

MUSE IN THE MACHINE

MUSE IN THE
MACHINE

American Fiction and Mass Publicity

Mark Conroy



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Part One

Theoretical and Historical Prologue

Introduction: Literature, Inc.

The history of literature has been the history of mass publicity. To adapt Walter Benjamin, almost every document of literary art has also been the artifact of an essentially commercial process of publication and distribution. Certainly the modern form taken by the literary as an institution since the late eighteenth century would have been impossible had not the publishing apparatus of the West generated it. This state of affairs is not in every way negative or crass, especially in view of the way publishing houses typically acknowledged competing pulls and tugs and were never thought to be merely pecuniary entities. In some ways, in fact, the impersonality of the market permitted an autonomy, and an anonymity, previously unavailable to writers. (The anonymity almost perished when electronic media placed new urgency on the book tour, though many nineteenth-century authors were also platform performers.) The helping hand of patronage could also be a dead hand weighing on its recipients, and much of the independence the romantic literary artist was able to declare resulted from the fact that literature was taken out of that circle of patronage and thrust into the great world.

Of course, surrendering the claustrophobia of patronage meant taking on the agoraphobia (“fear of the marketplace”) attendant on the emerging arrangements. As the texts in this book attest, the partnership between author and publicity machine has always been necessary, above all since the rise of mass literacy. But like so many close partnerships, it has also been fraught with tension, subject to resentments and pique. This is especially inevitable with the collaboration between literary authors and the machinery of marketplace distribution, because part of the way a writer defines him- or herself as literary is by not being *too* good a partner to the mechanism of commerce. In their various ways, all the writers I treat dramatize the flaws and contradictions in the commercial cultural apparatus of their day; and in looking outward, they also look inward—to their own complicity in the process they critique and their own need to be outside it, or to seem to be.

It is by now a critical commonplace to sketch forth all the ways literary writers were responding to the welter of mass-cultural messages. Time and again we are informed that T. S. Eliot knew of and eulogized Marie Lloyd, that James Joyce loved and used techniques from the cinema, that Marianne Moore was really excited by advertising. True and useful as this emphasis is, it threatens to make our literary figures too cuddly and populist sounding. In truth, the greater awareness of mass culture on the part of modern writers is not really a mitigation of their suspicion of it. If anything, it may have aggravated those suspicions. What it did do is to increase their nostalgia for the kind of deep mythic resonance that the more successful mass-cultural products seem to attain with people. What should be added to an already raised awareness of how much influence the products of mass publicity have had on serious literature is a sense of how much dismay and fear literature has had of them: fear of being beaten by them and fear of joining them (at least on terms other than its own). The machine insists, in the end, on (its perception of) the audience, the muse on itself. But the muse still wants an audience and needs the machine to provide it. And this machine was a printing press long before it was supplemented by sight and sound.

Although the novelists I treat are late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans, the riven nature of the modern literary enterprise goes back at least to romanticism. This may be the place to acknowledge that even if much of this study's material concerns the electronic media and their famed capacity for simulation—an issue for Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*, Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*—it is nonetheless the burden of my argument that the particular anxiety in these reflections on the media originates not merely from the evident competition between word and image (a competition where image seems destined to have the last word), but more from a long-standing condition of modern letters, one that implicates the very source of the literary as a category. I contend that the commercial configuration and the imperatives of the publicity apparatus are more disturbing to literary people than any later electronic technology could ever be, precisely because that apparatus was so vital to creating the conditions of their own emergence in their modern form. (In fact, there may be a sense in which the iconic form of electronic media production is actually reassuring to authors: there seems, after all, a natural divide between writing books and manipulating sight and sound. One is consigned to irrelevance, at worst, and this is a familiar condition for literature; but at least one is not seduced into complicity with the commercial apparatus.) This is why I do not consider this a study of the media primarily; it is more a glimpse at a much older and more persis-

tent phenomenon of Western society: the commercial publicity apparatus. If the authors in this study seem suspicious, even disapproving, of this process, this ingratitude is understandable. The only possibility of being heard, since the era of patronage, is through this megaphone, and the people who own it determine what gets said by its means. Many changes have been brought about in this process with the advent of electronic media, and these will be taken into account. But the process itself has changed surprisingly little, and the same could well be said of the queasiness about the process on the part of the authors confronting it and caught up within it.

Pandora's Press: The Whored Muse

The growing post-Renaissance interest in fame as a possible route to life after death gives rise to the ideology of authorship. So goes the oft-told story, and for a reason. But a material ingredient of the concept of authorship, even if not the only begetter of the "onlie Begetter," is the development of commercial publishing and its replacement of gentlemanly patronage. Under that regime, the role of the poet or musician was primarily to solemnize certain occasions and to praise his patrons the rest of the time. This process often yielded very good results (J. S. Bach and Wolfgang Mozart come to mind). But the stance that grew up by the turn of the nineteenth century, the rebellious artist with whom we associate romanticism both English and continental, was inconceivable under such tutelage.¹

The artistic sensibility, chief if not sole guarantor of the work of art according to Pierre Bourdieu, was far from the priority before the growth of publishing that it became afterward. For the personal "take" of artist on world to be the central fact of literary endeavor, it had to be possible for writers to confront a readership without the requirement of pleasing some specific set of people.² There is much said about the nostalgia of writers for patrons—and there have been twentieth-century writers (James Joyce and Robert Musil, for instance) who had much patronage—but the defenestration of the patron can be liberating as well as disquieting. Furthermore, the anonymous marketplace of letters almost necessitated at least the attempt at a personal style, if for no other reason than as a means of differentiating one's own writing from that of other people. In many instances, at first almost all, anonymity was itself a blessing of Grub Street economics, although that rapidly became less of an option. In any case, the fact that the author, named or not, was relatively unknown personally to the reader allowed an artful arrangement of self, a dramaturgy of the personality, to develop.³ The essay form was just such a use of style to present personality.

Even though we can see that, by the time of Henry James's artist tales at least, personality and prose style have already been primly separated into their respective functions (the former iconic and promotional, the latter textual and literary), it is my impression that this was less if at all the case during the era of the English romantics. The tendency of romantic poets such as William Wordsworth to inscribe when the poem was "composed" constitutes itself as an open invitation to read the poem without any persona, as legitimately reflecting the author's sentiments. Furthermore, much as people like to exile the publicity-hungry Lord Byron from other, nobler souls, the reality is that the romantic poets saw the opportunity in the new modes of distribution for using the process of mass circulation itself against the mass culture of their day. More than that, their strategy revolved around the very populist idea of giving pleasure.⁴ Even the inevitable twin to artistic sensibility—alienation—was more available as a stance to unaffiliated authors than it would have been to their patronized predecessors. After all, one had better not be alienated from the hand that feeds one.⁵

For all of these reasons, then, the anonymous and distant marketplace actually worked to foster the attitudes that seemed to spring up in opposition to it. This is true not only in the trivial sense that were it not for the marketplace there would be nothing to react against, but also in the strong sense that the preconditions for presenting the figure of an autonomous artist bravely breasting society's waves were met by moving from recipient of patronage to free agent. At the same time, this very freedom was underwritten by a different sort of bondage, and a harder one to fathom: to the public.⁶ Michael McKeon is describing this soft indenture when he insists that "publication . . . participates in a system of commodity exchange in which the rewards of production and the release from paternalistic patronage are inseparable from an obligation to be consumed with some regularity."⁷

When they saw the formless and void chaos into which they had been thrust, literary people reacted by seeking smaller publics within the larger. (Just how determinate this "smaller public" often was helps account for how it could be thought that John Keats had been killed by a review.) The rejection of society, in this regard, could be read as the signal to a smaller, more select society to gather round the story tree—and so it was taken by various coterie audiences as the nineteenth century progressed.⁸ It is not without reason that the growth of that very middle-class counterweight to the middle class known as bohemia comes along soon after the romantic era.⁹ Regardless of their disdain for the mechanisms of civilization, though, authors romantic or bohemian never objected to being published, the usual prerequisite to being read. Add to that the fact that the individual

sensibility so prized by literary people could only be highlighted properly when placed outside the circle of any obvious enfolding protection. Since the orphanage that gives birth to this autonomous sensibility is only sustainable by the modern mechanism of publishing and distribution, it is fair to say that in this sense the machine itself produces the muse.¹⁰

Why is the muse necessary to the very viability of the machine itself? Arguably it is not, but it acquires the illusion of centrality in part by the peculiar avenue of copyright law. Martha Woodmansee has shown that in some sense the very concept of authorial intention, now a commonplace of literary criticism and rightly so, has its origins in the industrialization of print, the desire of the authors to show that a “work transcends its physical foundation” and the consequent need to show that it “is an emanation of [an author’s] intellect—an intentional, as opposed to a merely physical object.”¹¹ Woodmansee points out that earlier, in the eighteenth century, writing was “considered a mere vehicle of received ideas that were already in the public domain,” and so was “by extension . . . considered part of the public domain” itself.¹² In a way, the development of copyright law in this regard shows how the growing pride of authorship of the writer post-Renaissance comes to clash with the newly installed industrial process of mass printing and distribution.¹³ Yet the very fixity of the written result and the clear demarcation drawn by mechanical reproduction between the type and the token both produce a paradoxically easier case for declaring a text utterly unique to its author.¹⁴ Oral pronouncements are fleeting and fall back readily into the oral tradition from which they come; writing remains irreducibly itself and not something else.

The sort of originality obsession with which the English romantics are associated springs naturally from this state of affairs. Starting with Alexander Pope (not coincidentally the first English author to get rich from the publication of his writings) on through William Wordsworth, the inspired moment becomes ever more central, and in the process becomes less the property of God, more the flower of genius: “And as they [the writings] are increasingly credited to the writer’s own genius, they transform the writer into a unique individual responsible for a unique product. [Note how uniqueness seems to move from product backward to source, for some reason.] That is, from a (mere) vehicle of preordained truths—truths as ordained either by universal human agreement or by some higher agency—the *writer* becomes an *author*.”¹⁵

Woodmansee allies the growing nineteenth-century concern for originality, the horror of being a mere scribe, to writers’ desire to lay a secure claim to their province of the written and published word. But I would add

that the constant fear of the scribal, of regression to the taking of dictation that writing once usually implied, gets displaced from technology (since printing presses now copy things, and with increased efficiency as the century proceeds) and even from piracy (since copyright regulations help as they are introduced) onto the literary marketplace itself.¹⁶ But what is remarkable is how fast a society of “individuals” has to form to promote free-spirited expression and nonconformity. Literary culture, a lonely endeavor in the throes of creation itself, is quickly fortified by houses of its own: cenacles, salons, publications that announced the favored works and authors, eventually imprints for individual literary editors within publishing houses.¹⁷ I would suggest that such bulwarks are essential against the loneliness of the misunderstood individual writer confronting the marketplace alone, a confrontation only Ayn Rand could really have loved.

Culture of any sort, high or folk, seems always to need a house, and coteries and their institutions have traditionally supplied a house for writing. Without enough such shelter, the danger is that the unaided writer will prove unequal to the greater force of mass taste and its imperatives. That such a force may be indirect, working as it were from the inside of the author, makes it possibly even more disturbing. The inkling that the inspiration, or muse, is itself already whored—that it is the ventriloquism of public taste—troubles the sleep of many a writer.

America, Ink: The Republic and Letters

But, at least in the American context, the answer may be more complex, and more melancholy, than that. After all, there never was a system of patronage in the United States, or a very rickety one in any case.¹⁸ Hence the marketplace, always in place and never congenial, could not prompt any feeling of manumission. In addition was the problem that the public had little use for serious literature, in the nineteenth century or the 1990s. For figures such as Melville and Hawthorne, the variegated American public is already the same sort of threat a living patron's rejection would have been.¹⁹ Above all, in the American discourse a proponent of serious literature has no easy recourse to the assumption that cultural refinement is a civic good, in the way a European nation tended to have. The storied American restlessness with all forms of authority, particularly those smacking of Europe, seems to have been in play here, even bedeviling Ralph Waldo Emerson.²⁰

The publicity apparatus that has become so hypertrophied in the current electronic mass culture was already a strong and unavoidable determinant

of American literary life by the time antebellum had turned to postbellum.²¹ It has always been a part of the widened national marketplace for written work brought gradually into being throughout the nineteenth century.²² Indeed, this early version of the literary marketplace was so powerful that William Charvat makes the case for changing our classic dyadic relationship between author and reader into a triangle, with one of the three sides of the dynamic representing the “book and magazine trade.”²³ The fact is that in many ways serious writers in the United States have always had this tug-of-war with their distribution apparatus. The change in publishing from a gentleman’s pastime to a professional’s trade took several decades to accomplish. Arguably it was not until the conglomerates came to the large publishing firms in the seventies that the process of commercialization became essentially complete. But by the Gilded Age it had already commenced.²⁴

Little noticed but equally important to the growing commercialization of the literary life was the shift toward more popular magazine journalism, which began in earnest somewhat later than the comparable process in book publishing itself had. Such venerable old journals of New England as the *Atlantic* were being jostled by inferior but racier product such as *McClure’s* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, an especially significant trend because serialization had provided for authors what Christopher Wilson has called “a vocational springboard.”²⁵ The nationalization of the readership for magazines and books prompted this rationalization, and what some close observers of publishing would view as degradation, within the literary market.²⁶

By common consent, though, it takes the aftermath of World War I—with its combination of pent-up hedonistic demand, proliferation of photographic and radio technology, and improved transportation owing to the automobile and better roads—to institutionalize publicity culture in a serious way. The claim has been made that American advertising revenue went from \$682 million in 1914 to almost \$3 billion in 1929.²⁷ Ann Douglas has made the interesting point that many of the writers and artists of the twenties in America were actually very well disposed toward the advertising system that was developing at that time. Part of the reason for this was sheer novelty and the delight in it, but Douglas also suspects that the evident psychic harm and exploitation of the advertising system was not yet as blatant.²⁸ The advent of the Great Depression reminded writers of the deadly seriousness that underlies the playful consumerism of the interwar economy. Nathanael West’s more jaded response to the media carnival of his day could be partially put down to his position as a writer primarily of the thirties, not the twenties.²⁹

It is really in the thirties that the fragile partnership between literati and mass culture is most dramatically frayed, despite the fact that more writers than ever—more serious writers—were employed in Hollywood and mass journalism. In fact, the very well-defined nature of electronic media in particular made it easier psychologically for the serious writer to imagine he or she was engaged in an entirely different enterprise from that of entertainment: when the model was primarily print journalism, the distinction was somewhat harder to maintain since it was all writing and only writing. As the example of Tod Hackett in West's *Day of the Locust* would suggest, however, the seeming divide between entertainment and art could be overwhelmed by entertainment even then. In West's allegory of mass culture and high art, it is not so much the former's diabolical similitude that causes it to triumph over the latter: it is sheer *force majeure*. Size really did matter in this regard after all—and essentially nothing else.

One reason why American writers seem more aware of their alienation from the public than do comparably serious writers in France or England is that for the latter authors there really is an alternative, however unrewarding, to popularity—and that is very palpable prestige. In the United States, by contrast, there is scarcely even prestige awaiting the impecunious author. The aristocratic stance of a Gustave Flaubert or Charles Baudelaire, so definitive of the modern artist and writer, is less available to Americans, who do not have the same assurance that in the extreme future generations will “catch up” with their productions.³⁰ In addition, there is no competing discourse to the bourgeois language of democracy and the “common man” to fall back on. (The only possible alternative, the pseudo-aristocratic language of social Darwinism, is in practice only ready to hand for defenders of the propertied.) Often, even self-styled avant-gardists in the United States have a sentimental vestige of democratic ideology and cannot finally bring themselves to acknowledge the ineluctable dissonance between their work and the public appetites.³¹ Between the individual writer and the national readership falls a shadow too deep and dark to be overcome. Another way of saying this is to note that although there has always been in America, from the Civil War on, a *kind* of coterie audience for serious art, it was never large or concentrated enough, in either numbers or geography, to produce its own institutional counterweight to the great, undifferentiated reading public.³² And even *this* seemingly vast “public” is such a small fraction of the population at large that little can be retrieved for high seriousness by its means.³³

The culture bearers in the fiction I have chosen to treat are disparate, sharing only their isolation. But the isolation of their creators has an additional source: the lack of that strong and deep support from “minority” cul-

ture that is the defining feature of countries where literature and art are vibrant and thriving.³⁴

The impersonality and wide reach of commercial distribution are what allowed a new sort of literary person to flourish, unaided by direct patronage, first in England from the time of Samuel Johnson onward, then in France after the Revolution and in America after the Civil War. This new machinery really did help birth a new muse, even bringing about the independence and creative freedom of artists and writers who then sometimes felt free to turn against it. The not very hidden weapon in the arsenals of most of those who did strike out seemingly on their own, except for a few with very strong wills like Nietzsche's or an inheritance like Flaubert's, was a second, substitute "patron" in the form of a smaller but reliable knot of interested and discerning critics and consumers. These coterie audiences have been the salvation of high seriousness elsewhere in the industrial world. And they do exist also in the United States. But they are largely left to their own devices here, our minimal public arts aid sustained chiefly to incite public fury and be routinely punished with budget cuts. Our creative writing departments are possibly the closest thing we have to a patron for serious authors. But aspiring writers are a poor substitute for enthusiastic readers.³⁵ The actual numbers of this serious audience, especially by comparison to the titanic proportions of the overall population, are ludicrously tiny and, owing to the distribution of urban areas, widely scattered. The fabled rigors of that rite of American authorial passage known as the book tour take on a special color when the sheer vastness of the country is factored in.³⁶

The reader may think that the contemporary situation I evoke goes too far ahead. It may, but it does not go far afield. The famously marginal status of *gens de lettres* today in America has been prepared for by a process that really got going by the latter nineteenth century. Small wonder that authors who first saw this process beginning, and not only in the United States, wondered whether they would be returned, by the circuitous route of public taste without serious tastemakers to guide it, to the sort of activity they had only recently been freed from having to perform, ironically as a result of the rise of commercial presses. That activity is figured as above all scribal. The very mechanism that once allowed authors to claim absolute originality and pride of ownership seemed increasingly to herald a return to the whoredom of copying. It is not for nothing that the banally reproduced image, the hackneyed turn of phrase or piece of received wisdom, comes to be called "stereotype." It does not take long for the creative author, the genius newly minted from the machine of marketplace publishing, to become haunted by the opposite number: the copyist.

Refusing Dictation: Authenticity and Authorship

Gustave Flaubert anticipated this obsession with originality and uniqueness—as usual in the form of fearing their opposite—in his late work *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, whose heroes are two copyists who try to become original thinkers and writers and who, in one version of the ending, hit upon the solution to the problems that result from their quest: “Copier comme autrefois.”³⁷ An offshoot of his work on this volume was his “Dictionary of Received Ideas,” which gives a good idea of what literary people construed as the enemy. (Of course, it is the fatal ambiguity of a project such as the dictionary that it is undecidable whether, by defining banality at length, one has confined it as well or merely succumbed to it. We know how often parody becomes earnest.)

But Flaubert was not the first or the last to see the uncanny closeness of quirky writer to impersonal, repetitive mechanism—and to reject it, or try to. The resistance to banality was to become, for the literary craftsman, something like what resistance to common wisdom would be for the scientist or the Enlightenment philosopher. What is striking about the literary, in contrast to visual art or music, for instance, is that when all is said and done, there are many fewer markers by which to set apart serious endeavor from frivolous or meretricious product than in those other fields.³⁸ But if the things of culture in modernity usually have a house—if classical music is performed generally in a concert hall by a chamber ensemble or orchestra, and painting and sculpture of value are found in museums and galleries—then an odd thing about prose literature (one of many) is the way it sits in the bookstore cheek by jowl, seemingly unfazed, among the banal best sellers. Some of them, wonderfully, are even themselves best sellers.

Assuming that Flaubert’s concern about reduction to the scribal is shared by other writers (and a reading of George Gissing, Henry James, or Nathanael West would suggest that it is), the obvious reply is: Why do they care? The literary merit and seriousness of a work of art is proven in the reading, like pudding in the tasting. If it’s there, the right people will know it. But again, who are the right people? What does knowing it mean? The forms of recognition in the literary life are few, uncertain, and usually late in coming—if they come at all. There are myriad informal ways of seeking membership in the confraternity of serious writing; but uniquely, I think, membership is never conferred. First of all, the novel’s very marketplace origin assures that any particular specimen is suspect. (At least poetry’s pedigree antedates publicity culture and its apparatus.) Beyond that, in order to

be published in the first place, a work has to be assumed to be of some commercial potential, a fact of which the novelist is aware in advance and which must order at least some of his or her thinking. To seek publication at all, in a situation where the delivery system is in essence not cultural but commercial, is to offer oneself as of commercial potential. This means one very important, insufficiently remarked thing: that literature, from at least the time of romanticism, was no realm set apart from the commercial arena, but rather a *contesting of the ground of the "Publick"* that had been seized first by meretricious product without aspirational intent. In a real sense, the so-called art novel is the latecomer, the potboiler the legitimate contender.

The inescapable conclusion is that the field of mass distribution itself formed the conditions for serious prose literature in two contradictory ways: it made novels and prose fiction generally possible—that is, commercially viable—and the run of its products provided something for serious writers to undermine with their own elitist example. The problem is that in the absence of the sort of strong barriers separating other forms of artistic endeavor from their mass-cultural counterparts, the serious writer could never be sure just how different he or she was from the low-minded doppelgänger on Grub Street. To contest the site of mass distribution was to some extent to play on its terms to begin with; and of course even the purest of writers (except those such as Flaubert who had an inheritance) were not untempted by the prospect of actually earning a living, which could be done under the reign of the printing houses as never before.³⁹

The overwhelming structural fact is that modern publishing, though it takes place in "houses," cannot truly be a house for culture but is ineluctably a quasi-industrial process that uses cultural materials to make profit. Possibilities open to the writer involving freedom from previous constraint and sycophancy, but the price is the homelessness of the traveling salesman and a similar worry about authenticity and "the genuine." By placing oneself on the other side of the divide from the Philistine best seller or maker of potboilers, one can distinguish one's own making of myth from that of one's opposite number—and, into the bargain, create a countermyth of one's own heroism and purity. One may not create more effective public myths than those who write for the masses, but at least one can create a myth for oneself. Since the terms are set by commercial enterprise, however, the battle (less a public one than an interior one) has ever to be rejoined, the myth ever forged anew. The *gens de lettres* try to separate themselves utterly from their pedestrian commercial counterparts but at the same time turn back to them constantly to reassure themselves that they are different. They need the publicity apparatus they despise in order

to be read, and they need the humbler servants of that apparatus to remind themselves that others have stooped far lower than they.⁴⁰

There may be a particular appeal to this countermyth for male writers, who are inclined to a heroic view of their own endeavors anyway, and even more so in America. This is partially the legacy of Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, no doubt, but also connected to the rise of mass literacy and the journalism that grew up after the Civil War to supply it. Rightly or wrongly, the high-end constituency for the advertising machinery has long been thought to be female, as for the fiction that has arisen since the Civil War. Nathaniel Hawthorne's infamous comments about the "damnd mob of scribbling women" have been echoed by many other male authors since his time.⁴¹ Beyond that, the heroics implied in battling the marketplace can conceal the more mundane reality of cooperating with it, a reality that to some male artists looks too much like emasculation. Does a male author prefer indeed to be thought of as one lone man fighting the world even when he is benefited by networks and coteries? One suspects that Ralph Waldo Emerson himself could be the ghost harbored within the myth of the muse in the machine.

Such speculations lead me beyond the scope of my study, though it inevitably prompts them. To see more directly how the emergent world of publicity affected a serious American writer, one could do far worse than to examine some of the literary responses of Henry James. In the nineties James made a dramatic and fateful decision: in effect, *not* to take dictation from the marketplace as it existed. Although our inclination now in looking back is to assume that this decision was inevitable—and given the marketplace's near total neglect of him from the 1880s onward, it does seem so—it was a palpable wrench to the author at the time. In making it, James has given critics a pregnant exemplum, a tale in miniature of the larger movement so many writers in the next two decades would make from realism to symbolism, from late Victorian to modernist fiction, from middlebrow to highbrow. What is especially interesting for my purposes, which are to trace how serious writers' tortured relationship to the publicity marketplace affects their fiction, is that the first one to create an allegory of this sort for James's career was James himself. His artist tales, from before but particularly during the nineties, constitute a kind of declaration of independence from the Publick, and not coincidentally come as close to propaganda as the author would permit himself to venture. In the next chapter, I examine some of the things that impel this declaration and how it is fashioned.

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