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Closing Ranks and Crossing Lines: loyalty and truth in the poems of Wilfred Owen

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But chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England, though wars should be in England; nor can it be seen in any battle. But only in Étaples.

It was not despair, or terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's.

It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.

Wilfred Owen, Letter to Susan Owen. 31st December 1917.
(Hibberd 1973, 86)

Wilfred Owen, one of the best-known poets of the First World War, was killed in northern France on 4th Nov 1918 just one week before the Armistice. He was shot as he was helping his men to cross the Sambre Canal. Owen's most widely studied war poems, written between the spring of 1917 and October 1918, show that the poet was committed to recreating the battlefield for those who would never experience it. Recording the reality of the front as he himself had experienced it, while remaining loyal to the men with whom he had shared it, Owen defines the inner conflict his poetic enterprise engendered in a letter to his mother, asking "And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?" (Letter to Susan Owen. May 1917. Hibberd 1973, 68). Acutely aware that he was making public a truth that belonged to a generation, Owen was tormented by an inner conflict which can be traced in his poems.

Owen was driven as a soldier and as a poet by a deep desire to bear witness to the tragic events unfolding on the Front. The desire to report back to those whose understanding of events depended on him was to shape Owen's life. It can be traced in his earliest correspondence. Prior to enlisting, Owen had observed surgical operations in a military hospital near Bordeaux. In September 1914, it was clearly with a didactic aim that he wrote to his brother of the macabre goings-on there. The letter included diagrams of injuries and the justification: "I deliberately tell you all this to educate you to the actualities of the war" (Stallworthy 1974, 110). It is in fact difficult to dissociate Owen's desire to convey truth and his desire to be a poet. Another letter written before he had experienced war shows that it was precisely a Keatsian ambition to convey beauty and truth that made Owen aspire to be a poet. This time to his mother, he wrote in March 1915: "A boy, I guessed that the fullest, largest liveable life was that of a Poet. I know it now... There is one title I prize, one clear call audible, one Sphere where I may influence for Truth, one workshop where I may send forth Beauty, one mode of living entirely congenial to me..." (Hibberd 1973, 53). Not surprisingly, there is often a correlation between events recounted by Owen in his correspondence and those which provide subject-matter for the poems. The poem 'The Sentry' recounts a tragedy Owen had witnessed at close-hand in January 1917. Over a year before he wrote of hypothermic soldiers in 'Exposure', Owen had written home about being "marooned on a frozen desert" and about frost-bitten casualties, marvelling at the fact that "only one of [his] party actually froze to death" (Hibberd 1973, 64). Owen himself declared "I think every poem, and every figure of speech should be a *matter of experience*" (Stallworthy 1974, 240).

Owen's creative impulse was all the stronger as within weeks of arriving in northern France, the poet had become aware that the reality of war stood in stark contrast to the ideas being spread about by the propagandists on the Home Front. The discrepancy between what the poet discovered on arriving in France in January 1917 and what he knew was being circulated in newspapers, films and exhibitions back home was intolerable. In one of his earliest letters to his mother from the Front, he wrote: "Those 'Somme Pictures' are the laughing stock of the army – like the trenches on exhibition in Kensington" (Hibberd 1973, 63). Having quickly established that the truth of war was far removed from what was to be believed on the Home Front, Owen's intolerance of the discrepancy between the soldiers' truth and the truth conveyed by pro-war propaganda

was to grow stronger as his experience of war deepened. Towards the end of the war, photographs in the newspapers of smiling wounded men exacerbated his anger. Driven by an ambition to set the record straight, he set out to undermine the effect of the pictures on public opinion with his own portrait of returning soldiers, those he defined as “the sunk-eyed wounded”. Hence in the poem ‘Smile, Smile, Smile’, Owen presents his own wounded men, “half-limbed readers” scanning those same papers in which “broad smiles appear each week”. In the poem, the smiles exchanged by the wounded become the symbol of a clear-sightedness exclusively theirs, *knowing* smiles manifesting the men’s shared knowledge of a lesser-known truth: “The half-limbed readers did not chafe/ But smiled at one another curiously/Like secret men who know their secret safe” (‘Smile, Smile, Smile’, 18-20).

Clearly then, Owen’s poetic art was fuelled by anger against the warmongering patriot and by a sense of responsibility towards the men who were fighting. The truth about the war was one exclusively shared by the men fighting on the Front. Owen’s sense of loyalty towards these men and his desire for faithfulness to a reality exclusively theirs underpin many of his poems. In a short preface meant to introduce his poems in a future publication, Owen had declared his poetic principles: “the true Poets must be truthful” (Hibberd 1973, 137). I propose to study four poems which show, in different ways, how Owen’s art is essentially shaped by two inseparable and sometimes conflicting notions: truth and loyalty towards the men to whom that truth belonged.

It has been said that Owen’s greatest achievement was to preserve in poetry the sights and sounds of the battlefield, to recreate the battlefield for those who would never – must never – experience it. “All a poet can do today is warn” Owen wrote in his preface (Hibberd 1973, 137). Owen’s ambition to “warn” helps explain why his poems carry truth in its starkest form and why they are characterized by such an abundance of graphic detail. Graphic detail, because it appeals to sight, makes the strongest impression on the reader. The abundance of detail reflects the poet’s ambition to purvey truth in its fullest form. A letter written to his mother during his first month of active service shows that for Owen, withholding detail was tantamount to deception: “I can see no excuse for *deceiving* you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell”. (16th January 1917. Hibberd 1973, 61). This falsely apologetic statement introduces a detailed account of all the horrors of the previous four days. This same ambition not to omit any element appears in the poems. In Owen’s densely

descriptive poetry, physical suffering finds visual representation, and thus is immediately and universally perceived. But Owen knew that no accumulation of visual detail could ever get across the atrocity of the battlefield to the reader. Although Owen's poetry relies heavily on visual effect, for Owen, sharing in the war experience implied more than *witnessing* it; it meant *hearing* and *feeling* it in all one's being. The poet's capacity for feeling appears in a letter written after just a few weeks of war: "I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have *perceived* it, and in the darkness, *felt*". (19th January 1917. Hibberd 1973, 63). It is no surprise that Owen's poems consistently appeal to all five senses. Sharing in the truth involves sensory experience. Being convinced that to apprehend the truth of the war experience, one had not only to see but to smell it, hear it, taste it, touch it, Owen set out to recreate in his poetry the sensory perceptions of the battlefield. And, as the most intimate and traumatic sensory perception creates a state of sensory confusion and eludes linguistic representation, Owen resorts to synesthesia. Sensory impressions merge and collide and the semantic fields exploited to express those impressions cross and overlap. For example, touch (pain) and sight are aligned in "the hurt of the colour of blood" ('Insensibility'). Sound and sight merge in "bullets streak the silence" ('Exposure') where the men's senses are acutely heightened as they watch and listen in fear. The repugnant horror of death which overwhelms all the senses is expressed through the merging of colour and smell in "green thick odour of [Death's] breath" ('The Next War'). Owen's use of synaesthesia testifies to the destabilizing impact of the war experience. More precisely, it reflects the *unseen* disorientation caused by trauma. Just a month before he died, Owen wrote Siegfried Sassoon a letter which attests to his understanding of the power of poetry to bring about in the reader a hyper-sensitive state in which all the senses collide in true synaesthetic fashion:

It is a strange truth: that your *Counter-Attack* frightened me more much than the real one: though the boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.
Catalogue? Photograph? Can you photograph the crimson-hot iron as it cools from the smelting? That is what Jones' blood looked like, and felt like. My senses are charred.

(Stallworthy 1974, 279)

Significantly, it was that same poetry of Sassoon's which Owen praised for its ability to capture truth. He recommended it to his sister, telling her

“My dear, except in one or two of my letters, (alas!) you will find nothing so perfectly truthfully descriptive of war... Now you see why I have always extolled Poetry” (Owen & Bell 1967, 489). For Owen, poetry could serve as a medium for getting the truth across to the non-combatant because in a good poem, the experience undergone by the combatant could, potentially, be reproduced in the reader. Acutely aware of the power of poetic realism to influence the reader emotionally, Owen also wrote poems in which poetic realism serves to influence the reader morally and intellectually.

‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ is one such poem. It was written while Owen was convalescing in Craiglockhart War Hospital in the summer of 1917. An early draft bears the inscription “To Jessie Pope etc” which has been crossed out and replaced by “To a certain Poetess”. Jessie Pope had published the jingoistic propagandist poem ‘The Call’ in 1915, a piece believed to have inspired Owen to write ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ in reaction against it. In ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, by juxtaposing a realistic account of a gas attack and Horace’s Latin motto, Owen denounces the discrepancy between the reality of war as he knew it and the common view that to die for one’s country was “sweet and decorous”. ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ offers a graphic account of a gas attack on a group of exhausted soldiers as they try to reach a rest camp. The speaker expresses his helplessness as he watches a fellow soldier, panic-stricken and unable to fit his mask quickly enough, choking to death. As well as graphic detail, the poem contains many examples of devices used to create evocative *sound* effects. The alliterative power of the guttural plosive /g/ in “wagon”, “flung”, “hanging”, “gargling” (18-22) conveys the violence felt by the speaker. The assonance achieved through the repetition of the diphthong /aI/ evokes pain in “white eyes writhing” (19). Onomatopoeia conveys the sound of blood spilling into lungs: “Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs” (22). And when language seems inadequate in the face of the unprecedented horror, Owen resorts to a neologism: ‘guttering’ (16). But ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, which leaves such a lasting impression thanks to its powerful realism, is not solely aimed at sharing the soldier’s experience with those who were not there. The scene depicted serves above all as a factual basis for a truth which has wide-reaching *moral* implications. This becomes clear as the poem’s third stanza announces a shift in focus and the speaker confronts the patriot. The pronoun “you” is suddenly introduced and an apostrophe begins: “If in some smothering dreams you too could pace/Behind the wagon.../And watch...” (17-19).

The syntax of this final stanza is impeded by the abundant factual details which run over from the previous description: twice a conditional clause is introduced and twice a plethora of details is interposed, delaying the moment at which the proposition can be completed. Eight lines of the stanza (which comprises twelve) are given over to the twice-repeated conditional “if you... could”. The first conditional clause serves to evoke the visual (“And watch...”) and the second to evoke the audible (“If you could hear...”). The noun clause which is the direct object of the verb “watch” takes up almost two lines and that of “hear” over three lines, both being expanded by figures that appeal not only to sight (“His hanging face, like a devil’s”, 20) but also to hearing (“the blood/Come gargling...”, 21-22) and taste (“bitter as the cud...”, 21-23). Of course this recourse to figures of sensory perception serves to strengthen the evocative power of the poem as a whole. It also results in rhetorical suspension as we now realise that the preceding stanzas in fact constitute the *exemplum* which makes the *moralitas* all the more convincing. The patriot has been made to understand that it is because he knows nothing of the truth previously expounded that he might propagate that “old Lie” from which the poem takes its title: “Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori”. Not only does the tragedy recounted leave the reader feeling deeply disturbed, it also leads directly and naturally to a truth for which it provides the factual basis. The death recounted here is neither sweet nor decorous.

Other poems conjure scenes of the battlefield and at the same time expose the reflection the battlefield inspires. This method which involves exposing the suffering of war and the thoughts the suffering inspires characterizes much of Owen’s work. These poems carry private thoughts which are meaningful to the reader only if the context which gives rise to them is also shared. They serve to expose to the reader an inner truth that the soldiers carried with them, that “truth untold”¹ to which access is gained solely through a heightened sense of awareness exclusive to the battlefield. What is striking is that paradoxically, these private inner truths are presented as being those of the group as a whole, truths of collective significance, something that the men shared. In ‘Exposure’, a first person plural narrative reveals the soldiers’ sensations during their long hours on the open battlefield, exposed to the elements, as they watch and wait. All sensory perception here is collective, as underlined by the first person

¹ See Owen’s poem ‘Strange Meeting’.

plural: “*Our brains ache...*”, “*Watching, we hear...*”, “*Pale flakes come feeling for our faces-/We cringe... we drowse...*”. The simple present tense is used throughout, creating the impression that the poem is a direct transcription of a stream of consciousness and conferring timeless significance on what is relayed. The second part of the poem then focuses on the men’s mental wanderings as hypothermia and exhaustion progressively drive them into a semi-conscious state. The poem’s final stanzas express a growing feeling of alienation as the soldiers’ thoughts turn to home and then back to the present and to their motives for fighting. The men’s thoughts, like the sensations focused on in the first stanzas, are presented as collective and thus conveyed through a first person plural. The antepenultimate stanza ends “*We turn back to our dying*”. Even death is envisaged collectively. In the stanza devoted to thoughts of home, collective significance is reinforced through the choice of plural nouns and generic references rather than personal or specific ones: “*Shutters and doors all closed: on us the doors are closed-*” (29). The men’s beliefs and innermost convictions are finally summarized in a stanza which, in its syntax and in its use of generic references, has the ring of a collective profession of faith:

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God’s invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
For love of God seems dying.

In ‘Exposure’, Owen’s achievement is twofold: the most intimate, inherently private truths of suffering individuals are exposed and at the same time, those inner truths are shown to have collective significance. The “truth untold”, once again, is not that of one man but that of a generation and as such it cannot be dismissed.

A later poem, ‘Spring Offensive’ also turns the reader’s attention to private but no less collective inner truth. Like ‘Exposure’, it mainly focuses on physical suffering as it recounts an episode of slaughter: the soldiers bravely top a hill and race straight into a storm of fire (“*And instantly the whole sky burned/ With fury against them*”, 29-30). Once again, the speaker’s thoughts are inspired by the carnage recounted in the poem. But unlike the speaker in ‘Exposure’, the speaker in ‘Spring Offensive’ has a wider perspective over the scene for he is not involved in the action. The third person plural is used throughout; the narrator is an extradiegetic one.

The episode is recounted in the simple past tense which sets it in a clearly-defined past. This temporal and spatial distance does not however bring an impersonal, objective account. On the contrary, the speaker *interprets* the scene: he claims that the sky “burned/ With fury” (29) against the soldiers as they came under enemy fire, he saw how [butter]cups opened to collect the blood as it was shed (30- 31) and in the showers of earth and rock blasted into the air by the falling shells, he saw “hell’s upsurge” (35). The speaker’s attempt to make sense of the scene is played out in the poem. The attempt entails considering divergent views: “*Some say* God caught them even before they fell” (37, *my italics*). In this quest for understanding, the speaker’s external status appears to be a handicap. Only those who took part can know the truth. The speaker must therefore turn to the soldiers involved. The final stanza thus opens with a question reminding us that the answers lie with the survivors : “But what say such as from existence’ brink/ Ventured but drave too swift to sink” (38-39). The same stanza ends with a question which highlights the devastating power of trauma masked by silence: “Why speak they not of comrades that went under?” The answer to the question – the truth – is unspeakable. The men’s silence attests to the complexity of the battlefield experience. Above all, it reflects the paradoxical nature of victory – both positively connoted and yet morally unacceptable. Finally, let it be noted here that between the questions which frame the final stanza, the speaker depicts the very same scene as in lines 27-37. This time, his choice of terms betrays his perfect understanding of the paradoxical mixture of glory and unbearable shame that has reduced the survivors to silence. That the speaker is perfectly familiar with the devastating paradoxes of battlefield victory can be seen, for example, in his oxymoronic phrasing: the survivors “out-fiended” the fiends of hell (41) and the returning soldiers owe their survival to “superhuman inhumanities” (42). The quest for understanding is a mock quest. The vision of the speaker in lines 40-45 is the vision of the silent men. It is their collective unspoken truth, complex and unspeakable².

It can be seen that Owen draws attention to both visible and *invisible* truth. Not surprisingly, the inner truth, that which generally remains unseen and unexpressed, often morally questionable, is the more

² See also the last lines of “The Send-Off”. In answer to the question of whether the departing soldiers will return, this poem concludes “A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,/ May creep back, *silent*, to village wells” (*my italics*).

difficult to encapsulate in poetry. But in his role as purveyor of truth, Owen is reluctant to moderate or to mitigate. On the contrary, he is careful to preserve in his poetry the full complexity of the soldier's experience. It would appear that it is precisely this complexity in its truest and most disturbing form that he aims to get across to the reader.

In 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo', Owen confides a complex truth structured around a number of disturbing paradoxes and morally unacceptable ideas. The title can be translated as "a defence or justification for my poem". An earlier draft bears the rejected title "*The Unsaid*". Indeed the poem seems to reflect a precise strategy aimed at reinforcing the poet's legitimacy as a spokesman for those who had no voice. And it is fraught with tension which, I suggest, arises from Owen's inability to reconcile two roles: that of the poet determined to put across the truth and that of the officer whose every action was dictated by loyalty to his men.

If the poet is to deliver the truth intact, then the paradoxes of the battlefield can only be relayed not resolved. In its simplest form, paradox is expressed through juxtaposition of contradictory terms or references. The poem's opening stanza delivers the first series of incompatible elements. It begins "I, too, saw God through mud", and evokes "wretches [that] smiled" and "more glory... than blood" in the eyes of soldiers in action (1-3). The speaker compares the laughter heard at the front with that of children (4). On the battlefield, faces are both "seraphic" and "foul" (16). Stanza 7, the last of seven stanzas devoted to conjuring scenes of the battlefield, brings a similar concentration of noun phrases composed of irreconcilable elements as the speaker recalls "beauty/In the hoarse oaths", "music in the silentness", "peace where shell-storms spouted..." (25-29). Other paradoxical images and concepts are woven into the text. No attempt is made by the poet to reconcile these incompatible elements. No mediation takes place. The paradoxes are those of the battlefield, delivered intact in the poem. The poem plays with the reader's expectations and challenges understanding. For example, death is defined as "absurd" (6). But this morally acceptable idea is immediately undermined by what follows within the same statement: "and life absurder". Hence, a common idea is used to secure the reader's approval but then a second idea – equally as true but far less morally acceptable – is evoked, destroying the logic of the previous one. All of these features appear to point to one clear aim: Owen forces the non-combatant to confront the complexity of the deepest and most disturbing truths he had

himself perceived in war. As if aware of the difficulty the non-combatant would encounter in trying to apprehend what is exposed here, the poet resorts to a number of devices which betray his ambition to convince the reader of the veracity of the facts and of his legitimacy as a spokesman.

If we look at *pronouns*, we find the speaker moving between “I” and “we”, as if to reflect both his individuality and his being part of a larger group. The poem opens “I, too, saw...” and the actions related in the first stanza are those of a third party (“wretches”, “their eyes”, “their laughs”). In the second stanza however, the first person plural pronoun is introduced and the speaker’s status switches from witness to participant: “For power was on *us* as *we* slashed bones bare” (7, my italics). This switch to “we” can no doubt be explained by the speaker’s desire to indicate that he was not alone in perpetrating such barbaric actions: responsibility for “slashing bones bare” lies with a group not an individual. But a second reason may be put forward. The switch, which manifests the inclusion of the speaker in the action, immediately follows a disturbing statement: “Merry it was to laugh there-/Where death becomes absurd and life absurder” (5-6). This is a collective, general truth as attested by the impersonal structure “Merry it was...” But it is something that can only have been ascertained through the speaker’s direct involvement and as such, a truth which relies on his status as participant for corroboration. It is this involvement that the speaker manifests by choosing “we”. That the statement given in lines 5-6 is dependent on the experience recounted in lines 7-8 is confirmed by the use of “For”. Despite the full stop at the end of line 6, lines 7-8 bring an explanation for what is put forward. Such a disturbing truth must be rooted in first-hand experience.

Stanza 3 announces a switch from “we” back to “I” as the speaker relates how he advanced “Past the entanglement” of wounded men into the front line among the dead and dying. The switch back to “I” betrays a desire to underline an *exclusive* status — the speaker moves *beyond* the other men, *alone*. It is precisely because he crosses the line that the speaker gains access to an otherwise unattainable truth. The experience is collective but the vision is exclusive. Stanza 4 thus begins “And *witnessed...*” and describes the exultation seen in the faces of men as they kill others. In stanza 7, the dual status of the speaker, both observer and participant, appears clearly: “*I* have perceived much beauty/*In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight*” (my italics). The speaker’s legitimacy as spokesman is all the stronger for his dual status.

The same desire to reinforce his legitimacy as a spokesman appears in the speaker's choice of tenses. Stanza one begins "I, too, *saw...*", and stanza two continues in the simple past, a straightforward choice for narrating a chronology of past events. But stanza three opens "I, too have dropped off Fear" as the simple past tense gives way to the present perfect. A link is forged with the present, with the moment of enunciation. This link is reiterated at the beginning of stanza 5 and of stanza 7 (which both begin "I have..."). The significance of the immediate past in relation to the present is thereby underlined: the speaker's present judgements are seen to be founded upon recent experience. In stanza 5, personal experience even serves as a basis for a re-definition of love, the logical link between the definition and the experience again being expressed by "for": "For love is not...", 19). It is the exclusive experience recounted in the poem which leads to – and serves as justification for – a conclusion encapsulating an exclusive truth.

Seven of the poem's nine stanzas are given over to exposing, in a confessional tone, the paradoxes of war and the complex personal experience in which those paradoxes are rooted. The poem is underpinned by a strategy aimed at confirming the speaker's legitimacy as purveyor of truth by constantly linking the truth expounded and the experience which led to that truth. 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' aspires to be an authoritative text. It is a testimony in which Owen asserts his authority as an author. The poet successfully retrieves the truth about war from the realms of common misconceptions and delivers it whole, in its starkest form. But the first line of the penultimate stanza of the poem marks a sudden change in tone. It is as if the speaker, suddenly regretting his brutal honesty, has been taken by remorse for having shared something not quite his to share. Could it be that truth and loyalty are incompatible? As from line 29, beginning "Nevertheless", a protective, defensive tone takes over. The last two stanzas take the form of an apostrophe. The penultimate stanza is fully taken up by a subordinate clause which, like the subordinate "if" clause in 'Dulce et Decorum Est', provides a last opportunity to recount the horror (here summarized more concisely). The final stanza is made up of injunctions against the reader, dictating what the latter may and may not do and there is judgement about "worth". The use of "shall" brings an authoritarian tone recalling Biblical discourse. Short decisive utterances express hostility towards the reader. It is above all the speaker's sense of responsibility towards his men which appears here: "You shall not come to think them well content/ By any jest of mine" (35).

His final verdict is one of bitter scorn and leaves no hope of reconciliation with the non-combatant. 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' leaves the reader with a lasting sense of uneasiness. Ironically, here, it is the reader who is alienated not the soldier as the soldier-poet effectively closes ranks with his fellows. Owen seems to conclude at the end of this, his *apologia*, that some truths are better withheld³. His dilemma, arising out of his conflicting desires to get the truth of war across to those who would never otherwise find it while all the time protecting the honour of those who had lost their lives and limbs finding it, has been played out in the poem.

Only four of Owen's poems were published in his lifetime and sadly, in his assessment of his achievement both as an officer and a poet, Owen was deeply dissatisfied with the latter. In one of his last letters to his mother in October 1918, he wrote: "I came out in order to help these boys – directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first" (Stallworthy 1974, 278). Thankfully, today, Owen's achievement is widely acknowledged and his message of truth has been clearly heard. Tim Kendall affirms: "Together, [Sassoon] and Owen were in large measure responsible for a public perception of the war's futility which is still prevalent today" (Kendall 2013, 152). Wilfred Owen would have been delighted with recent reviews of his work, particularly those which will mark 2014, this the centenary of the start of World War I.

³ It is no doubt these truths that Owen refers to in 'Strange Meeting' as "truths that lie too deep for taint" (36).

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