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# Beckett, Music, Intermediality

## *John Tilbury's Worstward Ho*

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### Abstract

The topic of 'Beckett and music' has gained considerable attention in recent years. In previous work I have argued that music in Beckett's plays does not, as some have suggested, exist beyond or exceed the ambiguities of body, knowledge and subjectivity that are apparent in other aspects of his work, but rather that its use parallels and reinforces these processes. If this kind of intermediality, involving music, operates already in some of Beckett's work, how does it manifest when musicians work with or in relation to it? This question is addressed through a discussion of John Tilbury's version of *Worstward Ho*, for piano, recorded voice and electronics.

### Résumé

Le thème de 'Beckett et la musique' a fait l'objet d'une attention considérable ces dernières années. Dans des travaux précédents, j'ai soutenu que—contrairement à ce que certains l'ont suggéré—la musique dans les pièces de Beckett n'existe pas au-delà des ambiguïtés liées au corps, la connaissance et la subjectivité qui dominent d'autres aspects de son travail, mais plutôt que l'utilisation de la musique opère en parallèle et renforce ces ambiguïtés. Si ce genre d'intermédialité, impliquant la musique, est déjà à l'œuvre dans certains textes de Beckett, comment se manifeste-t-il lorsque des musiciens travaillent avec ou en relation avec elle? Cette question est abordée ici à travers une discussion de la version de *Worstward Ho* que John Tilbury a conçue pour piano, voix enregistrée et électronique.

### Keywords

Beckett – intermediality – music – piano – audio technologies – subjectivity

The topic of 'Beckett and music' has gained considerable attention in recent years. In particular, monographs by Michael Maier, John McGrath and myself, and edited volumes by Mary Bryden, and Sara Jane Bailes and Nicholas Till, have explored the role of music in Beckett's work and the musical qualities of his writing. This work has included considerable discussion of the various ways in which Beckett's plays, prose and poetry exhibit forms of word-music intermediality. Perhaps the most obvious manifestations of this occur when words and music appear alongside each other, with actual music used in his plays (whether recorded music or snippets sung by characters), or in the odd cases where musical notation is inserted into texts (such as in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* or *Watt*). More pervasive, though, are two kinds of relationships with no actual use of musical materials; language remains the sole signifying system, but intermedial referencing takes place either explicitly, through discussions of music or other textual references to music and musicians, or implicitly and imitatively, with the language taking on musical qualities. Beyond even this are instances in which Beckett's formal (and even sometimes his thematic and/or expressive) devices exhibit generic qualities or structures found in music as much as literature but without an origin being attributable to one medium or the other.<sup>1</sup>

Here, there is no adopting of musical forms, as such; rather, the relationship lies in Beckett's use of certain kinds of formal patterning—most notably, repetitive patterns of similarity and difference—that are found in some music but cannot be considered inherently musical or literary in themselves. This is apparent, for instance, in the structures of quasi-repetition and difference that we find in many of Beckett's later texts, in which the language is at once fragmented into its basic elements and has a rhythmic flow: a generative, propulsive momentum. The opening words of *Worstward Ho*, building from the implications of its initial monosyllable ("on") and its negation ("no"), provide a good example: "On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on" (7). The more fragmented the writing becomes, the more musical its effect. The stutters, sputters, gaps and repetitions that express both the impossibilities of language and its necessity—its procrastination on the threshold of its own ending—also exploit the resonant and rhythmic qualities of words and syntax. Both are deeply founded in language, predicated on fundamental linguistic relations, but also deeply musical, in the kinds of motivic patterning of the sounding qualities that emerge.

1 For a full typology of intermedial word-music relationships (broadly, not specifically to Beckett), see Wolf (2002). For a more extensive discussion of the different manifestations of music (and musicality) in Beckett's work, see Laws (2013).

Beckett's writing is, then, often already intermedial in its exploitation of the complex and ambiguous relationship between language, musicality and meaning. Within this, the significance of listening is also notable, both generally but more specifically when Beckett focuses on listening to music. In the later work, particularly, there emerges a particular foregrounding of the conscious act of listening in and for itself. Beckett repeatedly observed that, as he grew older, the sense of hearing was becoming more important to him: "There is always something to listen to," he told Charles Juliet (1955). The image of the listener, usually with head in hand, is frequently a focus of attention in his plays, poetry and prose. Sometimes, as in the television play *Ghost Trio*, Beckett dramatises the act of listening to music. Elsewhere it is a voice to which we are (explicitly or implicitly) directed. This can be the voice of a reader, as in *Ohio Impromptu*, or the protagonist's own recorded voice, as in *Krapp's Last Tape*. Often, though, the voice is ambiguous, emerging from the darkness without clear origin or identity; it is perhaps the listener's own voice—the unstoppable voice in one's head—or that of another, real, imaginary or remembered. What is striking in all these instances is that it is the listener and the act of listening that Beckett foregrounds. We concentrate on what it is to listen, as much or more than on the subject who speaks or the object that produces sound. And in doing so, we experience the dramatisation of our own acts of listening; our own attempts to find meaning in sound. Significant here is also the mediated quality of sound and its affective quality: quite how we receive music, through various technologies, and what it comes to mean to us. These matters are, as is discussed below, subsequently relevant to how musicians have, in various ways, taken up Beckett's work in, or absorbed certain of his ideas into, their practices. In this sense the intermedial condition of Beckett's own work feeds into subsequent, creative, intermedial responses.

In previous work (especially Laws 2013) I have argued that music in Beckett's plays, does not, as some have suggested, exist beyond or exceed the interrogation of body, knowledge and subjectivity that is apparent in other aspects of his work, but rather that its use parallels and reinforces these processes. In most cases it is Romantic music, especially that of Beethoven and Schubert, that we hear, but the particular ways in which Beckett uses the music, filtering it through different recording technologies, taking it up in different voices, cutting it up and restructuring it, all undermine the tendency to hear it simply and transparently, as purely affective; a source of succour or means of transcendence.

In *Ghost Trio*, for example, Beckett uses the expressivity and the formal symmetries of the second movement (Largo) of Beethoven's Piano Trio (op. 70,

no. 1), “The Ghost,” in the same way as he does other elements of the play, positing them provisionally only to undermine their stability. We look and look again at the scene, zooming in and out, scrutinising as if to render its meaning and our relation to it palpable, and Beckett does something similar with the music, fragmenting it and recomposing our experience of it. Anna McMullan writes that in his television plays, “Beckett’s work interrogates this drive to possess or ‘get hold of’ reality via mediated images” (168); I would argue that there is a parallel process in the use of the music, in which listening back, over and over, to fragments of recorded music that carry particular affective content, operates as one more means to try to produce and reproduce virtual selves—selves that are fragmented and reproduced as ‘others’; more versions of the ‘I’ as a ‘not I’—but this time manifested aurally: to latch onto and recapture the self through affective memory located in much-loved recorded musical performance.

Further co-opting McMullan’s work on Beckett’s visual technologies, the various audio technologies, whether the tape recorder in *Ghost Trio*, the LP in *All That Fall* or the televisually mediated voice in *Nacht und Träume*, act as instruments in service of “a kind of prosthetic imagination” (168). Moreover, this affords the audience a particular connection: music becomes one of the means by which Beckett undermines the distinction between the inside and the outside of the plays, demanding the watcher-listener’s imaginative engagement with the creative ambiguities of agency and affect.<sup>2</sup>

Christopher Balme defines intermediality, as “the attempt to realize in one medium the aesthetic conventions and habits of seeing and hearing in another medium” (2006). From this position, these plays are truly intermedial. The music is not background music, primarily transitional or illustrative, but acts within the plays’ interrogations of their own capacities. Moreover, sound and music, with their associated technologies, in Beckett operate to layer past and present, the ‘here’ and elsewhere, and to undermine the distinctions between the live and mediated, between body and imagination.

If this kind of intermediality, involving music, operates already in some of Beckett’s work, how does it manifest—if it does—when musicians work with, or otherwise respond to, Beckett’s texts?

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<sup>2</sup> This is discussed more fully in Laws 2013.

### John Tilbury's *Worstward Ho*

In order to start to consider this, I will briefly examine a Beckett-related performance by pianist John Tilbury. Now in his eighties, Tilbury has had a long career, dedicating himself primarily to the performance of experimental music<sup>3</sup> and free improvisation. He has worked closely with many composers, especially British and American experimentalists, including John Cage, Christian Wolf, Terry Riley, Earle Brown, Cornelius Cardew, David Bedford, Howard Skempton, Dave Smith, Michael Parsons, John White and Michael Finnissy. He has given many premieres around the world and has made many acclaimed recordings. He is also well known as an improvising pianist through his membership of AMM, one of the most distinguished and influential free improvisation groups to have emerged in the 1960s. Additionally, Tilbury is the author of an extensive biography of the life and work of Cornelius Cardew, *Cornelius Cardew (1936–1981)—a life unfinished* (2008). Through all this, he has for decades been a key figure in experimental music: primarily its practice, but also the philosophies and politics that surround it.

Over the last twenty years, Tilbury has (with various collaborators) developed realisations of a number of Beckett's texts: *Cascando* (2001), *Rough for Radio 1* (2001), *Three Late Poems* ("Tailpiece," "Brief Dream" and "Go where never before"; 2010), *Imagination Dead Imagination* (2009), *Ping* (2009), *Worstward Ho* (2011), *Stirrings Still* (2016), *Sans* (2017), and *what is the word* (2017).<sup>4</sup> These pieces came about partly through Tilbury's experience of acting: having enjoyed amateur dramatics early in his life, he was persuaded by a family

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- 3 While there is considerable debate over definitions of 'experimentalism' in music, Tilbury's formative work in this field was in the 1960s and 1970s, when the influence of John Cage and other New York School composers (Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown) was particularly significant. While these composers each took very different approaches, key characteristics of their work—often still considered fundamental to experimental music more broadly—included a focus on composition as creating contexts for musical interaction, in which some aspects of the outcome were not fully determined and were therefore in certain respects unpredictable. This often left certain decisions about the musical content to performers, frequently involved the use of unconventional forms of notation (including graphic and instruction scores), and was generally more concerned with defining the processes by which the music would be produced than all the details of the final performance outcome. For a historical account, see Nyman; Jennie Gottschalk's *Experimental Music Since 1970* examines the more recent context.
- 4 The dates of composition given for *Rough for Radio 1*, *Imagination Dead Imagination* and *Ping* are informed guesses, on the basis of documented performance and recording histories, plus Tilbury's comments. However, Tilbury notes that his memory of the dates is a little vague (personal communication, October 2019).

friend to return to acting much later, in his sixties, and this led to various performances of both Pinter and Beckett, notably, more recently, to films by Jayne Parker of his performances of *Krapp's Last Tape* (in which he was directed by his fellow composer and friend, Howard Skempton, 2001) and ... *but the clouds* ... (2009).

Tilbury has spoken of his decision to start making piano-based versions of some of Beckett's works, saying that he started to feel an urge to "do my Beckett as a piano player" (2017). In many respects this seems a strange decision, not least for someone who so clearly appreciated the musicality of Beckett's language—its "sheer musicalness," as Tilbury put it in interview (2017). Bringing the grand piano into the scene of performance—its size, mechanics, culture and history all so particular and so imposing—was certainly not an obvious step. Certainly, some of Tilbury's long-term musical friends and collaborators were also interested in Beckett, occasionally themselves producing Beckett-related compositions.<sup>5</sup> More significantly, however, Tilbury says that the impetus to start making Beckett-based musical performance came from his sense that what he was doing on the piano "chimed in more with what I understood he [Beckett] was doing or trying to do" (2017). Tilbury characterises this in terms of the "fragility" of both Beckett's work and much of his own piano performance—as an improviser but, in particular, in his long-term association with the music of Morton Feldman. In interview, he linked his "strong empathy" with Beckett to his sense that his work as a pianist was very much bound up with both fragility and failure (Tilbury 2017).

This relationship bears further scrutiny. Tilbury worked directly with Feldman during the composer's lifetime, and has given numerous performances and made many recordings of his piano music. Of course, all piano playing requires attention to details of touch, tone, dynamics and pedalling, but much of Feldman's music operates within a very narrow, extremely soft, dynamic range, often at the borders of what is possible in terms of quiet piano sound, sometimes over very long periods of time; the piano piece *Triadic Memories* (1981) lasts around 90 minutes, and *For Bunita Marcus* (1985) a little less.<sup>6</sup>

5 Examples include the composers Michael Parsons, Christopher Hobbs, John White, Dave Smith and Gavin Bryars. Composer Howard Skempton, also linked to this group, published an article about Morton Feldman's Beckett-based opera, *Neither*.

6 These are by no means Feldman's longest pieces, though, with his *String Quartet 11* usually lasting at least five hours, sometimes longer. Feldman's move to composing longer and longer pieces was driven by his sense that musical form had become a "paraphrase of memory" (Feldman 1985, 127); that music was too often rooted in creating and subsequently fulfilling or denying expectations, focused on processes of memory rather than qualities of musical sound. By extending his works beyond conventional, assimilable durations, he hoped to move

Feldman liked to compose at the piano, often with his head very close to the instrument, listening carefully to the decay (Bryars and Tilson Thomas); he said that sound as a physical fact kept him from floating off into an “intellectual daydream,” guarding against an abstract compositional idea of how the piece would sound, at some remove from the acoustical reality (Feldman, 2006). As a result, in performing Feldman’s music the pianist must, perhaps more than ever, scrutinise the sound she or he produces, alert to the most subtle relative qualities of sound across considerable lengths of time. Fragility is therefore central to the experience of this music, as a listener but also as a performer: the repeated playing of the music gradually accumulates awareness of the ways in which the music not only resists stability but is in part ‘about’ the direct experience of sound in the moment of its perception: ‘about’ its own undecidability, its own contingency and performativity.

This is also a matter of failure, perhaps, and Tilbury has commented that “the idea of failing better was something I felt I could relate to very strongly” (2017), both in the experience of improvising, with its extreme contingencies and ongoing attempt to find the ‘right’ sound in the moment, and in playing Feldman’s music. Piano performance is, of course, always an experimental business, in the sense that pianists can never take their instruments with them. This experience is particularly acute when it comes to playing softly: pianists practice *pianissimo* technique, but the minutiae of the differences in key and hammer action mean that the technique has to be subtly adjusted for different pianos and across the range of the instrument. Moreover, as Tilbury himself has noted, the mechanics of the instrument are such that, unlike with many other musical instruments, the pianist is never entirely in charge of the sound: “you play a chord and you can sustain it, by means of the pedal, and then it’s really out of your control. You can kill it, by lifting the pedal, but the very complex way that it disintegrates and changes—you have no control over that whatsoever” (Gardner 2006). These are, of course, issues that pianists (and, to different degrees, other musical performers) confront all the time, but in Feldman’s music such matters are brought to the fore: the fragility of sound, the uncertainties of its perception and its unstable functioning in our memories are, in part, its subject. In this sense, while Feldman is known as an experimental composer, we might consider the process of practising and performing Feldman itself experimental, defined in Cage’s (1955, 13) terms (and later elaborated by

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listeners beyond any initial expectations that his quiet, uneventful music was bound to grow into something else, and towards a different kind of listening, oriented towards sound and the more local patterning and resonance of the musical fabric.



Michael Nyman; 1999, 1–30) as oriented towards situations with unknown outcomes. Performing Feldman is also always a matter of failure: to an extent, the pianist will always fail to play this music consistently as softly and evenly as is ideally required, over long periods of time: that is impossible.

This, then, suggests an underlying connection between the performativity of failure in Beckett and aspects of experimental music performance, especially on the piano. However, Tilbury's performances are not purely piano—they are not 'translations' into piano sound of aspects of Beckett's work. Rather, he often uses his voice alongside the piano: the pieces become a dialogue between text and piano. In his performances (and the forthcoming recording) of *Worstward Ho*,<sup>7</sup> for example, the recorded text, spoken by Tilbury, is played back while Tilbury provides a musical counterpart on the piano. *Worstward Ho* is, of course, one of those texts in which Beckett's paradoxical art of failure is most explicit, summed up in the much quoted lines "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better (7). Here, then, the fragilities of experimental piano playing are brought up against this most fragmented and fragile of texts. However, what particularly interests me here is how the fractured, provisional embodied agency mapped by Beckett's text is manifested intermedially, in the dynamics of presence and absence effected by a live but non-speaking performer interacting physically, through the piano, with a recorded voice.

Tilbury first made this "musical version" (as he calls it) of *Worstward Ho* in 2011, at the age of 76; as Tilbury points out in his programme note for the performance, he was one year older than Beckett was when he wrote the text. Tilbury plays the piano but also occasionally uses additional sound-making objects (for percussive sounds, for example). We hear a recording of him speaking the full text: the performance lasts over 80 minutes. Notably, Tilbury made the recording some time after he suffered a stroke that left him with a slight speech impediment. While barely noticeable (especially due to the particular treatment of the voice, explained below), Tilbury often struggles slightly to enunciate certain words. For example, in sibilant-heavy phrases the sounds are sometimes a little extended and flow into one another (as with "if needs must," for example). Alternatively, some lines are delivered with particular attention to their articulation, producing a slightly pedantic effect: this happens with "mere most minimum." Such instances are subtle but nevertheless underline what is already composed into the text: the impression of struggling to find the right words

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7 The first performance of Tilbury's *Worstward Ho* was given at St Margaret's Church, Whalley Range, Manchester, on 11 June 2011.

and put them together, with an associated emphasis on the sounding qualities of the language. Tilbury has commented that he felt encouraged towards the idea of performing *Worstward Ho* by the very fact of these residual speech difficulties: "I felt that he [Beckett] wouldn't mind that; ... that he would have no objection" (2017). Of course, near the end of his life Beckett himself developed aphasia, and he also translated "Comment dire," written subsequently, into English for the actor Joseph Chaikin, who had been left with aphasia following heart surgery. Laura Salisbury considers the relationship between Beckett's textual poetics and his experiencing of this condition (78–79), but also situates this aphasic writing in the context of modernist approaches to fragmentation, discontinuity and failure (108–120). Tilbury's condition is not the same, but the broad points are applicable: the material condition of Beckett's language, sometimes fractured and stuttering, sometimes flooding and flowing, is marked by the tremors of the interaction between brain and speech mechanism. Its sonic materiality and its processes of production are evident in performance, perhaps more particularly in this case.

In this performance, then, we see an old man at the piano who listens to and plays in response to an old man's voice. Members of the audience might already know that the recorded voice is Tilbury's, but that is surely not the point: we do not see or hear the man actually speak live, and hence the voice is separated from the piano player. That the two are identical is neither clear nor denied. It could be that this is, as is so often remarked upon with respect to Beckett's work, the voice in the head—the performer's voice in his head—and hence a form of split self: an 'I' and a 'not I.' But the ambiguity remains. The present 'I' makes himself audible only through the piano; this becomes his 'voice'—his mediating technology of self—while the 'actual' speaking self is mediated electronically, relayed through speakers.

In certain respects the voice and piano operate in dialogue with one another; a dialogue of presence (pianist) and absence (voice). The word-music relationships often work this way, with recurrent composed correspondences between the two. Tilbury made a structural analysis of the text, dividing it into eleven sections and considering the ways in which certain words ("bones," "mind," "child," "ooze," "place") are featured in each of those parts (Tilbury 2011). This analysis led to his composing particular phrases, harmonies or using certain articulations to characterise the sections, but certain words are also assigned what Tilbury calls a "musical image" (2011): a short motif or phrase that becomes associated with a word and recurs, as a kind of leitmotif, across the piece. Some of these operate almost like conventional musical word-painting: for example, the word "bone" is linked to the use of a clattering rattle, "plod" provokes a plodding rhythm, "groan" is accompanied by a piano groan in the

form of a lowish, detached cluster with the notes released unevenly, and so on. With others there is no such onomatopoeic relationship (and there could not be in many instances, when the words are more abstract): for example, the various references to body parts have no predictable correlation. Overall, then, as Tilbury has written, “the relationship between word and music is subjective but not arbitrary” (2011).

The text of *Worstward Ho* is both fragmented and propulsive, combining extreme compression and ellipsis with a dynamic, gestural structure of accumulation and negation (as is apparent in the opening words, quoted above). With no location or context, no characters, back stories, or hinterland of any kind, the text evolves in and through the process of its own reading: “the reading time equals the narrative time,” as Tilbury puts it (2011). By mapping the music to the structure of the text, Tilbury retains this strange, simultaneous sense of timelessness, from the lack of context, and ‘now-ness,’ from the performative sense of groping through the words, evolving each phrase accumulatively and then dismantling it into silence.

As such, the dynamic between text and music is in certain respects very apparent. We know, of course, that the text was written first and the music added, yet the processes of composition mirror the text in such a manner that, in listening, the music is not experienced as secondary; one acts as the counterpart of the other, with the music achieving a certain autonomy, something that Tilbury stresses in relation to this piece, but also with regard to his other Beckett-related compositions (2017; 2004). However, in certain respects the relationship between piano and voice is more complex than is implied by the above discussion. The recorded voice is not simply relayed by a PA system, heard distinctly from the piano music, but is fed through a number of small transducers inside the body of the piano. This means that when the pedal is down, the spoken text provokes specific resonances from the instrument, according to the frequencies and dynamic level of the voice. These resonances are, then, additional to anything Tilbury actually plays on the instrument.

This has two effects. Firstly, it simply gives the voice an additional overtone depth and musicalisation that emphasises its produced, mediated nature: it makes it harder to receive the voice as in any sense a natural or authentic presence, drawing attention to its recorded status, its composedness and its ‘past-ness’: its particular materiality and its memorial qualities. The extensive reverberations produced by these effects are contrasted with their sudden cutting off, when the pedal is released, leaving us with no sound of any kind. Overall, the particular use of reverberation and its contrast with silence seems to draw out the self-conscious, reflexive quality of the text, which is about the

process of its own making; the building of something from nothing. Moreover, ideally this production is heard in surround sound, with multiple speakers all around the audience. This means that while watching the pianist on stage, observing him at a distance, the listening experience is, in contrast, immersive, with the voice and piano emanating from positions around the space (and the listener), from various combinations of speakers. In my experience of the live performance, as the sounds built up around me, through the phrases, with additional echo and reverberations generated by the voice and piano frequencies, the effect was transportative, as if I was taken elsewhere, deep into some other space with a different acoustic: into the location of this voice. But the sudden release of the piano pedal, cutting the sound off completely, returned me, each time, to the 'here,' violently jolting me back to the acoustic of the performance space. This layering of the here and elsewhere, present and past, seems to me to echo that of Beckett's own use of audio technologies, as discussed earlier.

Secondly, when the voice provokes extra frequencies directly from the piano it manifests as a kind of piano-voice; a merging of vocal frequencies with related piano overtones. We hear this very clearly at certain times, especially in sections where the piano playing is very sparse; a good example is the very opening where, additionally, much of the piano material is in the low range, and hence the overtone effects are especially strong. However, it also means that often when Tilbury plays the piano, the instrumental music and co-mingled voice and piano resonances are additionally combined. Thus, even while voice and piano remain broadly speaking quite distinct entities, in aspects of the texture their frequencies combine interdependently, one producing additional overtones from the other.

The identities of the textual and piano voices are, then, simultaneously differentiated, heard in counterpoint to each other, but in other respects merged. Sonically, this matches the presentation of the split subject of the man, seen and heard separately as absent voice and present body, but with implications of identity. We see the man 'playing'—or playing with—the words that are themselves about the play of language, the attempt to 'say' things into being. This is nicely captured by Tilbury's description of his feeling that, in performing *Worstward Ho*, he somehow plays his own voice: "I'm performing, I'm playing an instrument, using in one sense my vocal cords and in another my fingers on the keyboard" (2017). Both the piano and voice are technologies of self; both apparently 'express' the individual and yet, in the process of becoming material, they are suddenly other, 'not I': desubjectified material—words and music—for manipulation. This is something that Beckett himself shows us time and again, in his writing and in also his use of mediating technologies. Overall,

then, Tilbury's music provides a parallel to the original text, his compositional, performance and sound production decisions further drawing out the fragile, complex mapping of fractured subjectivity.

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