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# The World Viewed: The Silverfish and the Broken Planets

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## The World Viewed: The Silverfish and the Broken Planets<sup>1</sup>

I was some way through Albert Camus' novel *A Happy Death* before I realised that I had the capacity for self-reflection. Not that I knew that this was an existential classic, or that the pages I was chewing my way through were a rather strange English translation published to catch the emerging market that fed the paperback publishing revival of the nineteen eighties. All I really knew was that the pages were warm and soft and woody; just sufficiently damp to support a rather sweet bacterial bloom that made this book a quite special pleasure. It was perhaps three or four weeks since I started on the book, working my way through it steadily, mostly at night when there is a particular sort of quietness and the temperature drops a little which makes moving around is more enjoyable. At night this special quiet somehow delivers a fresher feel as one slips between the pages; less to catch the throat so to speak as the air cools and the exotic gasses become memories. I had just passed what I later understood to be the halfway mark, more or less, when I became aware of the workings of something that I can only call memory. I have no real sense of what it was like before I became aware of this, it felt like a positive decision; as though at a certain moment I had decided to remember what it was like to be me when previously the very concept of recollection had no part in anything that I did.<sup>2</sup>

I cannot say how I got to *La mort heureuse* or what initially attracted me to it of all the material to hand at the time, maybe it was the torn cover and the general sense of dereliction that the book gave off. Maybe it was because it was a typical product of the time when publishing houses were repackaging titles that they had first acquired to meet a rather snobbish faux intellectual constituency. These editions tended to be bound in a reasonable quality card that was light and limp and they generally carried an artful typographic

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<sup>1</sup> As the title suggests this work, comprising a text and sculpture, is indebted to some of Stanley Cavell's thoughts on film which I have borrowed rather loosely. The work is particularly inspired by his ideas of phonetic and philosophical hallucination and '...our first fascination with objects and their inner and fixed beings...'

<sup>2</sup> One thing I remembered was that I had moulted quite a lot over time and on the basis of this guessed that I must have lived for about six or seven years.

design in two colours with a close tonal resemblance. This second iteration, consequent on the virtues of a liberal state education, were for readers whose literary choices had to be devoured in public - on trains and buses, in parks and even public houses: locations that gave the books a rather tainted quality consequent upon the mix of public and private aromas comprising cigarette smoke, petrol, sweat and 'some things I hate to think about'.<sup>3</sup> They were invariably 'bound' in a stiffer cardboard sandwich with brash two (sometimes three) colour images that required a less absorbent ground so that the layering of inks could produce the effect of a wider pallet. Sometimes a varnish finish was applied to the surface to prevent the accretion of small amounts of human sweat and skin that gave the simpler designs a particular aroma and faintly attractive salty dark patches. This final coating was, unlike the coloured ink that made up the image, a polymer-based film that may have given the book an attractive (sic) glossy appearance, but could not have been further from the simple uncoated papers on which the typed drafts of the books were first delivered to the publishers (and subsequently abandoned in the compositor's shops to line rat's nests or be devoured at leisure as they deteriorated in the damp). Whatever the provenance, these lurid glossy colours were in the main distasteful and I suspect that but for the torn cover I would have passed it over for something else. As it was I started at the exposed section of the half title page, which because it had been without the protection of the thicker card for a long time, was slightly brown and dryer than it normally would have been such that I very quickly found myself into the colophon where things really became interesting. The very small font used for the legal information on this page is not really intended to be read - more to be referred to in another context. Because of this intensity they have a particular attraction for me. The ink is denser per line and since the leading can also be as small as 2 points the whole page has a richness that is seldom found elsewhere in the book. No matter where one enters the colophon, whether in the unprinted areas or the dense fine text, there is a special excitement. It has the taste of a summer holiday before it collapses into a familiar activity of displaced routine and becomes dull. As it happened the torn cover had encouraged me to start somewhere in the centre of the page and

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<sup>3</sup> This phrase sprang to mind coming, I think, from a delicious copy of J.P. Donleavy's *Ginger Man* in the Olympia Press edition that I devoured in another life. It seems to have stuck with me.

the excesses of copyright detail offered an almost intoxicating start to what turned out to be something of an adventure into self-realisation.

Vulgar as they can be, there is something to be said for cheap editions; the paper is generally made from a softwood slurry that originates in the colder parts of the world without the benefit of additives such as rags or inedible crops. These coarse slurries are forcefully crushed, usually without much help from steam or chemicals, and, as a result, the fibres are significantly structurally degraded but, on the plus side, less contaminated. The predominance of pulpwood in the mix and the brutal treatment of the fibres is intended to lower costs at the expense of durability which is ideal for the indiscriminating consumer. The inks too follow the logic of the moment and tend to have an excess of vehicle that often reduces the pigment sufficiently to perceptibly change its tonality from page to page. Nonetheless, while these presentational imperfections in the production may be despised by some readers, for other wayfarers through the pages the short fibres and excesses of spirit produce a cocktail that becomes the very essence of the book. The volatile vehicle carrying the insoluble pigment comprises a mixture of pH modifiers, humectants, surfactants, defoamers, biocides and rheology modifiers that never quite stabilises in the fibre. As a consequence this poetic army of chemicals travel relentlessly through the capillaries of slowly separating pulp so that after a time the whole page is imbued with the exotic perfumes of a racy solvent. The cheaper the paper the more exquisite the fix so that it can be difficult to choose between a cheap book and the very old newspapers which are so seldom left long enough but, kept well so that the ink never quite dries, they have the rarity value of a fine spirit.<sup>4</sup> Alas, newspapers are collected in piles and are rapidly reincarnated at the mill and so are never left long enough to mature properly. If they are abandoned in piles and do become moist they offer a tantalisingly dangerous choice between the exotic pleasures of their aroma and very real risk of immolation. Sometimes it is this frisson of exoticism and fear that makes newspapers hard to resist. Books on the other hand offer a long-term home with relative security. If they have been

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<sup>4</sup> This is not the place to develop this point, but our experience with discarded corks makes this comparison more than a literary cliché.

neglected properly the paper becomes a little crisp at the edges and the inks become sluggish in the fibers so that, with the right amount of moisture in the centre, the page becomes a field of variations of familiar pleasure. And, unlike newspapers, for some unaccountable reason, cheap books are less frequently burnt or sent for reincarnation, but merely piled somewhere dark where they will not be disturbed. In this way they become a safer option for one's travels if a little less thrilling.

Passing through the centre of an uppercase 'O' in a cheap book yields all the frisson of the perfumes of the vehicle without the taint of the pigments. Its purity can send a shiver and a buzz of satisfaction at the sense of innocence that it recalls. In contrast, there is nothing quite like the cleanly taken jot above a lowercase 'i'. There is an element of familiar conquest in taking a jot; more sporting than the ubiquitous full-stop which is so often foreshadowed by spacing and line length that most of the time it comes as no surprise at all. The jot, on the other hand, appears unexpectedly floating above the x-line and, at times, levels with the cap line (occasionally taking its level from the cross stroke on the 't'). A well thought through jot defies gravity and it needs a deft and precise movement to take it cleanly without touching the stem of the 'i'. Done right it is a gift of pure pigment whose intense blackness bites with the pleasure of something that is both given and stolen - like the small dragée hidden in the chocolate box to make up the weight that is always so much more intense than the most elaborate finished confection. And yes the 'j' too offers such delight but they are so rare that these can turn a sport into a cheap hunt which, for the purist, is best left to amateurs. Not for nothing does the letter 'j' has the smallest box in the type case and I tend to pass by quickly or simply ignore them. It is the moment of opportunity and action that make the jot on the 'i' so special. Often beside or very near to an 'i' there is a double story loop tail 'g'. These strange and out of place shapes, which seem to belong to another species, reset the palate since their closed counters offer an unusual balance of paper, pigment and aromatic vehicle that is fresh and slightly uncivilized. A closed loop 'g' is like eating shell fish standing outside a pub in the afternoon or leaning on a wall at the end of a day at the seaside. Frequently between the 'i' and the 'g' there is the wonderful

arbiter of harmony the 'n'. It is found everywhere and has been with us as long as we needed to write of the snake or the fish, but since then, at every encounter in a printed book its size and shape dominates the mathematical logic of the distribution of pigment. It is the measure of all things. All heights, distances, spaces, dashes and proportions go back to the 'n'. Notionally half of its 'M' (another letter that ultimately constrains the limits of the pigment) the leaner and less motherly 'n' provides the norm from which all else is a variation. It is so much the staple fare of a cheap book that each one resonates with the compositors click of lead against steel.

I spent much of my life unaware of all of these features of the book and its exotic inhabitants. I just enjoyed the pleasures that they yielded without much thought as to how they came about or why they were distributed in the way that I found them. Indeed, I am not sure I was ever very conscious of books as a particular 'thing' in the world; they were there when I arrived. I understood that they were made – or at least that the consequence of a process before my time affected my experience - but the idea that they carried a metaphysical distinction seemed to feature in my awareness only as a retrospective reflection. I had known for some time that there were differences between books and that these differences afforded different pleasures of course which made me selective. What was more difficult to pin down (and came to me only recently - I know not how) was the quite special category of 'thing in the world' that they were. They seemed special that in some unfathomable way, a book could reveal its unique being through an intimate encounter of consumption. Yet paradoxically only through the experience of books as a class could the 'bookness' of a particular book become accessible: it is a strange and compelling enigma that, in this one instance, an object comprised of axioms can only be understood from within itself - or so it seems.<sup>5</sup> Moreover the experience of such essence must be the consequence of progressive accumulation

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<sup>5</sup> For an explanation of this see Gödel's incompleteness theorems

but, in contrast, the realisation of a special truth must be instantaneous since (as I now know) its recognition relies on a critical moment of involuntary recognition.

My own moment of involuntary recognition came about, as I have said, some way through *La mort heureuse*. (I use the French title even though this was an English translation for reasons that may become evident later). In my case the shudder of self-recognition seemed to be related to a page on which nothing had been printed. Even pressed as it was between two text-rich sheets there was no contamination of ink-pigment or vehicle and, unusual as that was, that alone could not account for the involuntary shock. After all I had experienced fields of unadulterated fibre before, and I confess to a certain perverse pleasure in the denial that this can involve; the bland journey around a page can throw up moments of intensity as for example when a stray fibre of flax, that must have strayed from another vat, finds itself isolated in the general homogeneity of the pulp. I recall (or should I say I am now able to recall) a derelict encyclopaedia I once encountered in which a lack of entries under an unpopular letter (the 'J' as it happened) presented a virgin field of lignocellulosic fibres that invited me to extend my stay for longer than necessary. I cruised in the fresh snow made from best quality bleached rag and old hospital linen. Ascending vertically I moved in alternating curves and turning to descend left and right in a slalom of acetic emptiness that was the antithesis of the wonderful excesses and orgy of ink that, say, following an upper case 'S' usually provides. Such was the delirium this absence induced that I withheld the pleasures of new adventure with yet another unpopular letter so as better to enjoy it when I tired of this self-imposed deprivation. Indeed, the lure of a lower case 'k' with its abrupt changes in direction and rich junctions of ink were all that prevented me making this minimalist world of exquisite denial a permanent home. But on reflection, the vicissitudes of my life in the 'j' had become so familiar that it was only the cumulative excesses of self-denial that broke the cycle and I carried on through to the very end of the battered book all the way through to the paste and dyed sheepskin of the binding (or what was left of it) and the next adventure. (I recall now a rather sour moment as I hit some gold leaf -a vaguely litigious taste that stays long after it

has passed by and is never quite forgotten). However, the blank page in *La mort heureuse* were not a rag and linen retreat from the world but a violent event that triggered a very different shudder which I experienced vividly but at the time failed to understand. I simply stopped, intent on the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. Only later as the fullness of the image has become clear have I realised that it was the haphazardness of events and the unusual quality of the impregnated fluid in the paper that, mixed with the unusual hyphae, that polyphenols and amino acids suspended in cellulose encourages), brought forward a moment of self-recognition.<sup>6</sup>

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The most startling aspect of this moment was its retrospective insistence: I knew at once that this awareness was entirely new but at the same time that was a capacity that I had always had – and indeed had even used to make choices (of a sort) about my direction of travel. But new questions unsettled me. How could my fascination with, and lust for, jots precede my awareness that such things existed? How could the axiom of the ‘en’ space that had shaped my atmosphere have been both so insistently present and yet so invisible? I now knew that I had experienced great pleasures in my explorations as I responded to the security of familiarity (the dark damp journey through pulp and ink) and the frisson of difference as delivered by (for example) an unexpected pair of jots or the shock of footnote number floating between the x-height and the ascender. But how could my pleasures, solid and purposeful conditions that they are, be reconciled with the haphazardness of the events that shaped them? Most of all perhaps was the insight that until my encounter with the tea stain on the unprinted page midway through the book, I had not really understood what a question was: I had tasted many interrogation points (a surprisingly fatty aftertaste especially if one starts at the bottom) but familiarity with a question mark did not offer insight into what a question was. And indeed, the questions my moment in *La mort heureuse* provoked did not require pre-

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<sup>6</sup> Later I understood that tea had been split on the book, possibly on the blank page and that it had contaminated the pages (particularly at the edges) for what remained of it stopping only at the inside of the back cover.

determined answers as most interrogations do for there were none, rather they insisted on actions. Change was called for and I decided to be recklessly happy.

I now suppressed my habitual appetites and followed the polyphenols and amino acids with a criminal disregard for safety – venturing at times to the very edge of the page where the energy from the world light excites the cocktail of cellulose, hemicellulose, lignin, quinone structures, avonoids, glues and other substances so that they taste of lots of things but mostly danger. As I followed the course of the desiccated tea I sought the more brittle areas, the fluffy, colourful live clusters of filaments that render the substrate spongy, and even the acidic flyspecks. I purposefully tracked the meandering trails of previous insect grazing and ventured into deserted channels and galleries that smelt of death. It was a liberation of habit that could, and possibly would, only end badly. The details of the ending may be as exceptional as they are absurdly stupid but that is of no consequence for the result was the same whatever the process. What was of consequence was that the moment the tea touched my palate all memory of *A Happy Death* was displaced through a moment of self-reflection to capture its first publication. It became *La mort heureuse Cahiers Albert Camus 1*.<sup>7</sup> But I am ahead of myself. The tea had mixed with the paper from an intense centre to the finest of capillary fusions at the edges where it seemed as if the very fibres of the paper itself had reached out to the liquid to draw the last possible remnants into its make-up. It was here that the most exquisite combination of matter and desiccated tea formed a boundary that could be followed by the senses. Too far into the mix and the taste was alien; too far away from it and the paper became insipid. I could not believe that I would use such a term for cheap pulp which until this moment I had regarded as my staple diet. This was not like the exotic charge of a piece of bloodied linen or the

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<sup>7</sup> Aside from ‘natural’ processes, predators and coincidental disasters the two major causes of death are fire and water. The former unites us with the atomistic (eventually) while water is often a prelude to a reincarnation through pulping that is so ubiquitous that it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the pulp edition I was working my way through may have contained a trace of an ancestor who could have even been working its way through one of the many editions or even Gaston Gallimard’s first paperbound edition.

double jot consumed in a chance encounter. This was an intoxication in which chemical transformations in the nervous system played no part. Its joy made me reckless to the extent that quite close to morning I found myself at the edge experiencing the menace of world-light but without the slightest hesitation broke into another section of the book with a creased corner where a large pool of the tea had formed a meniscus between the pages that, now dried, left sufficient space for me to enter. It had an intense air in the half-light: all senses tingling and muscles tensing that I thought at first was a consequence of the concentration of desiccated tannins. I buried myself deeply in the crevice and sat out the day, exposed to the flickers of world-light were vaguely visible to me because I had not worked myself deeply into this new chapter.

How I first sensed her I am not sure, but without a doubt I knew that she was there before there was any material sign.<sup>8</sup> She must have followed my galleries, grazing on the way, and finding a difficult section (the one that the distractions of the boundaries had encouraged me to skip) she worked her way through it with a seriousness and purpose that made me slightly ashamed of my earlier abandon. I could sense her relentless concentration taking a direct route mining through the dense (and slightly sugary) compound of tea and pulp to where I had forced myself between the sheets. As I felt her approach I turned so that I could face her. She stopped and we touched; standing like that for some time there passed between us the experiences of our senses until, without any sign we both withdrew a few lengths of our body but remained in the same face to face relationship so that at the right moment we came together again to stand transfixed only to part abruptly. How many times we did this I cannot say but it seemed to last for about the time it takes to consume two pages. Then as I sensed her consent I turned and ran away as fast as I could. She followed and though I tried to lose her in twists and turns the weight of the pages stopped me for a moment and she caught up with me. I thought of running again but instead stood beside her head to

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<sup>8</sup> This paragraph is the mandatory 'love-interest' insisted on by my editor and can be skipped.

tail for a while, gave her a small gossamer parcel and, since it was properly dark, I left the tea encrusted cave for another part of the book.

I found myself in the margins of a page that was unfamiliar. I stayed there not paying much attention to the text thinking about the curious predicament in which I had found myself. The paper was very wet and, with lots to drink, the impulse to eat was less urgent than usual. I seemed to know so much about myself and my world without knowing how I acquired such a comprehensive understanding. More puzzling still, I had developed a curiosity about the origins of this self-awareness. Suddenly it was revealed to me: the encounter with the blank page recovered a much earlier exploration of an unusual book of marine tide tables that had clearly been languishing somewhere for a number of years absorbing sea water before being taken ashore in a canvas bag and left on a dark earthen floor. Unusually, my entry to the book of tide-table was not from another volume but from the earth where it had mingled with the canvas to produce a rich emulsion to explore and I went about it, I remembered, with the special enthusiasm that the shortening of the night engenders (so it must have been winter). I entered the book through the mixture straight into the text block. This meant that the usual preparations that a cover affords was bypassed and I was not prepared for the exotic dangers of the high levels of sodium impregnated in the paper.<sup>9</sup> After a few pages I lost my equilibrium and was (forgive the pun) all at sea.<sup>10</sup> The paper had the particular crispness of an unused book which, despite the dampness, gave a hint of short warm nights that lift the soul and make food an afterthought and the odd careless excursion into the light a dangerous habit. And indeed as I traced my way between the pages over weeks these blissful times were soon upon us. New pollen mixed with the dust and the mites to form a surface as smooth as talc that absorbed some of the natural dampness of the body in an exciting unity with the world the endangered as much as it

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<sup>9</sup> Although the levels of salt were perceived to be high, in sea water it constitutes less than 4% but this was sufficiently unusual to feel extreme.

<sup>10</sup> I am not sure how I became aware of puns but as I burrowed through texts of all kinds I can only assume that along with a random selection of information I also absorbed some of the quirks of language that are used to amplify the strength of a moment such as irony. While it was within my grasp to recognise the effects of a profoundly untrue exaggeration, a necessary and sufficient property of a pun is that it is heard. As a creature sensitive to vibration this was rather unsettling.

enlightened, so that one was always tempted to stay too long and obliged to scurry back to moister climes to catch ones breath.

And so it was; at sea with the sodium and dusty warmth that I stayed too long away from the safety of my territory and met the cat. Met is possibly the wrong word. It was there. No doubt it had its reasons to be in the semi-darkness but it did not seem to me to have much purpose or point. It just sat feeling the damp earth on its stomach looking at nothing. At one moment it began to lick its paw by just moving its head rhythmically- tongue out for the forward stroke, in for the back. Since it is always best to stay still in the dark and run in the light I froze but it had no interest in me and I decided to make for the place where the book, the earth and the canvas became one. Perhaps it was the salt, the creeping daylight or just old age, but as I darted past the cat I climbed up a short but steep incline and fell back a little. Without breaking the rhythm of his licking the cat flicked his tongue over me, its sticky spike caught me for a moment and I was drawn into its body.<sup>11</sup> Like a sort of mirror image of Balso Snell my journey through the digestive system of the cat was no more than an allegory for my increasing failure to socially integrate as I became more self-aware.<sup>12</sup> Almost at once the enzymes in the cat's saliva began its work on my skin and I quickly moulted but that did little to prevent the inevitable passage into the oesophagus and the churning acid of the cat's stomach.

I was strangely calm throughout this process. I was some way through the oesophagus when I realized that my capacity for self-reflection was finite. If Blaso Snell was to be my guide in this premature atrophy I could expect an adventure in which I would meet all kinds of strange characters but my passage to this, it turned out, was a much more mature reflection on what it means to die and live.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Lulu for helping me with this plot twist.

<sup>12</sup> For fear of simply repeating myself I am just amazed that such a trivial literary figure should have entered my consciousness. Only a few copies of this little novel were printed although it was subsequently included in posthumous collections of West's work. It was published shortly before Camus drafted *La mort heureuse*. It was republished in a collection in the same year that Camus won the Nobel prize. Both West and Camus coincidentally died in car accidents in 1940 and 1960 respectively. West, the day after his friend Scott Fitzgerald died suddenly (although not unexpectedly) from a heart attack.

<sup>13</sup> As the attentive reader will no doubt already be aware it seems as if I was killed by the cat before I encountered *La mort heureuse* and wrote this account. I am afraid I have no explanation for that.

## **The episode of the tide tables**

Watching a book of tide tables has its own sensual delights but these are trivial compared with the sense of intellectual superiority just looking always gives me. I can spend time – heaps of it – contemplating the occult knowledge that things – any and all kinds of things – harbour. Old tide tables, are of no use to serious mariners since the piles of water that endlessly slop around the seas never follow the same pattern (at least not with any precision) but – and it is an astonishing but – these slops are predictable: Huge unruly slops washing up on shores or regrouping in a hill of water somewhere away from the land come and go without surprise. That is of course because these great oceans are, like the rest of the Earth, subject to the pulls and pushes of the stars and planets (as we are endlessly told) to such an extent even the least observant creatures can recognise something of their force. The smallest organic cell and the largest subterranean mountain all wave and shiver in the wake of their movement. As the moon gets close, and more noses bleed, even the crumpled pages of the tide tables seem to straighten a little as their colours lighten a fraction. As the moon backs away and the hospital is quieter so there is also a little relaxation in the tension between the stitching and the spine. At least that is what they say but it is all nonsense made up so that humans can feel good about themselves. Tides, however, are fairly accurately predicted and times and heights are printed in neat columns next to the date. At the beginning of the year they are neat, crisp, smelling of spirit and full of promises for tomorrow but as soon as the moment has passed the prediction is, at best a reminder, of lost opportunities.<sup>14</sup> To those who use them and for whom they have meaning they become land-bound flotsam: useless but too well-made and charismatic to burn. They are like old essays and Christmas cards; semi disposed of - put somewhere not quite safe where over time they will deteriorate until, we can blame them for their dereliction and they can be thrown on the bonfire without regret. But to me in this liminal condition between being something and being nothing like the

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<sup>14</sup> The apparent correspondences between the heavens and the earth that underpin the predictions are fortunate coincidences which lead to the illusion that there is a causal connection.

one I am watching they are monuments of folly that capture the hubris of those whose trivial fortune telling comes true with such precision that the greater inaccuracies and failed projections can be ignored. So, I spend piles of the day and night watching these abandoned tide tables suspended between the hostility of vermin who will shred them and the precariousness of the erratic human compulsion to tidy up. I watch with the pleasurable smugness of a seam of gold as it watches the over-confident prospector walk by. I call this part of my purpose my 'watching relaxation', it is the thing I try to do most and it has taken up most of my time for at least ten thousand years. It was during this particular watching relaxation as I was giving myself a cooling lick that a silverfish flicked by, got caught on my tongue and, almost at once, became a memory for us both.

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