

# THE REPRESENTATION OF IRELAND IN TWO NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH JOURNALS

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Writing in 1843 about the affairs of Ireland, Victor de Mars, news-writer for *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, said: “the age-old wound that seemed to slowly heal suddenly opened up wider and more acute than ever” (1012).<sup>1</sup> He could not pass over the question of Repeal in silence because of the importance of national representation at the time both in Ireland and in France. It seems that the French found echoes of their own ideals and political principles in the fight for freedom in Ireland.

In this paper, I wish to study the way in which Ireland and the Irish were represented in two nineteenth-century French periodicals. The first one, *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, began publication in 1829 and is still in existence. More than a literary periodical, it was meant to be a mirror of European and American ideas and regularly published the stories of travellers. Indeed, travels and travelogues were intended as a fundamental means of knowledge before ethnology came to the fore. The journal was the voice of moderation, always trying to combine a respect for tradition with an openness to modern ideas, along the lines of the philosophy of the July Monarchy. It published many articles on Ireland on a wide range of topics including literature, politics, economy, and social relations. In addition, Ireland frequently received attention in the “Chronique de la Quinzaine,” the journal’s bi-monthly political summary. The second journal, *L’Avenir*, was published from 1830 to 1832 and followed the main ideas of liberal Catholicism trying to adapt to the new context of post-revolutionary Europe.<sup>2</sup> At the time, the people and especially the *bourgeoisie* rejected the Restoration and its links with the reactionary Catholic Church because it reminded them of the *ancien régime*. In this anti-clerical context, the journal was meant to reconcile the democratic and liberal ideas of the people to a romantic Catholicism. Both periodicals illustrate the fact that interest in Ireland developed with the news of Catholic Emancipation. They also show that this interest was widespread, whatever the political beliefs and aims of the publishers.<sup>3</sup> There were many common points in French and

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1 All translations from *La Revue des Deux Mondes* and *L’Avenir* are mine.

2 It was short-lived because it was condemned by Pope Gregory XVI in 1832. It supported the separation of church and state, claiming the authority of the Pope in religious matters and that of the people in civil matters. See Seamus Deane for a comprehensive analysis of the circumstances surrounding the publication of *L’Avenir* (203-249). Deane also provides a translation of Montalembert’s “Letter on Catholicism in Ireland” (251-271).

3 *La Revue des Deux Mondes* was first a liberal journal before becoming more conservative in the 1850s. *L’Avenir* was a liberal Catholic journal written by three priests: Lacordaire, Lamennais, and Gerbet.

Irish debates on the ideas of nation, religion, and freedom. Ireland was also represented as a romantic and picturesque island, an image that resonated with the ideals of the period, claiming both an inheritance of the past and a need for new ideas. The portraits of Irishmen also followed this tendency. O'Connell was the best-known Irish figure in the middle of the nineteenth century, even transcending traditional French sympathy for any man who opposed England. Other portraits included Edmund Burke or Thomas Moore.

In the following, I will concentrate on the first half of the nineteenth century because it was the time of reconstruction after the French Revolution and it was characterised by an intensity of political debates and the proliferation of new ideas. I will first try to define the image of Ireland given at the time, its evolution, which elements appealed to the French public and then explore how they used this image of Ireland in their own political debates.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ireland was represented through the prism of its relations to England. Its wretched condition was constantly insisted upon in both journals, which referred to it as "poor Ireland" or "poor Erin." The complexity of the relations between the two Irish communities was pointed out as the reason for this situation, and it was the main point of interest for the journals. In *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, an anonymous article published in 1829 and entitled "Catholic Emancipation," stated that at the end of the eighteenth century the Irish population was subjected to a whimsical Protestant ruling class:

No link of religion, no homeland, no hope for justice. On one side, the affected disdain of an insulting superiority; on the other, the deep hatred of a nation that feels hurt in its dearest affections, that sees the career of honours and noble ambitions narrowing down in front of it. (Anon., "Emancipation" 71)

The divisions between Catholics and Protestants, between people of Gaelic or English descent were perceived as limiting the progress of Ireland. There seemed to be no link between the two communities, except disdain and hatred. The Irish government was described as "abnormal" and society as "bizarre" (Anon., "O'Connell" 665). Ireland was said to be in an unexampled situation. In 1840, Prosper Duvergier de Hauranne summed up the book *L'Irlande sociale, politique et religieuse* written by Gustave de Beaumont in 1839,<sup>4</sup> saying that no other country had suffered more than Ireland. It thus deserved the attention of moralists and politicians. According to Beaumont, the Ascendancy was definitely Irish but could not admit it, thus making the country poor and miserable: they "became so impregnated with the Irish character that you would not find in its mores a single trace that would be reminiscent of

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4 Beaumont was a friend of Tocqueville's. He went to America with him and contributed to his book *Democracy in America*. Beaumont's book, the most thorough French study on Ireland in the nineteenth century, was the result of his investigations and focused on the progress of democracy there. The Protestant *Dublin Magazine* said that this book could not be by a foreigner and suspected a Dublin radical to be its true author.

the English adventurers, its ancestors" (Anon., "O'Connell" 665). This denial made the Ascendancy an "evil aristocracy" (Duvergier 12). Two communities living on the same territory had been fighting each other for centuries: the oppressed peasantry and the frivolous landowners. Irish civilisation was seen as "unreasonable" at the time. The end of the eighteenth century was an "extravagant, extremely witty, bloody, savage, extraordinary and bizarre period" (Anon., "O'Connell" 665). The life of George Robert Fitzgerald (1748-1794), nicknamed "fighting Fitzgerald," a noted duelist, "proved the savage state of this country and the little influence civilisation and law had on the island, still feudal and left in the grip of the barbarities of the Middle Ages" (Anon., "O'Connell" 666-667).

Under its "apparent ferocity," the Irish nation hid "noble aims, a burning desire for independence and a deep hatred for England" (Anon., "O'Connell" 667). England was indeed considered responsible for a certain number of Ireland's catastrophes. Ireland's piety, abnegation, and resistance to the Penal Laws were considered exemplary. *L'Avenir* frequently alluded to the involvement of the faithful in a non-violent fight for freedom under the guidance of a humble clergy (Deane 204). Charles de Montalembert, who favoured a constitutional and liberal monarchy, wrote "Letters on Catholicism in Ireland," published in 1831 in three issues of the journal, insisting on the link between the situation in Ireland and France:

And we, laymen, we who were born in a century in which it is so hard to live, but so glorious to fight, if ever despondency came to seize us, if ever our tired heart doubted God and His eternal solicitude, let us think of the wonders of the Catholic Association, that only started with seven members, and that, after a fifteen-year fight, conquered the religious independence of Ireland and laid the foundations of its national independence. Let us think that to maintain Catholicism in Ireland in front of the foreign conqueror, of victorious heresy, of British glory and power, in a situation that offered no support, through three centuries of plundering, revolutions, and troubles, two things were needed that will not fail France: on one side persecution, on the other, faith. (163)

Ireland was persecuted and it never gave up thanks to its deep faith (Deane 229). The Irish situation under the Penal Laws was described as a form of slavery in both journals:

When law is despotism and tyranny, when it is unfair, oppressive, terrible, can we say there is liberty? Is there liberty when it orders or allows slavery? Were the Catholics free under the terrible penal laws that not long ago still bore upon them in Ireland and in England? (Lammenais 303)

The Penal Laws framed and limited the Irish nation. *L'Avenir* described the laws as an evil legal code no one should respect, using the Irish example as a proof that laws were not always good for the people (Deane 239). In *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, Louis de Carné compared Ireland to overseas colonies, such as the French colonies in the Caribbean:

The rod of despotism had reached Ireland and had dried out everything to the root. Thus did egotism bring back, if not justice, at least a less bloody policy. A few property rights were given back to those islanders in order to be able to negotiate with them, as

the Caribbean planter watched over his slaves' health to take more advantage of their work. (295-296)

Ireland was also compared to colonial systems in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of America where Black people were declared White by letters patent. The length of the conflict was likewise insisted upon. The conquest's effect was seen as perverting both the conquerors and the conquered and condemning them to an eternal fight that England had ignored for too long (Duvergier 28). The English attitude was identified as the source of Ireland's current problems.

Both journals supported the fact that England was responsible for the Irish situation and that it should do something to make up for it as in the case of other colonies (Duvergier 25). Catholic Emancipation was seen as the first step towards improvement. The main problem seemed to be the deep anti-Irish feeling in England in spite of the Act of Union. Protestant England did not consider Irish people as fellow countrymen or Catholic people as brothers: "In its eyes, Ireland is still a conquered land, the Irishman a loser, the Catholic a slave" (Duvergier 28). Both journals underlined the discrepancy between this attitude and the traditional English image of an enlightened country. The debate on Catholic Emancipation unveiled the real face of England, i.e. that of an intolerant country. Catholic Emancipation was "a measure that moved too deeply the old England, that showed to the face of Europe a mass of ignorance and fanaticism that is hard to reconcile with the flattering idea that we liked to form of the enlightened liberty of that country" (Anon., "Emancipation" 68). The English government considered Ireland as a sort of "domestic enemy." The Irish question was a never-ending problem that England simply failed to understand. Emancipation is thus described as an act of national justice, the first step on the road to liberty (Anon., "O'Connell" 670).

But the Irish cause was also the pretext for many misdeeds. Outlaws operated in Ireland and attacked or robbed Protestant owners. The Whiteboys and the supporters of Captain Rock<sup>5</sup> were also described as a sort of rampant evil that plagued Ireland from the mid-1820s (Anon., "O'Connell" 675). The fear of such outlaws on the part of French writers shows that the spectre of the 1789 revolution was still there. But these rebels were also considered good examples of the Irish character, illustrating courage and dexterity.

Such descriptions of the Irish character were prompted by a renewed interest in Ireland during the Restoration with its romantic quest for origins and the appeal of Celtic studies. Ireland was described as a romantic landscape, especially the West of the island. This romantic image was the main stereotype used by travellers who visited the country at the time. O'Connell's birthplace, for example, was described in *La*

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5 The Whiteboys were an eighteenth-century secret Irish agrarian organisation which used violent methods to target landowners and tithe collectors. The Rockite movement, named for its leader and hero, stirred the Irish countryside from 1821 to 1824. It was notorious for its violence that targeted the landed élite.

*Revue des Deux Mondes* as a savage and sublime place in which anthropomorphic mountains, “like bald giants, were stretching their arms to reach the sea through the mists of the coast.” Ireland seemed to be a land of the gods (Anon., “O’Connell” 660-661). There were also references to Ossian, which proves the European success of Macpherson’s book, even if everyone knew that the poems were not originals.<sup>6</sup> Ireland was described as an authentic and picturesque country, a representation that gradually imposed itself as the ‘true’ image of Ireland.

One of the best-known articles in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* is “La poésie des races celtiques,” written by Ernest Renan and published in the January 1854 issue. This article describes the Celtic race as a fundamentally feminine race, which came from a sort of lost paradise, both geographic and utopian. It is a hymn to Celticism and a sort of poetic reverie.<sup>7</sup> Ireland, for Renan, was the only place where ancestry was certain and pure:

If the excellence of races is to be appreciated by the purity of their blood and the inviolability of their national character, it must be admitted that none can vie in nobility with the still surviving remains of the Celtic race. Never has a human family lived more apart from the world, and been purer from all alien admixture. Confined by conquest within forgotten islands and peninsulas, it has reared an impassable barrier against external influences; it has drawn all from itself; it has lived solely on its own capital. From this ensues that powerful individuality, that hatred of the foreigner, which even in our own days has formed the essential feature of the Celtic peoples. Roman civilization scarcely reached them, and left among them but few traces. The Teutonic invasion drove them back, but did not penetrate them. At the present hour they are still constant in resistance to an invasion dangerous in an altogether different way – that of modern civilization, destructive as it is of local variations and national types. Ireland in particular (and herein we perhaps have the secret of her irremediable weakness) is the only country in Europe where the native can produce the titles of his descent, and designate with certainty, even in the darkness of prehistoric ages, the race from which he has sprung. (Renan, “Poetry”)

Celtic Ireland is seen as resisting the invasion of modern civilisation, because the Irish cling to their national type. This gives the impression that Ireland was essentially a nostalgic country (Deane 263). According to Emile Montégut, it was in a strange position, between memory and hope: the Irish looked back on times gone by with longing but they would never restore their glorious past even if they strove to.

The Celts have always lived upon memories and hopes. To get over the present, they like to delude themselves with the painful memory of faded joys and then look into the future for the resurrection of this beloved past. From this comes the charm, the tenderness, the grace that we notice in the character and especially in the poetry of this race, which seems to speak in the tones of both a young and an old man. (Montégut 895)

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6 A notice on the book *The Poems of Ossian*, in the original Gaelic, with a literal translation into English by James Macpherson, with a new dissertation by Archibald Clerk (published in 1870), claimed that the texts were fake (Étienne 735-736).

7 Renan came from Brittany. His description was laudatory, but it was probably used to justify the English presence in Ireland, as a feminine race needed a more reasonable masculine race to govern it.

*La Revue des Deux Mondes* presented Ireland to the French as if it was an intermediary, a translator. It dealt with literature, economy, Anglo-Irish relations, but many aspects of the situation in Ireland were left aside, even if the portrait seems more thorough than in *L'Avenir*. Both journals sympathised with the Irish people, blamed England for the situation even if they did not subscribe to every Irish action. But their image of Ireland was biased and determined by the situation in France. The rediscovery of Ireland was framed by the attempts to redefine the French nation, which had been dislocated and disunited by the Revolution. In other words, Ireland was imagined by French people along the characteristics they chose to ascribe to it. According to *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, both countries had a lot of common points but France was a “reasonable” country, contrary to Ireland (Anon., “O’Connell” 665). We may wonder why the journalists from *La Revue des Deux Mondes* wrote so much about Ireland and tried to present the Irish fight for freedom as an example to be followed in France.

Ireland, or the image constructed of Ireland, was used as an example to inspire French people. Many articles in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* thus presented famous Irishmen. A series of three articles by Philarète Chasles and Charles de Rémusat dealt with Edmund Burke and his writings. Burke was represented as the defender of the oppressed. He never let Ireland down and criticised the Penal Laws more or less openly despite his prominent position in England. The poetry of his discourses was also hailed despite a tendency towards “fancy and pathos” (Chasles, “Burke” 629-661; Rémusat, “Burke (1)” 209-252; Rémusat, “Burke (2)” 435-491).<sup>8</sup> An article by Hippolyte Taine dealt with Jonathan Swift and his ability as a pamphleteer and a poet. According to Taine, Swift had invented a type of satire to defend Ireland more efficiently (869-904). Such rhetorical qualities and such involvement were to be emulated in France. In 1820, the French historian Augustin Thierry prompted his fellow countrymen to follow the example of Thomas Moore, who constantly praised his country and its wonders (121). For Thierry, praising the national spirit was a great means of mobilising people into action and uniting them under the same flag. He thought that art could help reason and courage in times of crisis. Ireland was thus presented as a source of inspiration for French people in a number of respects: celebrating the glory of the nation, uniting the people, renewing faith and reform. In 1843, *La Revue des Deux Mondes* devoted a thirty-page article to Thomas Moore. According to it, Moore strikingly shared and expressed the feelings of his fellow countrymen. He was the voice of the nation representing faithfully “the feelings, the passions, and the instincts of the people.” He perfectly expressed the fact that Ireland had neither a past nor a present because everything had been taken away. His work was deeply Irish and thus less universal than that of his friend Byron (Dudley 695-696).

Moore’s patriotism was perceived to be as strong as that of any politician. His *Melodies* seemed to include all the elements needed to retrace the events of Irish history,

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8 Burke’s opinions on the French Revolution were also criticised.

but they were songs of captivity, of nostalgia, and had no equivalent in France. Ireland was a “country of memories”; France was a “country of hope” (Lasteyrie 806). Only enslaved and oppressed nations could fully understand Irish suffering. Yet, *The Melodies* seemed to be the collective work of an entire people because of their deeply national quality. Here was an expression of national unity that did not exist as such in France.

The Catholic faith reinforced this sense of unity. *L’Avenir* described Ireland as an example to follow because it had resisted English oppression for centuries. French Catholics should try to emulate this search for unity. France had been far too individualistic since the Revolution of 1789. People should unite under the guidance of religion to defend order and the general interest. The Irish fight for freedom and the link that existed there between God and liberty was seen as proving the fact that religion strengthened social ties. Such ties were the only tangible elements in this period of change (Lammenais, “De la separation” 155-156). Ireland and France had similar problems including hunger, corruption, inequality, and immorality. But such problems were perceived as more acute in Ireland (Chasles, “Le roman” 1006-1007). The real issue both in Ireland and France was to give a new moral impetus to the population, to give it examples to follow.

*L’Avenir* obviously felt sympathy towards Ireland and the fight for Emancipation there. But Ireland also showed the way to unity to an over-individualistic country such as France. Ireland was a good example of how a people should unite to achieve its aims. The journals stated that the main author of this unity was Daniel O’Connell. In *L’Avenir*, O’Connell was portrayed as a liberator, somebody to draw inspiration from for the renewal of French Catholicism and for bringing it closer to the people. He was also seen as a symbol of the possible reconciliation between the spirit of Catholicism and liberal modernity, between tradition and modernity in general. Montalembert’s address in 1847, when O’Connell came to France, shows the fascination he inspired: “You are our master, our model and our glorious preceptor [...] You are not only the man of a nation; you are the man of Christendom” (“Visite” 2). For Montalembert, O’Connell personified the victory of faith and liberty.

In *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, O’Connell was also portrayed as a central figure. Over a fifteen-year period (from 1829 to 1843) four articles were dedicated to him and many others mentioned him. He was presented as the “champion” of the Irish cause, leading Ireland towards freedom. His talents as a “popular orator” were emphasised: he was able to communicate with the masses; he understood them (Anon., “O’Connell” 670). The journal built up a sort of myth of the liberator and agitator, comparing his public speeches to the tides of the sea or a tempest.

Both journals praised O’Connell’s moderation and his advocacy of legal reform instead of violence. This was important in the aftermath of the French Revolution, because many people feared a new outburst of violence in France. He was depicted as a political hero whose fight for democracy was firm but non-violent, contrary to that of

John Mitchel<sup>9</sup> for instance. Beaumont thought O'Connell was the best example of what modern politics should be. His moderation, inspired by Catholicism, enabled him to use the Catholic Association as a pressure group and push for Catholic Emancipation without violence (contrary to the French Revolution) and guide the masses away from barbarity. He was the best example that it was possible to combine perseverance and passion, force and prudence. This new form of action avoided the unexpected consequences of an unsuccessful insurrection even if it did not have the instant effects of a revolution: "He is a man who, without the military or civil force, manages by the sole force of reason and talent to free his country peacefully and to dominate as it were the government that his country depended on" (Duvergier 38). He allowed the democratic spirit to develop without any violence. The example of O'Connell also confirmed Montalembert's belief that progress without violent revolutions was possible.

This was a good example for France to follow. John Mitchel, on the contrary, was depicted as a man who had a taste for violence. He was not a revolutionary *à la française* according to Montégut in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* (901-902). Mitchel supported revolutions and the republic not because it would help spread the rights of man but because they were a means to producing new political institutions. He had revolutionary instincts but no democratic feelings.

O'Connell's ability to preside over popular movements was strongly underlined. He was declared the "king of the people" or the "orator of democracy." According to *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, he frequently borrowed Moore's verse in his addresses, thus perfectly illustrating the link between past and present. His ability to handle the disorganised masses thanks to his talents as an orator was widely admired (Anon., "O'Connell" 672; Mars 1022). The representation of the masses in political life was becoming crucial in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Political leaders did not know how to organise a crowd's instinctive reactions. A man like O'Connell knew how to make the masses follow him, probably thanks to a certain *mise-en-scène* of his "monster meetings"<sup>10</sup>: "In Ireland as in France, the masses are theatrical; keen on decorations and costumes, they follow their instincts – they have no principles" (Chasles, "Le roman" 1021). This statement by Philarète Chasles shows that the masses inspired both fascination and repulsion in French politicians. O'Connell was portrayed as the advocate of the oppressed people vis-à-vis the kings and the tyrants. The masses were excluded from the ballot but they could be represented anyway through O'Connell as an intermediary. His talent to lead the crowds inspired

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9 John Mitchel was one of the leaders of Young Ireland and of the Irish Confederation. He was believed to encourage insurrection even if his editorials in *The United Irishman* show that he favoured passive resistance to English oppression.

10 The term "monster meeting" was coined by *The Times* during the campaigns for Catholic Emancipation (1823-1829) and for the Repeal of the Act of Union (1829-1847) led by Daniel O'Connell. It referred to the impressive number of people that the orator managed to gather at each demonstration venue.



French republicans such as Ledru-Rollin or Etienne Garnier-Pagès, who wanted to unite the poor and the middle classes around such a symbol of republicanism. They idealised O'Connell until they realised in 1843 that he was anti-republican. His decision not to go ahead with the monster meeting at Clontarf after the government's interdiction deeply disappointed French republicans.

In the course of the 1840s, the admiration for this popular hero gave way to his rejection as a liar and a demagogue. O'Connell's campaign for Emancipation had been described as proof of his spirit of modernity. But the campaign for the Repeal of the Act of Union of 1800, according to *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, was a form of attachment to the past, a utopian and nostalgic ideal that would destroy the nation. Ireland was still poor in spite of Emancipation because of the ongoing fight for Repeal: "Political fever agitates and devours it" (Anon., "O'Connell" 696).

O'Connell was compared to French orators such as Marat or Lamartine, who were equally eloquent and popular. But there was no room for an O'Connell in France, because France was not Ireland. According to Lamartine, the Revolution had "removed all the barriers that had separated [France] into three or four different peoples"; there was a "uniformity of patriotism and the fusion of all interests in a common interest" (Mars 1022). The confrontation between these constructed images of Ireland and France enabled the French to reappraise their self-image. In comparison with Ireland, there seemed to be virtually no internal divisions in France.

The image constructed of O'Connell corresponded to the needs of the parties that exploited it.<sup>11</sup> O'Connell was thus depicted as a sort of hero to be taken as an example of what could be done to fight for freedom within the limits of legal action. The myth of the "Liberator" was used as an inspiration to reconstruct the French national spirit, as the situation in Ireland reminded the French of what had happened in their own country at the end of the eighteenth century. Such a myth thus integrates both elements from the past and ideas that appealed to the people in a period of doubt and change, as it is fundamentally a memory, but also a guide to action (Carbonell and Rives 10; Eliade 93, 166). This is how French leaders and journalists thought they could respond in a creative way to their country's situation.

The French had sympathies for Ireland, their age-old ally in the fight against England. Journalists also found common points in the struggle for freedom the two countries had engaged in. But the image constructed of Ireland and its heroes was taken from a set of stereotyped images used in the press and in political speeches. France was thus depicted as a more reasonable country than Ireland would ever be.

According to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the foreigner can be defined as a sort of "empty space" that we try to fill in ourselves as we know what we belong to, but we do not know who the others are. French journalists depicted the Irish fight for

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11 See Colantonio on French images of Daniel O'Connell and how they were used by various parties in French political debates.

freedom as necessary but violent, judging its defenders as utopians resisting the movement of modernity. The latter were thus perceived as unreasonable and threatening, even more so because Ireland was a small island. According to Paul Ricoeur, the smaller the communities, the more threatening their minorities. Getting inspiration from the Irish fight for freedom but also rejecting certain aspects of the 'Irish mind' prompted the reconstruction of the French national spirit. A definitely progressive spirit emerged, turned towards the future, contrary to the stereotypical image of nostalgic Ireland.

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