

Another World... Inside This One: Wilderness, Eternity, and American Continental Philosophy

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Abstract

Continental philosophy has maintained an abiding interest in transcendence; however, that interest has been shaped by the geographical, historical, and cultural milieu in which continental philosophy developed. But today “continental” philosophy is pursued beyond the boundaries of continental Europe, and it behooves us to ask what might be contributed to phenomenological and hermeneutic accounts of transcendence by traditions rooted in other places, other continents. Some of the first distinctive philosophical contributions of North America—“philosophical” in the sense that term is used in “Western” philosophy—are to be found in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau, in particular, gave voice to a very different view of transcendence. Thoreau and those thinking in his wake—Henry Bugbee, Annie Dillard, and others—think transcendence in terms of nature, particularly wilderness, in terms of contact, and in terms of wandering or itinerancy. Here transcendence is less about trans-ascendance and its focus on another world, and more about a mode of living deeply in this world.

Keywords: Immanence, transcendence, wilderness, abstraction, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Bugbee, Annie Dillard

Within me, even the most metaphysical problem takes on a warm physical body which smells of sea, soil, and human sweat. The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh. Only then do I understand—when I can smell, see, and touch.¹

NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS, *Report to Greco*

¹ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, trans. P.E. Bien (New York: Touchstone, 1965), 43.

The holiness of the real
Is always there, accessible
In total immanence.²

KENNETH REXROTH, "Time Is The Mercy of Eternity"

CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY HAS LONG BEEN concerned with the question of transcendence, a fact attributable in part to the historical significance of phenomenology and the legacy of debates surrounding transcendental idealism, the *epoché*, the status of the world and of other people, and, at least for some philosophers, the question of God. The question takes different forms in Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas, Derrida, Marion, and others working in this tradition, but it remains an abiding concern for each of them. Over time the persistence of this issue has formed a body of work that constitutes a kind of center of gravity—one among several—that characterizes continental thinking.

However, as with any gravitational body, the question of transcendence tends to attract satellites that follow relatively predictable orbits. For example, one persistent focus in continental accounts of transcendence is the question of how the other, as other, can appear to us, which is taken up in Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, and elsewhere. This concern with appearance is, again, no doubt a function of the legacy of phenomenology. A second characteristic of continental accounts is the tendency to think of otherness primarily in the form of persons, whether human or divine. The concern with persons is certainly a function, not of phenomenology, but rather of the Judeo-Christian milieu in which continental European philosophy developed. Neither of these foci—how the other appears, or the tendency to focus on the otherness of persons—can be said to be universal in continental thinking, but they are, broadly speaking, characteristic of the way in which we have come to think about transcendence.

However, both of these emphases are traceable to a context or environment that is, we must concede, contingent. The scope of continental philosophy is still influenced by what I have characterized as the gravitational pull of a single continent, Europe, and that during a rather narrow timeframe, the latter half of the 20th century. This is not to dismiss, in any way, the significance of the thought that arose in that time and in that place, much of which is undeniably profound. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Serres, Marion, and similar figures are read because they are brilliant and insightful, not because they happen to be European.³ Rather, it is to

² Kenneth Rexroth, "Time Is The Mercy of Eternity" in *The Sierra Mountain Writings*, ed. Kim Stanley Robinson (New York: New Directions, 1944), 76.

³ Or because they happen to be male, French, German, heterosexual, and so forth. Nevertheless, the argument that continental philosophy is enriched by a conscious attempt to play continental (European) philosophy in the key of different places (North American, the West, Asia, Africa, New Zealand, etc., etc.), could be made equally well for the need to

recognize—with hermeneutics, another core continental development—that context matters, and that every thinker, caught up in the hermeneutic circle, is in some measure a reflection of his or her time and place. But if this is true, what is the significance of the fact that the 20th century is no longer our time? And the fact that, for many “continental” philosophers, Europe is not our native place? What we think of as the core of continental philosophy bears the mark of World War I and the Lost Generation, of World War II and the Shoah, and of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation; but new phenomena and experiences mark our time, and characterize our dwelling in our own places.⁴

In the interests of expanding the scope of reflection on transcendence in continental philosophy, in what follows I want to think about what might be contributed to our thinking from a different continent. And since I do not presume to speak from all traditions, times, places, I’ll bracket for the moment any attempt to address a different tradition (e.g., Buddhist) or time (e.g., by limiting myself to contemporary thinkers), and concentrate on reflecting on what might be contributed by thinking from a different place: North America. Nevertheless, as I don’t mean to sever my reflections from the springs of continental philosophy, my references will draw from both sides of the Atlantic. As Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in his famous oration, “The American Scholar,” in seeking to make genuine and distinctive contributions to philosophy or literature, one must both serve an apprenticeship to “the past,” learning what truths it has to teach, and be deeply attuned to “nature,” the concrete particulars of one’s own place in the world.⁵

The strand of American philosophy I want to develop—there are certainly others⁶—is relevant for thinking about transcendence in continental include other kinds of otherness in the “continental” canon. Again, this is not to endorse relativism by suggesting that all approaches and expressions are equal. Additionally, I cannot emphasize strongly enough, given recent political developments in my own country, that my concern here has nothing to do with a blustering nativism. If Thoreau should be read by continental philosophers, it should be because his contribution is *both* (i) novel (i.e., not part of the same milieu as the continental canon) *and* (ii) brilliant or insightful. The former, lacking the latter, is not worth sustained attention during a limited life. But the latter, lacking the former, runs the risk of staleness at least and myopia at worst.

⁴ Thus, I hope to problematize the concept of “continental” philosophy insofar as that term has generally come to mean continental *European* philosophy. Surely if we took phenomenological method or hermeneutic awareness and planted either in the soil of Sri Lanka or Shanghai, the themes, emphases, and foci they developed would differ in meaningful ways from those same traditions as developed on the continent of Europe. Put otherwise, it is perhaps time philosophers began to think about “continental” philosophy (phenomenology, hermeneutics) beyond “the” continent (Europe).

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 53-71.

⁶ Thus, “American” philosophy, including the version of it I pursue here, is just as problematic as “continental” philosophy. I think there is good reason to think of the tradition and style of thinking I develop in this essay, a tradition associated with the ideas of wilderness, is distinctively American and emblematic of the American character. However,

philosophy both because it shares traits with more traditional continental thought and because contributes something new to the conversation. The shared traits facilitate communication between different thinkers, while the novel or divergent traits insure that there is something worthwhile to talk about. My claim—that transcendence is always found and experienced in and through immanence—is hardly original; it is expressed in various forms by thinkers including Nietzsche, Proust, Woolf, and others. Nevertheless, by cleaving close to the work of American thinkers like Henry David Thoreau and Henry Bugbee, I hope to develop a particular expression of that insight: that nature, and particularly wilderness, offers us a mode of access to transcendence that is generally underappreciated in continental philosophy.

I. Thinking Poetically

There are, of course, multiple avenues through which we might inquire into the character of American continental philosophy; but a convenient place to begin can be found in the work of Henry Bugbee. Other American thinkers—Emerson, Thoreau, et al.—share some of Bugbee’s sensibilities and insights, but Bugbee provides a useful point of contact with continental European philosophy insofar as he was engaged more explicitly in dialogue with Gabriel Marcel and others.⁷

Bugbee spent the greater part of his professional life teaching in Montana, after being denied tenure at Harvard on the basis of insufficient publication, a problem greatly exacerbated by the fact that Bugbee’s own brand of “experiential reflection” was alien to the academic standards of the institution.⁸ Insufficient quantity of publication was the stated cause for his termination—Bugbee was very well liked at Harvard, and W.V.O. Quine described him as

it is not uniquely so. If, as Wallace Stegner claims, the frontier and the West shaped the American character and as a consequence American literature and philosophy, the same could be said with equal validity of, for example, the African-American experience, history, and narrative (slavery, the Civil War, the civil rights movement, etc.). There are various other examples.

⁷ Of course Thoreau and, to an even greater extent, Emerson were also influenced by European thought; but, following the spirit of Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” they were both also self-consciously engaged with an attempt to develop distinctively American philosophical expressions. Thoreau was also particularly influenced by South Asian philosophical and religious thinking, at least insofar as it was available to him; and this also moderated the influence of the dominant European traditions of his culture. Despite “The American Scholar,” Emerson was still very much an intellectual in the European mode, or at least an image of it. Thoreau, however, was something altogether *sui generis*.

⁸ See Henry Bugbee, *Wilderness in America: Philosophical Writings*, ed. David W. Rodick (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 3. Also see, as the most characteristic example of that “experiential reflection,” Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

“the ultimate exemplar of the examined life”⁹—but the style of his thinking and writing were undoubtedly contributing factors to the leisurely production and mixed reception of his work. Bugbee’s major work, *The Inward Morning* (completed after he left Harvard), is a meditative reflection that reads like a crossing of Marcel’s *Metaphysical Journal* and Thoreau’s *Walden*; it bore little resemblance to the ordered arguments and logical style that were even then coming to dominate the academy. Bugbee’s work does not frame itself as a dispute, nor does it drive for closure. As such, it echoes the style of *The Embers and the Stars*—written by the Czech philosopher Erazim Kohák while he was teaching at Boston University and living in an isolated cabin in New Hampshire—which the author warns us does “not [seek] to ‘prove a point’ but to evoke and share a vision,” his primary too is “the metaphor, not the argument,” and the end result is “not a doctrine but an invitation to look and see.”¹⁰ Bugbee believed that while we can experience and reflect upon existential truth, it is not comprehensible in the sense that we cannot “attain any kind of permanent hold upon it.”¹¹ We can come to understand it more fully and more deeply, but we cannot fix it with precision. Consequently, he came to recognize that, for him, the best philosophy was in the end “an approximation to the poem.”¹²

In his celebrated *Senses of Walden*, Stanley Cavell asks, “Why has America never expressed itself philosophically?”¹³ The question is, of course, ironic because Cavell believes that America has expressed itself philosophically, and has done so in a particularly American idiom.

In looking for “American” philosophy, one might be inclined to point to Pragmatism, and not without reason. While Peirce, James, and Dewey were in dialogue with European philosophy they were certainly original thinkers. And the emphasis on the “use” or “cash-value” of ideas does seem to resonate with one stereotypical image of the American character. Fair enough. But a generation or more before the rise and influence of pragmatism Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalists were at work. The difficulty is that, especially in the modern academy, Emerson and Thoreau do not really appear philosophical. The environment that made Harvard so unworkable for Bugbee, despite the goodwill of his friends—an environment that treats philosophy as a kind of “all-purpose solvent” for solving an increasingly narrow set of problems, and demands “correct,

⁹ Bugbee, *Wilderness in America*, 2.

¹⁰ Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), xiii.

¹¹ Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 30.

¹² Bugbee, *Inward Morning*, 33. I take this to be a result of a quasi-hermeneutic recognition that the truths with which we are here concerned are ones that we speak of in ways that are, at best, indirect and approximate. A kind of “theo-poetics,” to use the terminology recently adopted by Jack Caputo. See John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

¹³ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 33.

scientific, abstract, hygienically pallid”¹⁴ expression—is precisely one that cannot recognize the philosophical contributions of thinkers like Thoreau and Bugbee. And this, I’d suggest, applies to a wide variety of American philosophical figures. Thoreau is more often studied in English departments than in departments of philosophy, despite the clearly philosophical nature of his reflections. Bugbee’s meditative journal is forgotten by all but a small core of admirers, despite the fact that they record the reflections of someone more or less universally viewed as wise by his colleagues from diverse philosophical traditions. Cornel West’s contributions are marginalized not only by the fact that he is an African-American intellectual, but by the fact that he stubbornly refuses to conform to a narrow scholarly paradigm. A list of American philosophers marginalized by the American academy would be long, and would include many distinguished figures.

Theoretically, however, continental philosophy—with its emphases on perspective and context, and its acceptance of indirect, elliptical, even poetic expression—should be more open to engaging figures whose work defies standard academic categories.¹⁵ I’ve already noted that Bugbee’s *Inward Morning* closely resembles Marcel’s *Metaphysical Journal*. But a tradition that embraces the eccentricity of *Circumfession* and *Eyes*, or the sweeping scope of *The Five Senses* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, should have little problem with the idea that valuable philosophical truths might be expressed otherwise than syllogism or abstraction.¹⁶ A stylistically diverse, meditative, and open-ended style of philosophy is the first characteristic I want to associate with the stream of American philosophy I’m engaging here; and this is a characteristic it shares with some of the best work in continental philosophy as traditionally conceived.

¹⁴ Martha Nussbaum, complaining about the rigid confines of the analytic philosophical community in which she found herself as a young academic—appropriately enough, at Harvard. See Martha Nussbaum, “Form and Content” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 19.

¹⁵ Certainly analytic philosophy has its own particular value and virtue; and I have learned and continue to learn a great deal from reading analytic philosophy and engaging my analytic colleagues. So the emphasis on continental thought here is not intended to be dismissive of the analytic tradition as a whole. However, because analytic philosophy is pursued in a manner that tends to emphasize abstraction and disinterested rationality, it also tends to downplay the significance of history, language, culture, and place. In a word: context. It matters little whether analytic philosophy is pursued in Oxford or Oklahoma, since disinterested reason functions similarly in either locale. Therefore, there is in principle nothing distinctive about *American* analytic philosophy. The same cannot be true for continental—that is, phenomenological and hermeneutic—philosophy, or at least that is my wager.

¹⁶ *Circumfession* is part of Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993). Michel Serres, *Eyes*, trans. Anne Marie Feeberg-Dibon (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1987).

II. Thinking Concretely

A second distinctive characteristic of this form of American philosophy—one that it also shares with key figures in the continental tradition, and one that bears on the issue of transcendence—is its allergy to abstraction. Or, stated otherwise, a commitment to a kind of immanence. Thoreau, Bugbee, and others of their ilk are deeply rooted in the concrete—everyday experiences of the carnal body in the material world.¹⁷

Abstraction is the process by which we take an element of reality and separate it from the whole in order to study it. This happens, for example, when I view a young person in one of my classes *qua* student, or when a land manager looks at an environment in terms of resource extraction. In instances like these, the abstraction helps us to focus on something useful or important and to learn about it. However, while abstraction is not misleading *per se* it can metamorphose, eventually succumbing to what Gabriel Marcel calls the “spirit of abstraction.”¹⁸ The spirit of abstraction takes hold when we forget that abstraction *is* abstraction: when we begin to think of the abstraction as *the* truth, or when we mistake the part on which we have focused for the whole from which it was abstracted.

As Marcel says, “it can happen that the mind, yielding to a sort of fascination, ceases to be aware of these prior conditions that justify abstraction and deceives itself about the nature of what is, in itself, nothing more than a method.”¹⁹ The power of abstraction lies in its ability to help us to understand—more precisely, with greater detail, and so forth—due to the focus that it allows. However, abstractions can lead to their own *misunderstandings*, missing the forest for focus on the trees, and at worst becoming “a violent attack directed against a sort of integrity of the real.”²⁰ Abstraction is a powerful tool or step in the process of understanding; but the original unity of experience must be recouped by what Marcel calls a “second reflection,” which reinserts, as it were, the abstraction into the whole that is its natural environment and within which it has meaning.

Abstraction has become common in many philosophical enterprises, and this is no less the case in our thinking about transcendence. In his Gifford Lectures, Marcel insists that whatever we mean by “transcendence” we cannot mean “transcending experience.” Understanding the experience of transcendence may be fraught with all kinds of difficulties; and it may be

¹⁷ *The Inward Morning* covers a great deal of ground for such a short book, but Bugbee insists that one of his major tasks was overcoming abstraction (Bugbee, *The Inward Morning*, 10.). An allergy to abstraction is also evident in the other major American philosophical innovation: pragmatism (William James, John Dewey, Cornel West).

¹⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1967), 155 ff.

¹⁹ Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, 155.

²⁰ Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, 156.

that such experiences approach ineffability—which is precisely why talk of genuine transcendence is more likely to resemble poetry than physics. However, the otherness of transcendence cannot be so otherworldly so as to preclude carnal, embodied experience of it in the actual, material world: “There must exist a possibility of having an experience of the transcendent as such, and unless that possibility exists the word can have no meaning.”²¹ This, of course, means that we cannot think clearly about transcendence without thinking about the experience of particular people in the particular places they inhabit.²²

American thought develops these commitments—against abstraction, for embodied experience, and for the relevance of place—in distinctive ways. However, given the limitations of space, I will focus on what is perhaps its most distinctive characteristic vis-à-vis European thought: the commitment to nature, and particularly to “wilderness.”

III. Thinking Transcendence

Stylistic diversity and an allergy to abstraction represent points of contact between this type of American philosophy and at least some figures in continental philosophy; but the third characteristic I want to highlight is the source of a relatively novel contribution, at least for continental thought, to our thinking about transcendence. If the first two characteristics together suggest that continental philosophy *can* open itself to American philosophizing in the tradition that flows from Thoreau through Bugbee, Dillard, and others, this third characteristic gives us a reason that it *should* do so.

²¹ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, *Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser (London: The Harvill Press, 1951), 46. The need to experience transcendence is not unrelated to Kierkegaard’s insistence on the necessity of the incarnation: if God is absolutely other than man, then humans cannot encounter or relate to God (cf. the “absolute paradox” of *The Philosophical Fragments*). We can only experience that which is experience-able. Of course, for his part, Marcel was still very much committed to a traditional distinction between the immanent and the transcendent, one that emphasizes a vertical rather than a horizontal “going beyond.” On the other hand, he expressed some reservations about the term “trans-ascendence,” used by Jean Wahl and by Levinas (*Ibid.*, 45).

²² Experience is more or less meaningless when “abstracted from intimacy with the lives of persons” (Bugbee, *Inward Morning*, 30). This is because experience is not an object that can be held before us in order to be examined. We are caught up in experience, which is less like the “absorbing into oneself” of an object, as in the consumption of food, and more like “straining oneself towards something, as when, for instance, during the night we attempt to get a distinct perception of some far-off noise” (Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, 47). Thus, while Marcel insists on the possibility of experiencing the transcendent, he does not thereby mean that the transcendent is comprehensible. The transcendent, by definition, refers to that which is beyond: “There is an order where the subject finds himself in the presence of something entirely beyond his grasp. I would add that if the word “transcendent” has any meaning it is here—it designates the absolute, unbridgeable chasm yawning between the subject and being, insofar as being evades every attempt to pin it down” (Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 193).

(a) Wilderness

While Bugbee's commitment to experience and the concrete shares many similarities with Marcel's, his own philosophy is expressed in a distinctive idiom. For Marcel the intersubjective relationship remains his central theme, which often, and rightly, draws comparisons between his thinking and the thought of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Human relationships play the pivotal role in his discussion of presence, reciprocity, creative fidelity, mystery, being, and apropos to my theme here, transcendence. This, I've suggested, is characteristic of a number of philosophers working in the continental (European) tradition.

However, while Bugbee's philosophy parallels Marcel's in many ways, the dominant motif in his work is not the intersubjective relationship, but the experience of *wilderness*. In this respect Bugbee's approach draws on a tradition that includes Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, and other American thinkers more than on Marcel and European philosophy. The framework of wilderness gives Bugbee's thinking a distinctively American tone, one in which nature, wilderness, and the West serve as orienting experiences and ideas. Marcel himself describes Bugbee as a "man who has been steeped in the Far West," even as he engaged continental European philosophy and explored in various ways Zen, Buddhist, and East-West comparative philosophy.²³ It is this resonance with "the West" that is emblematic of the American philosophy I am exploring here, for as Thoreau writes: "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild."²⁴

²³ Gabriel Marcel, "Introduction to the 1958 Edition" of *The Inward Morning*, 17. Bugbee's interests in comparative philosophy and Zen gesture toward another characteristic of American philosophy: spanning a continent and touching two oceans, the U.S. "faces" Asia as much as it does Europe. See also Ed Mooney's "Introduction" to the same: "Bugbee shows us how philosophy consorts with poetry, biography, and history to unveil our worlds, configuring them narratively and imaginatively. His journal anticipates comparative East-West philosophy and religion in its attention to doctrines of 'no-self' and karma as well as Zen, and it is allied to phenomenology and continental philosophy as it intersects American philosophy in the tradition consolidated by Emerson and Thoreau, and sustained by the work of John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Wallace Stegner and Gary Snyder" (ibid., xx). To this I would add the potential for additional fruitful encounters between Bugbee (as well as Emerson, Thoreau, Cavell, et al.) and Kohák, Ricoeur, Serres, and other European thinkers.

²⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walking in The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 609. The emphasis on wilderness—especially those manifestations of wilderness found out-of-doors, in the woods and mountains—is borne out in various images and tropes of wandering, pilgrimage, and travel. This is no doubt in part an artifact of the American experience of its western frontier. That American thinking, narrative, and mythology are shaped by "wilderness" is not a new claim. See, for example, Roderick Nash's seminal *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001). But while Nash argues that "wilderness" is an idea, figures like Wallace Stegner argue that the physical landscape of the West actually shapes its inhabitants—their aesthetics, their ethics, even their metaphysics—in a manner not unrelated to the topic of transcendence. To be of the West is to have an appreciation for the "inhuman" scale of nature, both spatial and temporal.

But if wilderness is the dominant image and experience in Bugbee's thought—and one prominent in American thought more broadly—we must be careful not to read that term in *merely* literal manner, which would distort its full resonance. Wilderness indicates more than vast swaths of terrain unpopulated by humans. Bugbee's wilderness includes such environments to be sure, but for him wilderness—or, as Thoreau would have it, wildness—is much more commonplace. If wilderness can be found in deep forests, rugged mountains, or stark deserts, it is there paradigmatically, not uniquely. Bugbee insists that wilderness is also “close at hand” and it “invites our participative response in terms that are everyday.”²⁵ Wilderness is present everywhere reality exceeds our grasp—in what we cannot comprehend or, better, what we cannot control.²⁶ It is in this manner that Thoreau can find “wilderness” in his bean field, just a few miles outside of Concord, and in commonplace, even domesticated, animals: a woodchuck, a squirrel, a cow leaping over a field fence to escape an enclosure.

It would be impossible to fully unpack the idea of “nature” or “wilderness”—terms that remain hotly contested among environmental philosophers—in so brief an essay. Here, suffice it to say that “wilderness” is in its broadest sense the underlying, fundamental reality in which we find ourselves; we can be blind to this reality, and certain sorts of environments may overlay it in ways that make it more difficult to discern, but it is never wholly absent from our experience of the world.

We might say that wilderness is a manifestation of what Marcel called the “mystery of being,” that aspect of reality that we can never fully comprehend, both because it is inexhaustible and because we are inextricably implicated within it. Mysteries, in Marcel's sense, are problems that “encroach on their own data,” which is another way of articulating the hermeneutic

The temporal encounter with what is sometimes called “deep time” in the geology of the Grand Canyon or Yosemite; and the experience of unbounded space in a land where the sky “[comes] clear down to the ground on every side... full of great weathers, and clouds, and winds, and hawks,” a land that teaches us something from “looking a long way, from looking up, from being much alone” (Wallace Stegner, “The Wilderness Letter” in *The Sound of Mountain Water* [New York: Penguin, 1980], 152). This appreciation for “the inhuman” is evident in many thinkers of the American West, but is perhaps most powerfully present in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers.

²⁵ Edward Mooney, “Introduction” to *The Inward Morning*, xi. This commitment to the everyday is broadly evident in American thinking. “No ideas but in things,” wrote William Carlos Williams in *Paterson I*, an American poet who consciously chose to stay Stateside and plumb the depths of an apparently unexceptional small city, rather than follow the pattern of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and others by moving to Europe. Nevertheless, despite his commitment to wilderness in the everyday, Bugbee's own journal is distinctly oriented toward paradigmatic examples of wilderness. His is a “philosophy of the open air,” to use Marcel's characterization (Gabriel Marcel, “Introduction to the 1958 Edition” of *The Inward Morning*, 26).

²⁶ Thus, Michel Serres's emphasis on “the hard” is surely an aspect of wildness. See note 29.

insight that we never occupy a “view from nowhere” from which we can experience the totality objectively.²⁷ For this reason, mysteries, unlike problems, are not aporia we aim to eliminate or solve. They are, rather, realities we experience and attempt, imperfectly, to understand.

To express this in yet another vocabulary, one more congenial to mainstream continental thought, we might say that wilderness is a condition characterized by an irreducible otherness.²⁸ This is because mysteries confront us with a reality in which we are inextricably involved but which exceeds us on all sides and which resists, in varying ways and degrees, assimilation into the comfortable sphere of the same. We participate in wilderness, we are immersed in and present to it; but it always exceeds and in some sense resists us.²⁹

(b) Contact

In 1846, in the middle of his two-year retreat at Walden Pond and seeking an even more direct experience of wilderness, Henry David Thoreau set out on a journey to the Maine woods with the goal of climbing the remote Mount Ktaadn. He believed, echoing Melville and Nietzsche, that “the tops of mountains are among the unfinished [i.e., wild] parts of the globe, whither it is a slight insult to the gods to climb and pry into their secrets, and try their effect on our humanity. Only daring and insolent men, perchance, go there.”³⁰ On Ktaadn, Thoreau found what he was looking for: wildness that struck him with wonder and fear, the full range and measure of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

On the ascent, caught in poor weather, Thoreau experienced wilderness as alien and threatening: “[Here, Nature] does not smile on [humanity] as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you... Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother?”³¹

²⁷ Marcel, *On the Ontological Mystery*, 19.

²⁸ On the connection between mystery and otherness, see my *Aspects of Alterity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

²⁹ The image of a phenomenon that “resists” us is one that evokes not only “otherness,” including the “inhuman scale” of Stegner’s West, but also Michel Serres’s account of “the hard” (*le dur*). Hard reality is that reality to which we must accommodate ourselves, as opposed to soft (*le doux*) reality that we are able to bend to our needs or wants. Wildness is a way of speaking about those aspects of the world that resist our control, phenomena to which we must conform rather than bending them to our will. True, there are aspects of reality that remain “wild” in even the most advanced urban centers. Earthquakes, droughts, the coyotes and mountain lions that cling tenaciously to their homes in the local mountains—all this wildness exists right in the heart of Los Angeles, where I work. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that human beings exert much more control over their surroundings in Paris than they do on the Patagonian icecap or the Artic National Wildlife Refuge.

³⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 65.

³¹ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 64

However, his reflections on the descent call into question his initial reaction to the alien otherness of the wild:

we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear, and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on.... What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! ...Talk of mysteries! – Think of our life in nature, – daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact!*³²

Thoreau wants to experience the “mystery,” whether that mystery proves to be “mean” or “sublime.” As he says of his retreat to Walden Pond:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, which I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.³³

Thoreau also wants “transcendence” of a sort; but he is committed to the idea that it can only be found in immanence: “Contact! Contact!” Here it is precisely the density, hardness, and otherness of things that gives rise to their transcendence, and to our experience of transcendence. Eternity in the everyday.

If “wilderness” and “wildness” are, in part, ways of talking about otherness, it is in the context of an otherness that is, as John D. Caputo claims, the way in which continental philosophy speaks of “the real.”³⁴ Wilderness—which is beyond our comprehension, and resists our attempts to pin it down, fix, or control it—is reality which we cannot ultimately escape, reality to which we must accommodate ourselves rather than reality that we bend to our will and shape to suit our wants. It is an aspect of “the real” that we can try to ignore or elide, but which we can never fully escape and therefore must take into account.

³² Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 71.

³³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 90-91.

³⁴ John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 181.

Clearly this resonates with the thinkers I am describing. For his part, Thoreau is quite explicit:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake...³⁵

And Bugbee adds: "I want neither objectivism nor subjectivism... but realism."³⁶ But the "realism" toward which we are groping here is not one that is susceptible to a reductive materialism or a facile positivism. It is, rather, a commitment to the real and to immanence in a manner that, precisely, opens us to the experience of transcendence.

Only as things are dense and opaque do they stand forth in the light of eternity, and take the light. To take that which exists as existing, and not as a symbol for something else; to find something to which someone gives full heed, and not merely to push right through it in search of a beyond, or to have from it only a message at once directing the mind away from it and on to other things; such is the experience of things as eternal...³⁷

So the realism at stake here is precisely one that unfolds toward—or, better, *into*—the transcendent. Not the transcendence of another world *beyond* the world, but another world *within* the world.

Here we might take a cue from a philosopher who was American by circumstance rather than birth, a European expatriate who was educated and spent much of his professional life in the United States before returning to the Czech Republic: Erazim Kohák. Kohák draws a distinction between two overlapping but distinct orders—the order of temporality and the order of value. The order of temporality is one that we experience in largely causal terms, one which connects the present to the past from which it came and the future into which it will flow. In the order of time, we work and plan, calculate and accumulate. This despite the fact that such planning cannot prevent loss in the flow of time, "where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal" (Matthew 6:19). In contrast, the order of value is revealed when we glimpse the present moment "not in its relation to what preceded and what will follow it, but in its absolute being—in its relation to what, clumsily, we describe as eternity."³⁸ Here calculation is impossible, because what is given

³⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* in *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 350.

³⁶ Bugbee, *Inward Morning*, 168.

³⁷ Bugbee, *Inward Morning*, 163.

³⁸ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 82.

exceeds our capacity to receive it. As Nicolas Bouvier comments, reflecting on one such experience during a cold sunrise on a remote and lonely road east of Erzurum: “In the end, the bedrock of existence is not made up of family, or work, or what others say or think of you, but of moments like this when you are exalted by a transcendent power that is more serene than love. Life dispenses them parsimoniously; our feeble hearts could not stand more.”³⁹

In such moments, even the hardest of hard realities—our finitude and mortality—become “a matter of indifference.”⁴⁰ Far from the inauthentic flight from our being-toward-death that so fascinates the early Heidegger, these moments represent the full assumption—whether conscious or not—of our creatureliness.⁴¹ The finitude and frailty of the moment into which eternity breaks—this particular landscape, these ephemeral conditions, this mortal participant—enhance rather than detract from the phenomenon and the experience of it. In such moments, life “superlives.”⁴² The sufficiency, the plenitude, of such moments is the effect of eternity erupting in the flow of the temporal: the extraordinary in the ordinary, heaven on Earth. And while, absent additional faith commitments that would require a move beyond a phenomenology of experience into a theological eschatology, these experiences cannot quite bring us to “mock” the victory of death in the order of temporality, attending to these experiences can certainly lessen or remove death’s “sting” (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:55). In such moments, we come to recognize and appreciate the fundamental goodness of being, and, with Mrs. Ramsey of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, to believe and to feel, that “it [the glimpse of eternity in the everyday] is enough.”⁴³

³⁹ Nicolas Bouvier, *The Way of the World*, trans. Robyn Marsack (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2009), 95.

⁴⁰ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume VI: Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 257. This is the calmness amidst the uncertainty and, indeed, the chaos and brutality of life (i.e., wildness) that Melville’s Ishmael describes: “...amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwavering woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy” (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988], 399).

⁴¹ Here we might find a point of connection between more traditional religious accounts of transcendence and the tradition running through Thoreau, Bugbee, and others. Recent thinking in the Catholic Church has foregrounded the problems associated with losing sight of our creatureliness. To my mind, this is the central message of *Laudato Si’*. Climate change and other environmental injustices are terrible phenomena; but, in the end, they are really just symptoms of a deeper spiritual illness having to do with our desire to “be like gods” (Genesis 3:5) and to deny our creatureliness. An excellent bridge between a kind of Thoreauvian emphasis on our animality and a Catholic-Franciscan emphasis on our creatureliness might be found in the writing of Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Holy the Firm*, etc.).

⁴² Michel Serres, *Variations on the Body*, trans. Randolph Burks (London: Continuum, 2008), 15-16.

⁴³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Dublin: Roads Publishing, 2013), 73. Woolf, at times an aggressive atheist, nevertheless described such moments as “partaking in eternity” throughout *To the Lighthouse*.

(c) Wandering and Wondering

But eternity breaking into the everyday is not something we experience simply by walking out the door, nor is it, strictly speaking, something we can accomplish through our efforts. Rather, it is something more or less out of our control, which is why wildness is, on some level, the appropriate metaphor. It is something for which we can, at best, put ourselves on alert, increasing the chances that when the doors of perception swing open we will be properly oriented to step through. For the thinkers we have been considering—committed in various ways to realism, sensuous experience, and material place—transcendence unfolds not because we escape one place for another, but rather because we see the places we already inhabit with “new eyes.”⁴⁴

We accomplish this, first by *exposing* ourselves to the wilderness and, second, by *letting go* of our desire to dominate or domesticate it.

Thoreau claimed to suffer from spiritual and physical malaise if he failed to attend to his daily walks through the woods around Concord, which often occupied four or more hours of his day.⁴⁵ He referred to these outings as “sauntering,” the meaning of which he linked, tellingly, both to *saint terre* (holy land) and to *sans terre* (without a land or home). This spiritual exercise was one of the primary means by which he immersed himself in and experienced wildness, whether those treks were on paths around Concord or deep in the Maine woods.⁴⁶

For Thoreau, sauntering was more than just walking from place to place; it was a process of stepping away from society and of losing oneself so that nature, wildness, could show itself and speak. When we walk, we aim to get somewhere, and so we choose a destination, make plans, chart a course, and forge ahead. But when we saunter we aim not to get somewhere else, but to be more fully where we already are: “It is no use to direct our steps to the woods if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit.”⁴⁷ In the village—to say nothing of the city—we see ourselves, humanity, reflected back at us from every direction. Here man is not only

⁴⁴ As Thoreau says, “There is just as much beauty visible to us in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate, —not a grain more” (Henry David Thoreau, *Autumnal Tints* [Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1996], 58). Here again Kazantzakis appears to agree with Thoreau, Dillard, et al: “Since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes which see reality” (Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, 45).

⁴⁵ For other accounts of walking philosophers, see Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2014).

⁴⁶ I do not mean to impute to Thoreau any orthodox religious commitments; he grew to bristle at Unitarian orthodoxy, and it is difficult to know whether one should classify him as a Deist, a pantheist, or something else entirely. Nevertheless, he clearly falls into religious categories in the sense in which they are often used philosophically by figures like John D. Caputo, Richard Kearney, and others.

⁴⁷ Thoreau, *Walking*, 597.

the measure, but also the architect, of all things. And, as Blake points out, “he who sees only the Ratio sees himself only,” while “he who sees the infinite in all things sees God.”⁴⁸ True, there is wildness, otherness, even in the city; but that mystery is more apparent and more accessible when we step outside, away from climate-controlled environments and cornucopian dining tables, away from the security and shelter of home, away from well-ordered and policed society.

The saunterer declines to impose her will on the process, and allows the environment—the weather, the topography, the flora and fauna that share the landscape—to direct her steps: “I believe there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright.”⁴⁹ This mysterious beckoning was, for Thoreau, Bugbee, Muir, and others gravitationally aligned with “the West”—that is, away from ordered and domesticated society and toward wildness, otherness, mystery. Thoreau likens his peregrinations to the unknown paths of non-returning comets and to the mysterious rhythms of migrations, the latter—bison, salmon, baleen whales—so deeply emblematic of the American West. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that, for this stream of American thought, philosophy begins in *wander*.⁵⁰

The homelessness of such wandering is not that of certain medieval pilgrims, who walked on pilgrimage as if the Earth were merely a bus stop en route to paradise, a world into which we were exiled when we were expelled from our true home. The homeless of sauntering—which Thoreau likens to being at home “everywhere,” that is, in nature—serves to remind us that “there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in our philosophies,” or in our politics, economics, and sciences. It reminds us to give thanks for the gift and goodness of the greater whole of which we are a part, even if aspects of that mystery’s whole are terrifying, rather than resting comfortably in well-worn surroundings in which mystery is (relatively) absent. But the otherness of the wilderness can never be absolute, even in a storm on the summit of Mount Ktaadn, because wilderness is the condition of a world in which we are also at home, a world to which we belong.⁵¹

But we must do more than “wander” to experience transcendence; the classical philosophical commitment to “wonder” retains a central place in this tradition as well. “Nature,” writes Annie Dillard, “is very much a now-

⁴⁸ William Blake, *There Is No Natural Religion*. Note that the “series a” and “series b” versions of the etching plates seem to suggest diametrically opposed views with respect to human knowledge, “series a” being committed to a thoroughgoing empiricism and “series b” criticizing the limitations of empiricism.

⁴⁹ Thoreau, *Walking*, 602.

⁵⁰ In its own way a sentiment not far from the perspective associated with Marcel’s treatment of man as *homo viator* (Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, trans. Emma Crawford [New York: Harper and Row, 1965]).

⁵¹ See, for example, Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Counterpoint, 2010), 31.

you-see-it, now-you-don't affair."⁵² Our experience of it is that of a world concealing, revealing, and concealing itself again. Transcendence, eternity in the everyday, is possible anywhere and at any time; but one must be, as it were, on alert. Otherwise, like the brief incandescence of a shooting star, we miss it.

Having left the relatively ordered and controlled environment of the city or town for a path and the open sky, and having given up a rigid agenda about where one is going and how one will get there, it still remains to saunter with a wakeful disposition, to use another of Thoreau's favorite tropes. Alertness to the possibility of transcendence requires that we "let be" the things of the world so that they can show themselves to us; and it requires that we "let go" of our own attempts to impose meaning on them, that we listen rather than dictate.⁵³

Later in life, Thoreau became more and more interested in science, and spent most of his time in painstaking observation and documentation of the environment around Concord. However, he recognized that even the relatively hands-on science of his day was steering him perilously close to something like the spirit of abstraction; and he struggled to reconcile what we might call his earlier poetic and even mystical tendencies with his growing commitment to empiricism. At stake in this tension is the distinction between what Dillard thinks of as two types of seeing. The first type of seeing is one tied up with verbalization. This seeing pays close attention, observes, describes, analyzes; and it is important. But there is a second sort of seeing, which reveals something obscured by the first, and which involves not effort, but letting go.⁵⁴

Dillard recounts a tale of a girl, blind from birth or a very young age, who, on having her sight restored, described a tree as "full of light," delighting in the beauty and wonder and extravagance of the illuminated world.⁵⁵ Dillard herself works at trying to see the world with this kind of wonder and gratitude, in which "the whole world sparks and flames."⁵⁶ But she

⁵² Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964), 18.

⁵³ On this point, see Michel Serres, *Biogea*, trans. Randolph Burkes (Univocal, 2012).

⁵⁴ The similarities to Proust, as well as to Taoist thinking about *wu-wei*, are obvious. "The only true voyage, the only bath in the Fountain of Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we can do with and Elstir, with a Vinteuil; with men like these we really do fly from star to star" (Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume V: The Captive and The Fugitive*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin [New York: The Modern Library, 2003], 343). Proust's suggestion that "new eyes" are more important than "new landscapes" is, in fact, not far at all from Thoreau, who once observed: "I have traveled a great deal in Concord" (Thoreau, *Walden*, 4). The idea that one could "travel a great deal" in the immediate environs of one New England village suggests that Thoreau's travels, and his wilderness, is internal as much as external.

⁵⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 31.

⁵⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 11.

eventually discovers that such understanding never fully comes from trying or committing oneself to painstaking observation; rather, it comes unbidden when one is *not* trying, when one empties oneself and lets go. This glimpse of transcendence is “always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise... I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam.”⁵⁷ It is only after coming to understand this second sort of seeing that Dillard eventually sees, on one of her own walks beside Tinker Creek, a cedar tree “transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame.”⁵⁸

This is perhaps not unlike the experience of seeing the world both “as if for the first time” and “as if for the last time,” as recommended by Pierre Hadot.⁵⁹ To see “as if for the first time” is to see with innocent eyes. Not in the sense that the seeing is non-hermeneutic—a “view from nowhere”—but rather in the sense of seeing as a child does: with wonder. “A world with dew still on it,” as Stegner had it.⁶⁰ Seeing “as if for the last time” requires that we recognize both our transience and transience the things we experience. This gives rise to the melancholy pathos of *mono no aware* or *lacrimae rerum*, which, seen with the new eyes of transcendence, clarifies and magnifies the utter gratuity of the goodness of being rather than distorting or detracting from it.

When Dillard finally learns to empty herself and to let go, accommodating herself to the second sort of seeing, she writes that she found herself “ringing” or resonating with reality: “I had been my whole life a bell, and never known until at that moment I was lifted and struck.”⁶¹ If there is a unity among the transcendentals, as the medievals maintained, we should remember that it is often beauty that leads us to the good and the true, rather than the true or the good leading us to the beautiful.

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⁵⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 35. Admittedly this is in tension with both Thoreau’s near-obsessive dedication to collecting, categorizing, and describing facts related to his environs, and with modern environmental philosophers like Holmes Rolston III, who suggest that scientific understanding of the natural world helps us to see not only its truth but also its beauty.

⁵⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 36. This is reminiscent of William Blake’s childhood vision of “a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars.”

⁵⁹ See *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, trans. Marc Djaballah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), and *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

⁶⁰ Wallace Stegner, “Haunted by Waters: Norman Maclean” in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 192. Or perhaps a non-comical version of Miranda’s “O wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beautiful our world is! O brave new world, / That has such people in’t” (William Shakespeare, “The Tempest,” Act V, Scene I).

⁶¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 36.

There are, no doubt, other more domesticated ways of experiencing transcendence in the ordinary: Proust's *petit phrase* of Vinteuil or his stumble on the cobblestones outside the Guermantes' mansion, Mrs. Ramsey's dinner party in Woolf's masterpiece, and other similar experiences. But American philosophy in the tradition of Thoreau, Bugbee, and their heirs is attracted to wilderness precisely because we can relate to it as both realists *and* mystics, as empiricists *and* poets. In the wilderness we find a mystery that is rooted in what Serres calls "hard" reality, but in a manner that nonetheless somehow opens or reveals a depth that surpasses the kinds of understanding we normally associate with the hard.

Likewise, individual faith may still hope for other forms of trans-ascendence; but such speculation ought not distract us from the transcendence to which we do have access, here and now: the heaven outside our doors. When Thoreau was on his deathbed, forty-four years old and suffering from tuberculosis, Parker Pillsbury is said to have broached the subject of transcendence in terms of another world: "You seem so near the brink of the dark river, I almost know the opposite shore may appear to you." Thoreau is said to have smiled and gently rebuked his friend: "One world at a time..."⁶²

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⁶² Walter Harding, *Thoreau as Seen by His Contemporaries* (London: Dover, 1990), 101.

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