding choller feavers breeds,
Or the disease from other cause proceeds,
An universall perturbation brings
Disorder to the principles of things,
Who from their owne positions being displac't,
Those things, which did before well please the tast,
Become offence, and they yeild more delight
Which can more acid relishes excite.
Thus hony it selfe, as we before have shewd
Doth the mixt seed of both these tast include.
Now it remains, to shew how sents the nose

Approach. First know, a various odor flowes
From divers things, who allways breath forth smell,
And th'ayre with their dispersed savours fill.
But upon animalls, of different kind,
We some more prevalent then others find.
Soe bees smell honie farre of in the ayre,
So vultures to dead carkases repaire,
Drawne by their smell; so dogs by their quick sent
Persue the severall tracks where wild beasts print
Their cloven feete. So the white goose, Guardian
Of Romes high towers, affarre off smells out man.
Soe all the other creatures are indued
With proper sents, which guides them to their food,
Makes them their hurtfull poysons to refraine,
And by this means each race their lives susteine;
But every smell, which touches any nose,
In different wise to different creatures goes.
But yett no odor is discernd so farre
As sounds and voyces, or those species are,
Which, glancing on the eies, provoke the sight.
Smells, roving wide, are, in their tardie flight,
Disperst and lost i'the ayre, while they not from
Th'outside of things, but th'inmost entrailles come.
It shews the odor in the inside dwells,
Because things then cast forth the strongest smells,
When crusht, or bruizd, or melted by the fire,
The opend pores their inmost sents expire.
Againe, bodies of savour are more grosse
Then those which pierce-ing sound and voyce compose,
Because they penetrate not walls of stone,
Which frequently by sounds and voyce is done.
Wherefore the place where odor doth reside
Is not soe easily by sence descried.
For the slow touch of smells, coole in the ayre,

Scent is expired, ejected into the air.

Air carries odour particles to animals, who use smell to determine whether a food source is nourishing or toxic.

These are the Sacred Geese of Juno, kept at a temple on the outskirts of Rome. According to legend, their honking once prevented a Gallic invasion.

Different noses smell differently.

Sight travels the furthest, followed by sound. Smell atoms perish; they do not travel far.

Smell brings old news.

Smell comes from the interior, it is released when the object is damaged. Think of the phrase, 'Who cut the cheese?'

Lucretius says that smell particles are larger than those of the other senses and easily blocked. Imagine a closed door: it shuts out the odour of cheese but not the chatter of a neighbour.

There is evidence that the canine brain sends scent data to the visual cortex, creating a 'smell picture' of the world.

Nor to the sence doe new done things declare,
Wherefore dogs oft at fault, doe hunt to find
Their sent againe, nor only in this kind
Is there a losse, species and colours doe
In divers wayes approach each severall view.

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Colophon

The fruitfull sence

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Titus Lucretius Carus

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