

# Beyond Conventions: The Nomadic Smooth Space in J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

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**Abstract.** This article traces the processes governing the creation of literary places in J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*. The recognition of elements characteristic of pastoral, anti-pastoral and post-pastoral modes of spatial organisation in renderings of the City of Cape Town and the South African countryside constitutes the point of departure for the analysis. Conventional patterns are questioned and subverted, and ultimately proven unfit for the representation of the moments of social and political distress in late twentieth century South Africa. The novel's protagonist suggestively navigates the interpretation process into the field of postmodern theories of space. The distinction between 'smooth' and 'striated' space proposed by French philosophers Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze establishes a revealing set of correspondences and evinces previously uncovered exegetic layers of the narrative.

**Key words:** J.M. Coetzee; South Africa; literary convention; pastoral; ecocriticism; space; place; city; country; Michel Foucault; Félix Guattari; Gilles Deleuze; smooth space; striated space; heterogeneous; hybridity

Reflections on space/place in the field of Coetzee studies are to a great extent marginal and most often arise in relation to discussions of other literary issues. Generally, there are two distinct critical approaches. First of all, many studies stress the allegorical dimension of the writer's oeuvre and his distrust of realistic codes of representation (Head 1997, Dovey 1988). Other scholarly contributions focus on the novels' rootedness in spatiotemporal, social and cultural circumstances (Gallagher 1991). The intertextual dialogue between Coetzee's narratives and Afrikaner literary culture and mythology has also been widely discussed, es-

pecially in relation to the strictly spatial local genre of the *plaasroman* (Gallagher 1991, Attwell 1993, Kossew 1996, Head 1997, Barnard 2007). Dominic Head traces these textual influences in character construction (Head 1997), Sue Kossew analyses links between power, language and place, while Rita Barnard focuses on ideological and political meanings of place in times of transformation (Barnard 2007). David Attwell combines the two prevailing interpretative tendencies and locates Coetzee's novels "in the nexus of history and text" (Attwell 1993: 2). The purpose of this paper is to fill in the gaps in the extant studies in the discussed area by analysing the processes governing the creation of literary places in the light of postmodern theories of space. The article is limited to the analysis of one narrative – *Life and Times of Michael K* – and constitutes a part of a more extensive study, i.e. my doctoral dissertation entitled "Constructing Literary Places in Selected Novels by J.M. Coetzee."

*Life and Times of Michael K* is a novel about a country in a state of war.<sup>1</sup> This war is not waged against an external enemy, but against the people who live within the boundaries of the same country. The war is presented as a peculiar organism that lives its own independent life and is spurred on by the blind mechanisms of the wheels of history, the "spinning of the gyroscopes of the Grand Design" (Coetzee 2004: 135, 158). Deliberate references to thoughts and ideas which have roots in medieval and early modern European thought and which since the Enlightenment have legitimized the rational and empirical worldview seem to be the foundation on which Coetzee constructs the textual reality of his novel. The concept of Grand Design immediately calls to mind the world picture propagated by Renaissance humanism which reflected cosmic harmony, a divinely ordered system or "a gigantic game where everything is included and every act is conducted under the most complicated system of rules" (Tillyard 1971: 14). Yet Coetzee's renderings significantly challenge the idea of perfect order, creating visions which seem to portray postcolonial unrest in South Africa more fittingly. Coetzee's method involves the use of principles governing processes of creation of textual places typical of varied modes and conventions. Commencing with the depiction of the malfunctioning system (most acutely visible in the image of the diseased city of Cape Town), the ideal order is seen to break down. The attempts to rebuild a coherent world picture from the rubble of the old one with the use of available spatial conventions prove ultimately futile: Coetzee tests pastoral and anti-pastoral modes, probes the possibilities offered by eco-narratives, but they seem ultimately unfit for the purpose of artistic rendering of the South African places. The aim of this

<sup>1</sup> Published in 1983, this novel reflects the strained political situation and social unrest – stemming mainly from the intensification of guerrilla activities and conflicts with neighbouring countries – of the 1980s in the Republic of South Africa.

paper is to demonstrate how postmodern theories of space endorsed by such distinguished philosophers as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari constitute the most helpful and appropriate tools for the description of literary space in the moment of destruction of the established spatial ordering.

Most visible initially, especially on the level of the story, is the superimposition of the structure of pastoral narrative onto the reality of the late twentieth century. The impulse to search for asylum in the quieter and more secluded countryside is one of the most fundamental components of this convention, i.e. the pastoral motif of retreat and return. This formal device serves as an impulse for deeper personal reflection and discovery of certain truths previously obliterated by the reality of the city. As one noted pastoral theoretician noticed, "pastoral place is a place of vision" (Marinelli 1971: 49). However, at one point, *Life and Times of Michael K* strikingly swerves away from the norms of the discussed convention: ultimately the countryside fails to provide a positive comparison in relation to the city. Many specialists in the field of the pastoral agree with Harold Toliver's postulate that "where the potential contrasts between a golden age and the normative world are not exploited, we do not have the dialectical, tensive structure of all worthwhile pastoral" (Toliver 1971: 5). Although in the case of Michael K the move to the country does bring about some kind of relief and revelation, it is not achieved through the idealization of the natural recluse, but by the adoption of a highly individual and distinct worldview, which bears resemblance to the premises of eco-critical thought. If "pastoral refers to any literature that describes the country with an explicit or implicit contrast to the urban" (Gifford 1999: 2), then *Life and Times of Michael K* cannot be included in this category. Consequently, the erasure of the traditionally sanctioned differences between the country and the city distorts the relations which contribute to the creation of these places, rendering them heterogenous and marked by hybridity and fluidity.

Michael K, the titular protagonist and the carrier of the main plot, holds the key to the basic spatial categorization pervading the novel. Coetzee places the major weight of the opposing forces in the novel between what can traditionally be referred to as the 'city' and the 'country'. The transformations K undergoes during his movements through the southwest of South Africa, the intermittent incarcerations and wanderings into the mountains and the veld are the means of exhibiting places variously affected by war. The protagonist's decision to leave the cold and dangerous city for the allures of the countryside, promising milder climate, more space and easier living, allows for the interpretation of these two sites in terms of a pastoral narrative driven by the device of retreat and return. In this dichotomous mode of representation and form of spatial ordering, the city is conventionally the nest of all possible moral vice, the paradigmatic anti-pastoral

site, while the country opens the way to spiritual revival with the prospect of man and nature coexisting in perfect harmony, the idealized vision of pastoral retreat. This traditional contrast, whose historical variations have been minutely displayed by Raymond Williams in his famous *The Country and the City*, seems to be confirmed at the beginning of the novel, in which Cape Town is meticulously portrayed in conventionally negative terms. The vision is nearly apocalyptic: the city is ruled by laws of war and revolution; people are assaulted on a daily basis. The omnipresent chaos takes on various forms, but one of the most violent scenes rendered in the narrative is the description of the siege of the apartment blocks where K stays with his mother. A fierce fight breaks out on the streets, which soon enough escalates into a regular riot: people are severely beaten and shot. War brings destruction and devastation; whole buildings once rich and spruce are abandoned and left to fall into decay. During one of his walks around the neighbourhood, a disturbing vision comes into K's sight: "the devastated area around the old fuel-storage tanks where the demolition of burnt-out buildings had only just begun, past the dock quarter and the blackened shells of the warehouse that had in the past year been taken over by the city's street bands" (Coetzee 2004: 20-21). However, the physical violence and the ensuing destruction are not the only means adapted by the representatives of the State against its citizens.

The existence of the inhabitants generated by the current state of affairs is truly miserable. In their hour of distress, they are met with ignorance and indifference from the authorities. "War from K's perspective," argues Susan Gallagher, is "a disruptive and meaningless event with institutions and structures that allow the strong to triumph over the weak" (Gallagher 1991: 145). Hence the great number of homeless and destitute people with extremely meagre means of subsistence, who roam the city's drab streets begging and thieving. With no safe place to live in, no work to be found, no money to afford what can be bought in the poorly-stocked shops, the inhabitants of the city are often seen "waiting in lines at the relief agencies or simply sitting in the corridors of public buildings to keep warm, finding shelter by night in the gutted warehouses around the docks or blocks of derelict premises" (Coetzee 2004: 13). This vision depicts a considerable sway from what might be considered an ordered existence, and the State is determined to further curb the freedom of citizens. The introduction of a curfew compels people to be in their houses at strictly defined hours; special permission has to be obtained by those who wish to travel to another town or city. The police and armed soldiers control the roads and check anyone who wants to pass through to another district. The feeling of constraint and surveillance is reinforced by the prevalence of closed spaces within the city. The habitat of K's mother, which she shares with her son temporarily, is an airless claustrophobic room originally intended as a store-room.

Low temperature keeps K from falling asleep and often gives him a severe headache. Living in such conditions makes the mother “feel like a toad under a stone” (Coetzee 2004: 9). It is little wonder that K’s mother wishes to leave the dismal reality of the city behind and fantasizes about “escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet, and returning to the countryside where, if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies” (Coetzee 2004: 8). This movement, initiated by the elderly woman, has its beginning in the city and leads to the countryside.

The impulse which leads K and his mother to leave Cape Town is not only the woman’s dissatisfaction with the conditions she is forced to endure. She recalls memories of the childhood she spent on a farm in the interior parts of South Africa, somewhere near the town called Prince Albert. She casts a distinctly sentimental glance towards the past and sees a “pastoral of childhood” (Marinelli 1971: 75) comprising the quiet and relaxed ways of people who live in the countryside. Those days she considers “the happiest of her life, a time of warmth and plenty” (Coetzee 2004: 8). Although their journey to Prince Albert is extremely strenuous, riddled with obstacles, of which the mother’s quickly deteriorating health is the most serious, and devoid of all romantic notions of being on the road, the country harbours a degree of positive potential and in some ways constitutes a favourable comparison with the city. Changes become apparent when K leaves the urban environment for good (which takes place after his mother’s death in a Stellenbosch hospital) and strays off the roads into the South African scrubland – the Karoo. Most immediate is the experience of physical freedom of the protagonist who can go wherever and whenever he wishes to. The material concerns of not having enough money to buy food also disappear when he discovers what he will later realize more fully and consciously, namely that outside the city he can start “living off the land” (Coetzee 2004: 46). Thus he eats moderately: an occasional fruit, seed, or insect. Even the weather conditions seem to improve with each day that K spends in the open-air, basking lazily “in the thin warmth of the winter sun” (Coetzee 2004: 27). It is indeed a contrasting element, taking into consideration the heavy rainfall and damp climate prevalent in Cape Town, once so harmful to his mother’s fragile and failing health. Another source of relief and comfort to K are the pleasant sensations pertaining to the sense of hearing. K becomes easily irritated by artificial noises such as the wail of sirens and hooters, the roar of heavy vehicles or the disquieting buzz of electric appliances. Most of all, he detests radios and radio music. Whenever he hears the “nervous electric rhythms” of the radio, he feels deeply agitated and disturbed (Coetzee 2004: 123). Most of his childhood K spent in Huis Norenius, the ‘educa-

tional' institution for afflicted children where he was constantly exposed to the sounds of radio music. The music supposedly made children calm and quiet, but K seems to have just the opposite opinion of its effects: "The music made me restless [. . .] I used to fidget, I couldn't think my own thoughts [. . .] I used to think about flying [. . .] When they switched on the music I became too restless to do it, to fly" (Coetzee 2004: 133). It seems that for K music is a form of constraint. That is why, when he finally finds himself beyond the reach of the noises of the city and civilization, he experiences deep relief and a kind of bliss. Sitting on a hill in the middle of the veld, K is overwhelmed by the stillness which surrounds him. He thinks that silence is a blessing people should cherish: "He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles and miles of silence; he could understand that they should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity" (Coetzee 2004: 47). It is during his stay in the quieter countryside in the middle of the South African veld, in a place which was formerly one of the big farms owned by white farmer-colonizers of European origin, that K finds appropriate conditions to discover his real self and enjoys brief moments of elation.

This process of self-discovery, the capacity to gain deeper insight into the true nature of things, is one of the components of the notion of pastoral retreat (Marinelli 1971: 11). The most essential lesson that K learns through his escape from the city is "a heightened awareness of the nature of his identity," the awareness that he is a gardener and a cultivator (Kosev 1966: 150). He cannot stop his exhilaration when, finally back in Cape Town, he reminisces of the period spent in the rural area and arrives at the realization: "the truth is that I have been a gardener" (Coetzee 2004: 181). The sudden impulse to till the land overcomes K soon after his arrival at the 'farm.' Without second thoughts and as if driven by some kind of inner force or instinct, K takes passionately to all the activities intended to make the land bear crops. The fieldwork, which can be tedious and not very rewarding, gives K a sense of profound satisfaction: "His deepest pleasure came at sunset when he turned open the cock at the dam wall and watched the stream of water run down its channels to soak the earth, turning it from fawn to deep brown" (Coetzee 2004: 59). A new mission to "make the desert farm bloom" renders his activities light and pleasing and throws him into a joyful mood of anticipation for the results of his efforts (Coetzee 2004: 59). Tasting the first bite of a pumpkin he has planted, feelings of joy and satisfaction combine and K silently mutters a wish to himself: "to live here quietly for the rest of my life, eating the food that my own labour has made the earth to yield" (Coetzee 2004: 113). However, this vision of the country, which allows us to contrast it with the city in quasi-pastoral terms, is only partially true or, to be more precise – is incomplete.

Indeed, the descriptions of the agonies suffered by K in the city, the consecutive transformation and liberating spiritual growth following his escape from the urban into the natural environment, the presence of nostalgic idealisation of childhood memories and the motif of retreat and return create a combination which calls for a recognition of a dichotomy characteristic of the pastoral spatial organisation. In *Life and Times of Michael K* Coetzee projects another, diametrically opposing vision of the country, which no longer supports this interpretation. Descriptions and events which are rich in naturalistic detail and which show the less pleasant but more realistic side of rural life trigger obvious associations with the anti-pastoral convention. According to Terry Gifford, anti-pastoral texts offer a corrective voice in opposition to the pastoral representations, which are "selective, self-protective filters," obstructing the true, more sombre vision of the universe (Gifford 1999: 134). Since they aim chiefly at the verification of the pastoral renderings, they may either criticize the idealising device of all pastorals or voice disappointment with the current economic or social situation. In the case of the former, the natural or rural setting is presented in 'darker colours': sweat and exhaustion accompany all agricultural activity, the landscape is barren and deserted, nature no longer brings consolation and might be dangerous and unproductive. When the anti-pastoral is the voice of social criticism, it mainly attacks the effects of civilizational progress on nature and draws attention to the exploitation of the hard work of farming people. Instead of images of peace, harmony, joy and abundance, anti-pastorals abound in visions of distress, pain, and death.

Perhaps some aspects of the negative image of the rural regions in *Life and Times of Michael K* might be attributed to the fact that the country itself is not entirely free from the influence of forces which seem to have their origins in the city. A well-organised system of roads incessantly controlled by police and army patrols, roadblocks regulating the flow of people, and the web of rehabilitation and resettlement camps extend into the hinterland landscape. Each time K wishes to travel without being questioned or stopped he leaves the road and enters the zones in which wilderness dominates: the South African veld, the hills and mountain ranges. But is this environment an ideal place where the weather is mild and benign, where nature and man live in quiet harmony? Can nature always be the source of spiritual and physical growth? Not quite, not always. The weather does not automatically improve in the countryside; from time to time the cold rain keeps falling down on the shivering K, who seeks refuge wherever he can. Wherever he lays his eyes he is constantly reminded of the fact that the place he finds himself in is far from idyllic. The scenery that offers itself to K's perception is thus often rendered in negative terms: "the sodden grassland, the

drenched trees, and the grey-misted hills beyond” and the “flat landscape of scrub and stone” (Coetzee 2004: 39, 45) make up for the greater part of the rural setting. The places which K visits are touched by neglect and decay. What draws him to these sites is the privacy they offer; he sleeps at roadsides, under eucalyptus trees and bushes, on the porch steps of empty houses, under bridges, in dry river-beds, in forsaken car wrecks. The picture of K standing in the middle of “an apple orchard overgrown with grass and weeds” surrounded by “[w]orm-eaten fruit [. . .] taking bites of good flesh here and there, chewing as quickly as a rabbit, his eyes vacant” fittingly illustrates the hardships of his stay in the South African countryside (Coetzee 2004: 39). The abandoned farmhouse, which he enters only sporadically, is a ghastly, repulsive place: a ruined house and shed, cluttered with shattered furniture and other rubbish, now the seat of animals and birds, filled with their droppings, “all covered in dust and cobwebs” (Coetzee 2004: 54). Irrespective of the adverse external circumstances, K initially feels strong and enthusiastic enough to fancy the daring thought that there is “no limit to his endurance” (Coetzee 2004: 35). He does not eat for several days, gets gradually weaker, but, instead of feeling sick, experiences a sensation of lightness. However, the physicality of his existence cannot be ultimately ignored and the release from hunger and fatigue is only temporary.

K’s prolonged stay in the open country leads to the gradual deterioration of his health. His first major physical breakdown is a direct result of his decision to set out on a goat hunt. After a long day of exhausting yet futile strain, he is forced to keep an all-night vigil. Weary and acting as if in a trance, he finally manages to strike the long-awaited deathblow. But before this happens, the reader has to bear a long and detailed rendering of the animal’s agony which is heavily saturated with naturalistic detail:

Almost under his feet one [goat] slipped and slid, kicking like a fish in the mud to regain its footing. K hurled the whole weight of his body upon it. [. . .] He could feel the goat’s hindquarters heaving beneath him; it bleated again and again in terror; its body jerked in spasms. K straddled it, clenched his hands around its neck. And bore down with all his strength, pressing the head under the surface of the water and into the thick ooze below. The hindquarters trashed, but his knees were gripping the body like a vice. [. . .] Long after the last snort and tremor he continued to press the goat’s head under the mud. (Coetzee 2004: 53-4)

The country, as this brutal scene demonstrates, is no longer a charming recluse, but an unprepossessing sombre place of violent competition and struggle for survival. The expressiveness and strength of appeal achieved in this scene are overwhelming and do not harmonize with K’s delicate and peaceful constitu-



tion. Shocked at his own cruelty, he loses all motivation, but at the same time his new credo is unconsciously born. Laura Wright's interpretation of this event links K's ethical awakening to a change in his eating habits: "Michael's hunger for the ethical begins with the slaughter of a goat and ends with a purely vegetarian – albeit minimal mode of consumption" (Wright 2006: 106). Faced with the brutal physicality of the goat's carcass – "Its teeth were bared, its yellow eyes stood wide, a trickle of water ran out of its mouth" – he cannot imagine eating "this ugly thing" (Coetzee 2004: 55). He wishes to erase the bloody incident from his memory. However, after cherishing a fantasy of resurrection, K has to accept the harsh logic of reality and face the consequences of his behaviour. The process of cleaning the dead animal's body is even more obscene. More significantly, the killing of the goat provides no benefits: most of the meat soon goes bad and K falls ill.<sup>2</sup> Unfavourable weather conditions and excessive physical strain have taken away his vitality. High fever makes him delirious, as he wanders around in search of anything that could restore his energy. He spends most of his time lying and resting. The boundary between reality and dream blurs. Yet this moment, this physical collapse, marks K's further transformation. The trauma caused by the harshness of recent experience expresses itself through the collapse of his health and finds its ultimate aftermath on a different level – the level where K's philosophy of living is established and where he discovers the purpose of his being.

At this stage, another direction for interpretation presents itself. The place which K temporarily inhabits ultimately eludes the definitions of pastoral and anti-pastoral. The appropriate tools for analysis can be found in a relatively new branch of literary criticism, which is variously referred to as ecocriticism, environmental literary studies/criticism, ecopoetics or green cultural studies (Glotfelty 1996: XX). Irrespective of the multiplicity of names, these all share an environmental perspective and, as the mission statement of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment puts it, "promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world" (Glotfelty 1996: XVIII). Driven by corresponding concerns which involve the realization that "some literature has gone beyond the closed circuit of pastoral and anti-pastoral to achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human," Terry Gifford offers six qualities defining what he calls "the post-pastoral" (1999: 148). One of these involves the acknowledgement of the equilibrium between the creative and destructive

<sup>2</sup> The whole incident might be seen as a remote echo of Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. However, what happens to K is a twisted reworking of the adventures of the white colonizer and explorer. He is an anti-Robinsonian figure, standing in contrast to the epitome of the Enlightenment notion of progress.

forces in the universe. The necessary condition to understand the assumption of equality of the cycles of birth, death and rebirth, and of the processes of growth and decay, is the recognition of the shift from the anthropocentric to an ecocentric perspective. It has already been demonstrated in the preceding paragraphs how the natural environment of the South African scrubland where K maintains his plain vegetable 'garden' stages events which are both charged with feelings of relief, joy, and fullness of being and filled with discomfort, pain and ferocity. This setting is simultaneously marked by beauty and ugliness. K does not remain oblivious to these opposing aspects of nature and intuitively tunes in with the "cycles and tensions of the dynamics of the creative-destructive universe" (Gifford 1999: 154). His everyday chores are dictated by the rising and setting of the sun. He keeps no record of the passing days or months but instead adjusts his activities to the weather conditions outside. In the summer he stays outdoors, tills a small patch of land and basks in the sun and when winter rains come he falls into a deep slumber, a state similar to hibernation. As the days grow shorter and colder, the spans of sleep extend and K gradually loses his vital forces. No longer does he care to take any effort to secure food for himself; his bodily processes slow down: "He no longer sat outside when his tasks were finished, looking at the stars, listening to the night, or walked about in the veld, but crept into his hole and fell into deep sleep" (Coetzee 2004: 114). There is an ecological balance between the moments of idleness when K is at last "himself, lying in his own house," finally at home in what he calls "a blessedly neglected corner" (Coetzee 2004: 115-6) and those situations in which the harsh reality reveals its ultimately physical constitution and brings him literally 'down to earth' in the struggle for survival. Its essence is squeezed into a short description of weather change which, in a single paragraph, manages to render the jigsaw of moods corresponding to the two sides of nature: the dark, dynamic, violent and the bright, calm and benevolent: "After days of sultriness and heavy cloudbanks there was a thunderstorm. The gully came washing down and K was flooded out of his house. He crouched in the lee on the dam wall, sodden, feeling like a snail without its shell. After an hour the rain stopped, the birds begun singing, a rainbow appeared in the west" (Coetzee 2004: 112).

K's intuitive recognition of the changing rhythms of nature and his unquestioning acceptance of them give grounds to the discernment of yet another aspect of the post-pastoral.

This second feature points to the place of humans in the creative-destructive universe. People can achieve a sense of harmony and find a key to self-knowledge when they assume that "the inner is also the workings of the outer, that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature" (Gifford

1999: 156). Life in close vicinity to the natural landscape teaches a good lesson in cycles and processes which can also be observed within human beings. In the country K opens up to a different level of existence. Not without pleasure, he envisions himself as a wild creature, more animal than human being. As such he is in touch with the forces of nature and is better attuned to the whispers of its voice speaking to him through the language of his animal instincts. He cherishes a vision of himself as a man of nature, a man who has somehow acquired the secret knowledge of nature. Thus he experiences intimations of the properties of plants and is surprised to “know the difference between a benign bitterness and a malign one, as though he had once been an animal and the knowledge of good and bad plants had not died in his soul” (Coetzee 2004: 102). Moreover, K’s reactions to various types of external stimuli are sharpened. His senses of touch and smell become keener in absorbing information about the environment usually unavailable to the ordinary man, a consequence of his choice to live in accordance with the rhythms of nightlife. A delicate sense of satisfaction or even pride pervades the description of his newly acquired skills: “He no longer needed to keep to paths in his movements around the dam. A sense less of sight than of touch, the pressure of presences upon his eyeballs and the skin of his face, warned him of any obstacle. [. . .] He had learned to rely on smell too. [. . .] Though he knew no names he could tell one bush from another by the smell of their leaves” (Coetzee 2004: 115). Furthermore, K’s stay in the countryside is of great consequence to the process of his self-recognition and abounds in many moments of revelation. One day he decides that it is time “to return his mother to earth” (Coetzee 2004: 58) and spreads his mother’s ashes over a patch of land, an old field by the farm, covering them with soil. This is one of his first independent decisions, the very first time that he is “taking the responsibility on himself” which corresponds to “the beginning of his life as a cultivator” (Coetzee 2004: 58-9). From now on the centre of K’s existence is “bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there” (Coetzee 2004: 59). A very strong bond has been formed between the human being and his natural surroundings, which he experiences as “a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam” (Coetzee 2004: 66). The connection between K, the land he temporarily inhabits and the crops it yields is particularly intimate and might be identified as belonging to a certain strain of ecological thought, so-called spiritual ecology.

K is no longer only a gardener or a cultivator of melons and pumpkins: a mission has been bestowed upon him. His vocation is to be the guardian of the holy natural cycles; he is the priest figure, the father to his children: pumpkins and melons. This ‘organic religion’ achieves its climatic expression in the worship K

directs to the earth which finally yields the long-awaited crop, his "firstborn", as he calls it (Coetzee 2004: 113). Before eating the ripe pumpkin he kneels and prays. The meal is more of a religious experience and the plants provide spiritual nourishment rather than physical strength. Having consumed his 'firstborn' K's communion with the earth and its produce is almost complete. The scene cannot escape comparison with the Holy Communion, in which the congregation partakes of the consecrated bread and wine, which through the act of transubstantiation are transformed into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>3</sup> This ritual not only commemorates Christ's death and resurrection but also unites the faithful with Christ, giving them the hope of eternal life.<sup>4</sup> It also strengthens Christians in faith and brings new life to their souls. Does K believe that the consumption of "the bounty of the earth" (Coetzee 2004: 118) contributes to his spiritual growth and grants him everlasting existence? It is hardly possible that such would be his conscious reasoning. Leading a simple existence, his only wish is to be left alone and "for the seed not to die out" (Coetzee 2004: 112). But why is he such an avid protector of the seeds? Why does he consider them to be members of his family? This attitude seems to be related to the fact that the seeds have been fertilized with the ashes of his deceased mother. Certainly his relation with the earth is not a simple one: it is a complex combination of the down-to-earth, practical attitude of a gardener with ambiguous religious mysticism. In environmental literary studies, one may find similar notions in the analyses of the stereotype of the American or Ecological Indian (Garrard 2004: 120-135 and Gunn Allen 1996: 241-263). As Paula Gunn Allen argues, "American Indian thought is essentially mystical and psychic in nature. [. . .] Its distinguishing characteristic is [. . .] an enduring sense of fluidity and malleability, or creative flux, of things" (Gunn Allen 1996: 255). The tendency to see the earth as a sacred creation in which people and earth belong to each other, establishing a sense of wholeness and integrity is also visible in the debate of eco-spiritualists on the concept of Gaia, which involves "[a]scribing orgasmic unity to the planet and giving it the name of an Earth-goddess" (Garrard 2004: 174). Perhaps K believes in his own private covenant with the earth and the fruit it yields. He, like an Indian who "at the deepest level of being, assumes that the earth is alive in the same sense that human beings are alive" (Gunn Allen 1996: 256) seems to believe in the possibility of both very real and mystical, not just merely symbolic, communion with nature. His mother, who "has [. . .] after her season in the earth, been washed clean, blown about, and drawn up into the leaves of grass," has also found her way into the pumpkins, which are therefore the final product of the communion of earth,

<sup>3</sup> Compare: Matthew 26:26-29 (*Holy Bible, King James Version*)

<sup>4</sup> Compare: John 6:53-59 (*Holy Bible, King James Version*)

water, sun, seeds, ashes and K's tender care (Coetzee 2004: 124). Now his family line is forever united with this earth, and the seeds are its physical epitome. This covenant, just like that of the New Testament, allows K to cherish the hope of partaking in nature's eternal cycles of birth and rebirth. Consciously or not, K links his personal story to the natural flow of time measured by the cyclicity of seasons. His own mother is the material part of plants cultivated by himself, which, on the other hand, are his children. In this way K discovers his family, his position and role within the spatiotemporal coordinates he has found himself in.

However, a part of K's behaviour transgresses norms endorsed by ecocriticism: the protagonist's instincts do not correspond with the forces which drive every living creature to the satisfaction of the basic needs: hunger, thirst, and procreation. Quite the opposite – these are the two instincts that K has consciously chosen to ignore. Indeed, he seems to be tuned into the “cycles of heavens” (Coetzee 2004: 118), lying low in his burrow, resting satisfied with the completion of his mission. K's sleep becomes deeper and deeper and turns into a kind of torpidity, “his body slowing down,” even “forgetting to breathe” (Coetzee 2004: 118). He loses track of the passing hours and days as his exhausted body finds relief in effortless inaction. From time to time, he can hear the echo of the distant voice of reason telling him to take care of himself but, indeed, it is very faint and unconvincing. Ultimately, K's philosophy of minimal existence and cultivation cannot prevail against physical reality. Thus, as a result of malnutrition and exposure to adverse weather conditions, his health deteriorates. He loses all vital energy and falls seriously ill: his empty stomach incessantly retches, his intestines stop working; he feels dizzy, constantly shivers and suffers from a tremendous headache. The most basic natural law has finally begun to act on K – a living body cannot do without food and drink. Nature's cycle of birth, death and rebirth in which he hopes to participate is doomed to failure. K is on the edge of physical collapse and can no longer be the guardian of his ‘children.’ Without his care, the plants will wither. He is in no position to protect his ‘garden’ from the assault of military forces. Ultimately, he loses not only his garden, but also the little bag of seeds he managed to secure. His ‘family line’ will perish with him.

The rendition of places in the novel involves simultaneous application of various traditionally sanctioned spatial conventions and their subsequent questioning. The places depicted in the narrative are marked by pastoral, anti-pastoral and post-pastoral modes of representation and constitute a curious amalgam, in which none of these conventions prevails over the other. The outcome of this strategy is a nondescript, indeterminable, open space, questioning the relations which conventionally construct places. Consequently, some of the novel's locations share certain traits with Foucauldian heterotopias: they have the capac-

ity to simultaneously allude to, display and refute configurations of many sites (Foucault 1986: 24). In his attempt to define these peculiar places, Foucault enumerates six principles. The third principle, stating that “the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986: 25) finds its realization in the image of the countryside where most of the novel’s action is situated. Certain features of Foucault’s heterotopias, such as their openness to re-interpretation, complexity, non-descriptiveness and variable functional and subversive potential can also be found in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theorizations on space. Steven Spalding, who in recognition of these parallels has coined the notion of nomadological heterotopology, stresses the fact that the hermeneutics of space postulated by these philosophers equally “seeks to defy [. . .] the given lock-hold on truth by reinvesting spaces with new, multiple narratives” (2000: 48). Hence the methods and strategies employed by Coetzee in the process of creating textual places in *Life and Times of Michael K* can be successfully interpreted alongside Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of smooth and striated space.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari immerse their reflections in varied disciplines – from mathematics through physics, music, anthropology and history of art to basketry and weaving – and apply terms and ideas which come to their minds uncurbed by scientific discipline in order to fish out a rare and precious style of thought which could justly be recognised as nomadic. Their method is governed by a single rule: to avoid former rules, so as to be able to assume a perspective which essentially rejects any kind of fixed and static point of view promoted by Enlightenment metaphysics. Across their discussions of a wide range of topics runs a discernible rift, which organises every aspect of human existence – culture, science, politics, social relations, art, etc. – into two diametrically different realms. Hence, firstly there are notions which might be grouped together under the broad label of ‘State’ and which are integrated through the fact of sharing the properties of being closed, hierarchical, ordered, centred around a governing idea, coded, systematised, limited and fixed. The State stands for all the totalising and ordering forces which underlie Western metaphysics since Plato – “the classical image of thought” which “aspires to universality” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 379) – and the space which the State institutes: the striated, or in other words, the girded or sedentary space. “The State,” Deleuze and Guattari postulate “as the model for the book and for thought has a long history: logos, the philosopher-king, the transcendence of the Idea, the interiority of the concept, the republic of minds, the court of reason, the functionaries of thought, man as legislator and subject” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 24). At the opposite pole, the philosophers place the broad scope of what they call *noma-*

*dology*, i.e. a way of thinking, perceiving, acting and writing which in the manner of a rhizome spreads out chaotically, without linear temporality, in unforeseeable directions and, significantly, is “the opposite of a history” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 23-5). Nomad space or “smooth” space is heterogenous, rhizomatic, devoid of structural properties and patterns; it is “a field without conduits or channels” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 371). Coetzee’s novel opens up to the distinction between the smooth and the striated via the figure of its protagonist. K’s function might be described in terms of how he reveals various aspects of space he traverses and how he reacts to places he stays in. In this line of thought, he demonstrates affinity with Shakespeare’s Touchstone, the fool of *As You Like It*, who probes the reality of Arden forest to expose the incongruities of its pastorality.

In Coetzee’s novel a very similar distinction of spaces and human activities contributing to a particular “mode of spatialization, the manner of being in space” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 482) is distinguishable. K is the nomad whose demeanour and movement across the South African land foreground the tensions and interactions between two types of spaces. His life is a life of *intermezzo*, of the in-between: not only is he in constant flux between the striated and the smooth, he also acts as the force which transforms places or, in other words, ‘smooths’ them. Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to the incessant “communication between the two kinds of space, their alternations and superimpositions” and “the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, traversed into striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 478, 474). The use of the prefix ‘re-’ in the verbs ‘returned’ and ‘reversed’ stresses what can be read in *The Thousand Plateaus*, i.e. that the smooth has precedence over the striated, which is associated with human civilisation in its earliest stage of mobile tribes of hunters and gatherers. Consequently, the purest forms of nondelimited and unstandardised spaces, were the natural spaces untouched by human hand, of which we might find only traces in the desert, steppe, sea or ice nowadays. K, perceived by others himself as a wild man, “a rudimentary man [. . .] a genuine little man of earth” (Coetzee 2004: 161) makes an impression on the medical officer who offers medical assistance to and genuine interest (which verges on obsession and veneration) in someone who is “in touch with things you and I don’t understand” (Coetzee 2004: 155) and allows him to notice that “[t]here is no home left for universal souls, except perhaps in Antarctica or on the high seas” (Coetzee 2004: 151). True enough, K feels best in places which have not yet undergone partitioning and which have escaped the State’s systems of control. However, the State apparatus is very powerful and produces striated spaces with increased intensity. While the archetypal smooth space is the open

sea, "the city is the striated space par excellence" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 481) and for that reason K's journey is in fact an escape from Cape Town. K finds it difficult to accept that the mobility of citizens is strictly limited through the introduction of curfews, road blocks and travel permits. Streets, roads and bridges are patrolled by armed convoys. The city is divided into zones (residential areas for the privileged, the ghettos for the unprivileged) and the country is cross-fenced with barbed wire into networks of private farms. Bureaucracy confines people to specific places, punishes violations of those restrictions with imprisonment and invents an intricate system of categorising and classifying its citizens. When K cannot present any official papers upon being arrested, he is in turn given an identity, be it a false one, and is listed as "Michael Visagie - CM - 40 - NFA - Unemployed," and charged with "leaving his magisterial district without authorization, not being in possession of an identification document, infringing the curfew, and being drunk and disorderly" (Coetzee 2004: 70). The police officers have no qualms about inventing a few facts here and there in order to justify their decisions and to 'trim' the whole event along the standardised procedures of the State. Everything must be controlled, numbered, systematised, hierarchized and centrally governed. This vision is a perfect illustration of Guattari and Deleuze's comments on the function of State in relation to the space it controls:

One of the fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns [ . . . ] It is a vital concern of every State not only to vanquish nomadism but to control migrations and, more generally to establish a zone of rights over an entire 'exterior', over all of the flows traversing the ecumenon. If it can help it, the State does not dissociate itself from a process of capture of flows of all kinds, populations, commodities or commerce, money or capital, etc. There is still need for fixed paths in well-defined directions, which restrict speed, regulate circulation, relativize movement, and measure in detail the relative movements of subjects and objects. (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 386)

Again, there is a constant struggle and flux between the smooth and the striated: suddenly a riot breaks out in a quiet rich seaside neighbourhood, the inhabitants are forced to leave the devastated premises and leave it to vagrants and looters, and those who are potentially dangerous to the State apparatus are put in camps, hospitals and prisons.

The system of internment is highly developed: the countryside is full of overpopulated camps of various types: resettlement camps, rehabilitation camps, labour camps, etc. Irrespective of the official category ascribed to a given camp, they all have one objective: to keep an eye on people of no fixed abode (the



homeless, the unemployed, and others who are potentially the insurgent element). This threat is expressed by Robert, one of K's companions in the camp: "They want to stop people from disappearing into the mountains and then coming back one night to cut their fences and drive their stock away" (Coetzee 2004: 80). It becomes clear that the State's objective is to impose order that will contain by naming the activity of people. Such is the case with work, a value of utmost importance in civilised societies. One of the accomplishments of the State, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, is to "[i]mpose the Work-model upon every activity, translate every act into possible or virtual work, discipline free action, or else (which amounts to the same thing) relegate it to the 'leisure', which exists only by reference to work" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 490). Camps are to force people to work and rid society of parasitic individuals. Once again, this premise is reflected in the novel when Robert tries to explain to K the function and nature of camps: "This is Jakkalsdrif. This is a camp. Don't you know what a camp is? A camp is for people without jobs. It is for all the people who go around from farm to farm begging for work because they haven't got food, they haven't got a roof over their heads" (Coetzee 2004: 78). K listens to his friend and acknowledges his advice, but he essentially rejects the camp rules. He reveals his nomadic, revolutionary nature in his final refusal to work while all the men from the camps have to toil to earn their food and in his stubborn repetition of "don'ts": "I don't want to work," "I don't need to eat all the time," "I don't want to be in a camp, that's all" (Coetzee 2004: 85). Indeed, when we see K occupied, tending the plants which he planted, it is hard to classify his efforts in terms of work: his duties are not imposed on him by any external authority but rather have their source in K's singular attitude to earth and the crops it yields. His activity is free and results from his self-recognition as a gardener. K is very careful not to repeat the pattern of using and inhabiting the land established by its previous holders, which becomes visible both in his deeds and quiet resolutions: "Because whatever I have returned for, it is not to live as the Visagies lived, sleep where they slept, sit on their stoep looking out over their land" (Coetzee 2004: 98). He does not want to step in the shoes of a landowner and stays faithful to his philosophy of minimal existence, reducing all his needs to very occasional satisfaction of hunger and thirst as he remains "wary of conveying the Visagies' rubbish to his home in the earth and setting himself on a trail that might lead to the re-enactment of their misfortunes" (Coetzee 2004: 104). The worst mistake, he tells himself, would be "to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam" (Coetzee 2004: 104). K tills the land in an unsystematic manner (only because it brings him so much pleasure and satisfaction), seeing no necessity to divide or parcel up the land; he undertakes his 'farming' chores only when he considers

it fit.<sup>5</sup> In consequence, he cannot adapt himself to the obligation of forced work and one night he escapes from the camp.

As soon as he leaves the walls of the camp behind, K is filled with fresh energy and experiences a liberating sensation which stems from the newly acquired freedom of movement. With great joy he strays off the roads and travels “across open country” and concocts his own vision of the surroundings: “The landscape was so empty that it was not hard to believe at times that his was the first foot ever to tread a particular inch of earth or disturb a particular pebble” (Coetzee 2004: 97). This vista is a perfect representation of the properties of smooth space. K, who escapes from the imprisonment of the State institution, climbs over the fence, refuses to follow marked-out paths on which he does not feel safe, and moves across the veld, which is “open” and “empty,” (Coetzee 2004: 97,87) i.e. bears no sign of being under control of the regulating forces of the State. However, K cannot enjoy this unrestrained mobility and unrestricted movement for too long. Soon, the smooth space of the veld (this natural formation evocative of the steppe mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari) is interrupted by more fences, which “remind him that he was a trespasser as well as a runaway” (Coetzee 2004: 97) and not a free person in his homeland. However, this bitter realisation does not lead K to surrender: he steadfastly holds on to his true self, remaining forever unable to become a part of the system. He manages to escape the forces of the State, history and historical time. He asserts that the natural world is excluded from war and that war can in no way stop the natural cycles which always prevail over the actions of humans. His theory and reasoning is quite simple and based on simple observation: “Presumably the grass has not stopped growing in Wynberg Park because there was a war, and the leaves had not stopped growing” (Coetzee 2004: 67). K adapts the natural cycles and consequently considers himself to be excluded from the realm of historical time and the far-reaching influence of war. The rhythm of his daily existence is dictated by the rising and setting of the sun and he feels as if wrapped in “a pocket outside time” (Coetzee 2004: 60).

K is a figure with tremendous potential – nomadic potential – and a person who ‘fights’ against the State on his own terms and on a different level, the level of space. Guattari and Deleuze argue that “each time there is an operation against the State – insubordination, rioting, guerrilla warfare, or revolution as act – it can be said that a war machine has revived, that a new nomadic potential has appeared, accompanied by the reconstitution of a smooth space or a manner

<sup>5</sup> For the discussion of the novel as revision of the local Afrikaner myth of return to the land propagated by the *plaasroman* genre, see Susan van Zanten Gallagher’s, *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee’s Fiction in Context*, 151-161, and Rita Barnard’s *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, 29-32.

of being in a space as though it were smooth" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 386). K is just such a person, the insubordinate element: he refuses to work, eat, communicate (he relinquishes all basic desires apart from freedom) and finally avoids imprisonment. He crosses fences, trespasses on others' property, steals food from orchards, leaves town without a permit. K erases the Enlightenment theory of progress and embarks on an inner journey which leads him to a different mode of existence, a minimal nomadic existence.<sup>6</sup> His story is marked by continuous ridding of all the attachments that would bind him to the external world, the metaphorical staying "out of all the camps at the same time" (Coetzee 2004: 182). The grand shift in K's state of being entails letting go of his whole personal and social identity. He eludes being categorised, noticed, called or named as he is gradually ridding himself of all possessions and needs, slowly losing weight and substance: "No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy" (Coetzee 2004: 142). No longer does he constitute a member of society with a fixed identity, as he gradually loses traits and abandons behaviours which define gender, age, and race. As he reaches beyond the limits of his being, K is likened to various types of creatures: "a flower," "a worm," "a snail without its shell," "a lizard under a stone," "a hard little stone," "a stick insect that has landed, God knows how, in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain," "a spirit invisible, a visitor on our planet, a creature beyond the reach of the laws of nations." (Coetzee 2004: 99, 107, 112, 116, 135, 149, 151).<sup>7</sup> Most significantly,

<sup>6</sup> This minimalism marking K's mode of living has been variously alluded to by many critics as: "minimalist philosophy of survival", "minimal subsistence" (Head 1997: 95), or a "minimal and ahistorical way of living on the land" (Barnard 2007: 25).

<sup>7</sup> Michael's elusiveness and Coetzee's propensity to "escape from system-imposed classification" (Kosew 1996: 151) which I link with the smoothness of space has also been a source of inspiration for some noted critics of the author's oeuvre. Thus Derek Attridge, through analysis of K's resistance, which "never becomes an alternative moral norm" arrives at conclusions regarding the inadequacy of allegorizing reading of the novel which is precisely based on the application of "preexisting norms and marked moral judgements" (2004: 53,54). Similarly, David Attwell traces the parallels between the protagonist's gradual self-erasure and the "open-endedness of textuality," between Michael's ability to escape various forms of imprisonment and the "freedom located in the act of writing" (Attwell 1993: 99, 92). On the other hand, there are also voices of critics who in the idea of K's gardening detect potential for an alternative order. Such is the case of Susan Gallagher, who interprets gardening as an antithesis of farming, which in the Afrikaner mythology is associated with social order, patriarchy, and property rights. Michael's story, according to Gallagher, "provides a prophetic guideline for new order that will emerge from ravages of the war" (Gallagher 1991: 160). Dominic Head also alludes to "a contrary ethos," "a new era of subsistence 'gardening'," and "a new myth of repossession" although he almost instantly questions the validity of neat oppositions (Head 1997: 105). The acknowledgement of the aforementioned ambivalence leads him to conclusions quite contrary to those presented in this paper. While Head states that this "chain of interrogation leads to a realization that space in which K's experiment as cultivator can endure does not exist, either in expectations of the novel at this time, or in the particular terrain alluded to," I try to prove that such space, understood in terms of smooth space, is indeed possible.

K's presence, behaviour and attitude have a lasting influence on the places he inhabits and passes through. Just as the camps constitute the essence of sedentary space which is typically "striated by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures," the movement of K is also a perfection of 'smoothing' which leaves the space "marked only by 'traits' that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 380). In his passive rebellion K does not seek to reassure his presence in a given location or his rights to stay and live in a particular place: "he could not imagine himself spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land. He thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust (Coetzee 2004: 97).

K's greatest success and victory is that he somehow accomplishes the perfection of smooth existence, an existence which Sue Barnard describes as "K's invisible, traceless, self-erasing mode of living on the land" (Barnard 2007: 25). Similarly, the locations depicted in Coetzee's novel elude simple categorizations. This is achieved through successive undermining and challenging of modes and conventions of place representation. The depiction of the South African countryside transgresses patterns typical of pastoral, anti-pastoral and eco-pastoral conventions. But also, the image of Cape Town which initially seems to adhere to the traditional negative coding of the city rendered through multiple "powerful hostile associations" (Williams 1973: 1), undergoes a significant destabilization when K returns to his hometown. The Cape Town which stages the final scenes of the novel constitutes a space whose conventional urban features have been blurred; it is no longer the same place, i.e. the diseased city in the iron grip of State forces. It is a heterogenous site, turned into an amorphous formation of smooth space which is "the continuous variation, continuous development of form" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 478). Its image is made up of various haphazard, unconnected and bizarre elements which fail to create a coherent, familiar and easily recognizable vision. In general, the places in the city seem to lie open to diverse unconventional manners of exploitation: a toilet is adapted as a place for illicit rendezvous, a forest reserve serves the tramps as a "summer resort," and abandoned facilities are transformed into human shelters (Coetzee 2004: 175). K's sojourn in the city is a constant roam across sites which have managed to remain exempt from the working of the regime, beyond control: dark corners, unfrequented cul-de-sacs, places touched by gradual decay and the forces of increasing entropy. K's mode of existence is a confirmation of Deleuze and Guattari's belief that "it is possible to live smooth even in the cities, to be an urban nomad" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 482). K's attitude has the force to arouse peculiar interest and to inspire

others to follow in his footsteps. The medical officer, who feels uncomfortable and lost within the oppressive system of the State, tends to treat K as a sort of a guide or leader and entertains a vision of accompanying him in his never-ending peregrinations to what he calls "[t]he garden for which you [K] are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michael, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way" (Coetzee 2004: 166). By the same token the locations depicted by Coetzee in *Life and Times of Michael K* are, like the ideal smooth space, off the mappings of fixed literary constellations and no road that is merely an application of existing conventional patterns leads to their deciphering.

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