

"Standing Alone in Rebellion": Dickinson's Withdrawal to Words

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If any strike me on the street

I can return the Blow-- (1167)

Emily Dickinson is a "ghost" in American literary history. Her life was enigmatic and her use of words even more cryptic. She was regarded as a mysterious eccentric who dressed only in white and remained single all life. She was a mysterious figure who avoided any public appearance and devoted her life to the writing of her own kind of poetry. Often seen as a docile little woman living nineteenth-century America, she was born, and died in the same house at Amherst, Massachusetts, and she spent her entire life under her father's financial protection. Totally unknown during her lifetime, she published only seven poems which was almost nothing in comparison with the 1775 poems she actually wrote. She was considered a difficult poet whose creation was characterized by queer diction, peculiar punctuation, inverted syntax, disjunctions and ambiguities which frustrated common scholars and thwarted many potential readers. However, the general impression Emily Dickinson left needs to be modified greatly. In this article, I would like to argue that Dickinson was not hesitant to rebel against her times and that her poetry will not be so difficult if we can understand how "words" are manipulated in the process of her creation.

In the first place, she defiantly rejected traditional religion for she questioned the very existence of the omnipotent God even during the strong religious revival of her time. Since she was concerned more with the present world than the afterlife, she refused to be baptized. Then, conscious of herself as an independent entity, she decided not to marry as a

kind of rebellion against her father's patriarchal authority. Lastly, to condemn the male dominant poetic conventions in her times, she refused to publish her poetry in her lifetime. In short, she was not submissive at all, but rather she was ready to return any inequity with a "blow." As she once wrote to her friend Otis Lord "... don't you know the 'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?" (Letter 562), she was a non-conformist in act and art.

To resist the repressions of religion, family and society, Emily Dickinson chose poetry as her weapon to fight the hierarchical discrimination and yet at the same time created her hegemony in her own word-world. She used language to approximate her experience, but the rupture between language and life revealed more than what she intended to conceal. To procure her liberty in literary invention, she devoted herself to constructing an artistic world of her own in a small room. Thus, poetry helped her gain a spiritual victory at the cost of physical submission. Language became her only salvation. She realized the power of language and yet she also recognized its limitation. These paradoxical attitudes toward language did not impede her creation; on the contrary, she had gained ample space to give free play to imagination and to explore the unknown territory of life. Since she was so indulged in working with words, her language finally became an autonomous system which failed to represent the world but reflected language itself. In the final stage of her life, language even turned into a sustaining power allowing her to express her rage against this world.

I. Escape

Escape is such a thankful Word

I often in the Night

Consider it unto myself

No spectacle in sight

Escape--it is the Basket

In which the Heart is caught

When down some awful Battlement
The rest of Life is dropt--

'Tis not to sight the savior--
It is to be the saved--
And that is why I lay my Head
Upon this trusty word-- (1347)

The idea of escape constitutes a special mentality for Dickinson in her confrontation with the world. Unlike most women who unconsciously submitted to the traditional role of woman as subordinate to man, she relied upon her intellect (Head) and chose "escape" as a metonymic strategy to subvert the predestinated role imposed upon her in the male-dominated society. She hid in the Battlement (her father's house) but never forgot to shoot with her gun (poetry as her weapon) at anything threatening her existence as a human being, especially as a talented female. She was not expecting any savior for she was the savior of herself. However, she was not blind to the fact that to escape was to be caught. Her escape only made her depend more on the circumstance (Basket) in which she was inevitably trapped. This contradiction and tension stemming from within her mind has driven her to write against deprivation and rejection by the outside world.

One of her most courageous acts against authority was evinced in her refusal to accept the omnipotent God. Early in her school days, she was the only student who was considered as having no hope of salvation. Conscious of herself rather as an individual on earth than as a dependent on God, she was intrepid to procure what was really true to her affections. "God is sitting there," she wrote to her close friend, Abiah Root, on January 29, 1850, "looking into my very soul to see if I think right thoughts. Yet I am not afraid, for I try to be right and good" (Linscott 230). Being a young girl, she outshone most of her peers in studies and intelligence. Naturally, she might as well withhold a strong will to success, or at least to confirm herself as an able competitor in male-centered society. She admitted to Abiah, "my rebellious thoughts are many" (Linscott 238). To challenge the religious authority of her time, Emily took a Nietzschean stance to proclaim the death of God and p

nounced the birth of her spiritual autonomy. Most people, including her friends and families, were converted in the religious revival at Amherst in 1850, and only she chose to remain outside the embrace of God. Her rebellious character was strongly revealed in another letter to Abiah:

You are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom--perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it bitter. The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea--I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger! You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love you more. I'm afraid he don't love me any! (Linscott 240)

Refusing to be a submissive lamb in religion, she enjoyed fumbling in the sea, swimming in the danger and thus freeing herself from any spiritual restriction. Emulating Keats' "negative capability," she was able to ease herself in ambiguity and instability. This attitude toward life is clearly reflected in her poetic style in which unity is ignored and linguistic distortion deemed normal.

The other crisis she had to face is her sex role in the family. Stick to conventional values and judgement, her father was convinced that too much study for a girl would only do her harm despite the fact that Emily was the most outstanding student in her class and that her literary talent was far superior to her brother Austin's. It was the nineteenth-century belief that domestic chores instead of mental exertion were more appropriate for women, and that too high a scholastic achievement would impair a girl's marital life. Thus she was forced to leave school and stayed at home attending her father and brother. In one of her letters to Abiah, she complained:

I have been at work, providing the 'food that perisheth'... Mother is still an invalid, though a partially restored one; father and Austin still clamor for food; and I, like a martyr, am feeding them. Wouldn't you love to see me in these bonds of great despair, looking around my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance ... I was in such a plight? (Linscott 236)

At any rate, this physical obedience to her father's authority unconsciously germinated deep

in her heart an ambivalent feelings toward men. She wrote a series of "Master" letters to three possible suitors in which her paradoxical desire to gain man's protection and her own independence as well were clearly expressed. There were speculations about the true identities of these three candidates, namely Samuel Bowels, the editor of the *Springfield Republican*, Charles Wadsworth, the clergyman, and Thomas Higginson, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Whether these identities were valid or not was not so important. However, one thing was true -- none of the three men were able to appreciate her real talent, let alone accept her independent thinking. Early in her decision to keep a certain distance from God, she seemed to understand that no heavenly savior, hence no man, could safeguard her on earth. The best way to secure woman's integrity was not to depend upon man's mercy for spiritual survival. Therefore, she decided to stay outside the besieged wall of marriage. Her father's desire to control her resulted in her running out of control, and her running out of control in turn resulted from her desire to control her feminine world. Her determination to be "erect" was clearly demonstrated in the following poem:

I'm ceded--I've stopped being Theirs--
 The Name They dropped upon my face
 With water, in the country church
 Is finished using, now,
 And They can put it with my Dolls,
 My childhood, and the string of spools,
 I've finished threading--to--

 My second Rank--too small the first--
 Crowned--Crowing--on my Father's breast--
 A half unconscious Queen--
 But this time--Adequate--Erect,
 With Will to choose, or to reject,
 And I choose, just a Crown-- (508)

The awakening of her feminine consciousness drives her to break out of the cocoon which

she used to "thread" herself inside. With a strong will to choose her own womanly life as a whole arc rather than be chosen as a doll, she casts off the stereotyped idea of woman as man's possession (being *Theirs*) and "erects" as a new feminist. A beautiful butterfly was born!

The third challenge that Emily Dickinson faced was to subvert the linguistic hierarchy of the patriarchal poetic conventions of her time. Following Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," she expresses her protest by refusing to publish her poetry in the male-dominated literary society. To relinquish male epistemology, she even invents her own grammar in writing poetry. Her most obvious rebellion against the traditional punctuation is her unique usage of dashes which isolates words from their context and in this way creates suspension in a text. Capitalized words in the middle of the line attracts readers' attention to their presence and thus render "a substantial referentiality to the ideas or things" (Miller 58). The demolition of fixed grammar class is another characteristics. Adjectives, verbs and adverbs are used as nouns, and nouns as verbs, or adjectives. The old order and system are replaced by a very Dickinsonian one. In addition, her idiosyncratic syntax invites her readers to participate in filling the deletions of which some are recoverable, but some are not. The distinction presented in her syntax clearly reflects the fragmentation of her transient and ephemeral thoughts about the mundane world in which she lives instead of the heavenly world of the afterlife. To renounce the masculine ideology of the utilitarian priorities of language, she shifts her attention to the recording of the process of perceiving and thinking. However, this recording of experience by language inevitably creates more problems than it tries to solve due to the semiotic nature of language itself. The interaction between signs gives rise to the endless circulation of floating signifiers and defers language's representational function. Hence, the gap between what is said and how it is said becomes a necessary evil which keeps on luring and frustrating the literary readers. This phenomenon is especially evident in Emily Dickinson's poetry. The deliberate gaps she left between the lines or words have become a maelstrom that drowns all her readers.

II. Prison vs. Liberty

No Prisoner be--
Where Liberty--
Himself--abide with Thee-- (720)

In nineteenth-century America, women were not financially independent. Emily Dickinson was no exception. She relied on her father's financial protection, and was compelled to domestic seclusion. However, the confinement of the body to the home did not stifle the energetic activity of her soul. She wrote to Abiah, in January 1851, "I do not care for the body, I love the timid soul, the blushing, shrinking soul" (Linscott, 239). The invigorating soul was what she cherished most.

She was born a literary genius and a rebellious devil too. Far from being a reticent conformist, she wanted to speak out her own feelings toward the world. In poem 613, she said:

They shut me up in Prose--
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet--
Because they liked me "still"--

Nevertheless, she is not a caged bird because her "Brain--go round." With a strong "will," she wants to "abolish his captivity and Laught." Besides, she has a strong desire to demonstrate her intelligence. Though subordinate and weak as a female, she is a valorous rebel:

I took my Power in my Hand--
And went against the Word--
'Twas not so much as David--had--
But I--was twice as bold-- (540)

The power in her hand is the pen which converts her thoughts into poetry. To revolt against the world, she chooses to escape from religious, familial and literary authorities, and at the

same time escapes to choose her own autonomy in poetry.

Her spiritual escape undergoes continuous trials. Her fighting spirit is fully displayed in the following poem:

I never hear the word "escape"
 Without a quicker blood,
 A sudden expectation,
 A flying attitude!

I never hear of prisons broad
 By soldiers battered down,
 But I tug childish at my bars
 Only to fail again! (77)

The last line implies her continuous conflict and struggle in trying to shatter the physical prison at home. Little by little, she learns that the only way to save herself is to liberate from "within." Discarding superficial socials, she learns to enjoy herself in solitude and in nature. Paradoxically, her seclusion protects her privacy and provides her roomy space for poetic creation. Free from interference from "outside," she is able to concentrate on the writing of poetry. In this way, the symbolical death of her body leads to a kind of poetic re-birth of her spirit. The liabilities reversely become her assets. Financial dependence turns into intellectual independence and the absence of a partner brings about the presence of a great poet.

III. Words as a Broken Net

A word is dead
 When it is said,
 Some say.

I say it just
 Beings to live
 That day. (1212)

Modern poetry is ... the conscious expression of a conflict within the function of language as representation and within the conception of language as the act of the autonomous self.

-- Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight p. 171

Keeping a certain distance from androcentric society, Emily Dickinson is a keen observer and writer. The distance enables her to keep calm and objective in evaluating her life in society. Since she has no chance to compete with men economically and socially, she can at least prove her superiority by expounding her literary talent in poetry. With this understanding in mind, it is quite natural for her to assume the potency of words and the impact of it's maker as well. "A little overflowing word" (1467) may arouse one's passion or move one to tears after it has been spoken for several generations. No matter how many dynasties have come and gone, it will remain as "eloquent" as it first appeared. This latent influence can even make its future readers "sick":

A word dropped careless on a Page
May stimulate an eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries
From the Malaria-- (1261)

The impact of a word which can outlive its maker does not diminish and on the contrary it becomes ever powerful. Therefore, the poet has to be very cautious to prevent his readers from being infected by "Despair" or attacked by "the Malaria."

A poet's words, to Emily Dickinson, can emulate, or even can beat, God's Words. In "A Word made flesh," she says that "A Word that breathes distinctly" is like "a Word made flesh" (1651). Congenial to logos, it is "Cohesive as the spirit," and it has "not the power to die." As a result, when she has to make a choice between Christ's love and Philology, she

chooses "the consent of language." With this "antinomian intent" (Dichl 125) in mind, she displaces the Christian logos with the poet's language. Therefore, philology to Emily Dickinson is favored over God's "Word."

Being secluded from society and retreating to her own word-world, Dickinson acquires power through her magical control over words. She meanders among her imaginary experiences which are otherwise denied by her circumstances. Words endorses her with strength to compensate her voiceless and powerless situation in society. She acts out her speech:

There is a word
Which bears a sword
Can pierce an armed man--
It hurls its barbed syllables
And is mute again-- (8)

Though she is "voiceless," she does believe that power exists within her poetry. A word spoken and a poem written will turn "the Fuse unto a Spark":

A Man may make a Remark
In itslef--a quiet thing
That may furnish the Fuse unto a Spark
In dormant nature--lain--

Let us deport--with skill--
Let us discourse--with care--
Power exists in Charcoal--
Before it exists in Fire. (952)

With skill and care, the poet transforms her experiences into language, and the fragrance of her poetic essence lasts long after the rose of life has deceased:

Essential Oils--are wrung--
The Attar from the rose
Be not expressed by Suns--alone--

It is the gift of Screws--
 The General Rose--decay--
 But this--in Lady's drawer
 Make Summer--when the Lady lie
 In Ceaseless Rosemary-- (675)

"Screws" here suggests the painful process of compressing the common language into the poetic one. Once the attar is extracted from the roses, it will make summer forever fragrant in the "Lady's drawer." The essence, whether it be perfume or poetry, will outlast its maker.

Though language is her sole means to secure her existence and integrity, Dickinson is also aware that language has its limitations. It is like a broken net which often loses more than it catches. Language opens to some experiences and at the same time it closes the others:

If recollecting were forgetting,
 Then I remembre not.
 And if forgetting, recollecting,
 How near I had forgot. (33)

In tracing back to the origin of our memory, we forget in order to recollect and simultaneously recollect to forget. The condition of *aletheia*⁽¹⁾ is inevitable. This is why her poetry is called "the language of oblivion" (Loving 8). Sometimes words are insufficient to express our feelings; therefore, she laments that "Your thoughts don't have words every day" (1452).

(1) Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writing*. *Aletheia* is a Greek word which means unconcealment or opening. As for logos, when one part of truth is revealed, there is always already another part of truth being concealed. The opening will entail the closure, and vice versa. Heidegger says that "because logos lets something be seen, it can therefore be true of false ... in the concept of *aletheia*. The "being true" of logos as *aletheuein* means: to take beings that are being talked about in *legein asapopyaisesthai* out of their concealment; to let them be seen as something unconcealed (*alethes*); to discover them. Similarly "being false," *pseudesthai*, is tantamount to deceiving in the sense of covering up: putting something in front of something else (by way of letting it be seen) and thereby proffering it as something it is not" (80-81).

Sometimes words fail because too many words express too little:

Could mortal lip divine
 The undeveloped Freight
 Of a delivered syllable
 'Twould crumble with the weight. (1409)

Language as signifier cannot be the full representation of its signified. Language, like mathematics, is a system of signs. Its meaning usually stems from the interaction between and among its individual segments. The lack of the complete referential function causes the disjunction between the signifier and the signified. As Pope says in "Essay on Criticism" that "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed," there is always a distance between what is in our mind and what is really spoken. Furthermore, commenting on Martin Heidegger's theory of language, Richard Kearney says:

Language, for Heidegger, is not an entity which exists but the very giving of Being whereby everything exists. It is not a present object but presencing. It is not something true but the very coming to be of truth.... Unlike beings which are, language as Being is not, for it is that whereby beings exist without itself being something that exists. Logos, in short, is the nothing which lets things be, the voice of silence (39)

Things do not exist independently until they are summoned by language, which gives them meaning and existence. Dickinson knows her dilemma of tracing the floating signifiers:

If I could tell how glad I was
 I should not be so glad--
 But when I cannot make the Force,
 Nor mould it into Word,
 I know it is a sign
 That new Dilemma be
 From mathematics further off
 Than from Eternity. (1668)

The experience of inarticulateness leads her to accept words as signs, and this belief is fur-

ther developed in the following poem:

To tell the Beauty would decrease
 To state the Spell demean--
 There is a syllable-less Sea
 Of which it is the sign--
 My will endeavors for its word
 And fails, but entertains
 A Rapture as of Legacies--
 Of introspective Mines-- (1700)

Signifiers cannot reflect the true meaning of conception. The signified thought can only be approximately matched with words. Therefore, the true beauty of "a syllable-less sea" is beyond language. Any endeavor to describe it with words will partly fail. However, the incompleteness, or the rupture, gives the poet the highest rapture in playing with words, in fumbling among the interaction of signifiers and in proceeding nearer to the signified.

Emily Dickinson's poetry is characterized as fragmentary and incohesive. In fact, fragmentation is just the order she intends to present. Imitating the hymn form, Dickinson's poems are short and cryptic. No obvious poetic development is shown through her writing career. No titles of her poems are given because she simply lets her thoughts run and records the process of her thinking and perception. The unorganized ideas are compressed into a few lines which often disperse our attention rather than hold it. The "unfinishedness" of the poems, as they are often ended with verbs or suspending dashes, opens the text to the reader with ample space for participation. It seems that most of her poetry refuses to tell a story because language itself, instead of the story, is her main concern. The intended foregrounding of language gives us some local brilliancies in a certain word or phrase rather than pleasure of an entire poem. Due to her interest in seeking linguistic excitement, her language withdraws from its referential function into the performative one. Cut from real experience of life, she seems to prefer words to the reality of life. She plays with words to please herself. As she wrote "This is my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me----"

(441), she gradually retreated to her own world of words and thus became the queen of her own world.

More evidences of her withdrawal to the word-world can be specified. Dwelling in her small private castle in Amherst, Dickinson created an idiosyncratic poetic style which challenged the conventional grammars and the readers' perception of the things. Her state of seclusion was also reflected in the subject she had chosen for poetry. Not many social events were included in her poetry; instead, she tried to record whatever she had encountered in the small circle of her life. Things such as flowers, birds, bees, snakes and other little animals occupied a big portion of her creation. In this way, the microcosmic world of her secluded life turns into the macrocosmic reality of her creation. In addition, she tends to allegorize her poetry. It seems that things were not related to her. This remote and impersonal attitude to the world is just a reflection of her own physical seclusion from society. However, this kind of self-enclosure is her own soul's selection:

The Soul selects her own Society--
 Then--shuts the Door--
 To her divine Majority--
 Present no more-- (303)

She shuts herself within a small society of nature and family, and sustains herself with words. As she says, "Deprived of other Banquet,/ I entertained Myself" (773), her secluded life is not miserable at all; on the contrary, she is enriched with poetic freedom and fun of word-playing.

Dickinson cares not so much about the world as words that represent that world. Maintaining a certain metonymic distance between the world and words, her poetry refuses to make a clear statement and often pushes its readers into a labyrinth of words. Just like her life, she is interested in depriving the referential function of the language and leaves it as pure locution. Out of contact with circumstantial reality, her poetry tends to construct a surreal world which can only be projected in the world of language. For instance, it is sim-

ply imaginary to say that "His mansion in the pool" (1379) or "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (280). I would like to agree with David Porter's comment on Emily Dickinson's poetry that her "language is speaking itself" (121). In her definition poetry series (X is), the subject she defined is usually self-referential and it has an inclination to move from the world to words, from mimesis to performance. As she committed that "Like this consent of language/ This loved Philology" (1668), she had a habit of consulting the dictionary in which the definitions of words are often circuitous. With this consciousness of dealing with words themselves, she automatically established a verbal autonomy of her own. Instead of using words as her means to describe things around her, she creates things out of her own words. Instances can be found everywhere in her poetry. Descriptions like "a dotted Dot," (617) "paragraphs of wind," (1175) "The hills in purple syllables," (1016) and "Germ's Germ" (998) are difficult to visualize and they can only exist in language. They are pure language games and like mathematics they only exist in the interaction among their individual signs. They are in fact meaningless. The truth is that Dickinson regards language not so much as her poetic means as ends. Consequently the ends even become her means in her career as a poet. The focus upon the ends themselves has thus become the biggest problem as well as pleasure in the study of Dickinson's poetry.

Language dominance has eventually turned into the foreground of her life and art. To a great extent, things exist only because they can become words for her poetry. Giving language absolute primacy over things, she transforms circumstantial reality into words. Any attempt to appropriate experience with words will only lead to the loss of experience and therefore to the performance of words.

Perception of an object costs

Precise the Object's loss--

Perception is itself a Gain

Replying to its Price--

The Object Absolute--is nought--

Perception sets it fair

And then upbraids a Perfectness
That situates so far-- (1071)

The conceptual idea of the thing will replace the thing itself during the process of its presentation. Like modern abstract painting, the description of the sea is presented as a seemingly random design of colors and threads on the canvas. The visible sea turns into the invisible idea of the sea.

An Everywhere of Silver
With Ropes of Sand
To keep it from effacing
The Track called Land. (884)

The sea disappears and the verbal display of the sea is saved.

Her penchant for words was also revealed in her letter to Higginson when he asked a photo of her. She replied cunningly with another letter rather than with her photo: "Could you believe me -- without? I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur-- and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves-- Would this do just as well?" (1-268) She relies upon her words even in dealing with human relations.

Words for Emily Dickinson are her life and her weapons against life. Being molded as "a dutiful daughter" in a male-dominated family (Mossberg 191), she had to be submissive in the first place and then she could have chances to turn oppression into power and establish her own autonomy. Regarding herself as an intellectual, she used words as weapon to struggle against the controlling world which did not offer an equal chance for female integrity. Deprived of the right to spell out her voice, she was angry and desperately in need of an outlet for her rage. Words thus become the instrument of power to help her gainsay the conventions and fight for the establishment of her true self. She identifies herself as a reticent volcano:

A still -- Volcano -- life --
 That flickered in the night--
 When it was dark enough to do
 Without erasing sight--

A quiet--Earthquake Style--
 Too subtle to suspect
 By nature's this side Naples--
 The North cannot detect

The Solemn -- Torrid -- Symbol--
 The lips that never lie--
 Whose hissing Corals part-- and shut--
 And Cities--ooze away-- (601)

Beneath the calm surface, she is smoldering with white heat and anguish. Her rage that "flickered in the night" corresponds to her nocturnal writing habit. When the volcano, the "Solemn--Torrid--Symbol," erupts with poetry, it can destroy cities in which man dwells.

She also identifies herself with "a loaded gun" (754). She holds "a furious propensity to destroy" and the "wish to love, to be sexual and to be creative" (Wolosky 93). Poetry is her bullet which has "the power to kill,/ Without--the power to die--" (754). Poetry is conceived of as violence, and life as rage which goads her to embrace a possible life of love, sex and creation.

Rage in this way has become a key word in understanding Dickinson's career as a poet. Sharon Cameron suggests that rage is the third voice which intrudes between sexuality and death.⁽²⁾ It is true that in sex we reach the climax of life, and in death we face the completion of life. However, rage is the "deference" force that sustains the climax of life and delays the threat of death. Rage in Dickinson's poetry is shown in her open style which resists coherence and completion. The conception of the defense against death is also

(2) Cameron has a detailed analysis on "The Dialectic of Rage" in which rage becomes the "other" that sustains the poet's life as an artist.

manifested by the fragmentary and transient nature of her poetry. In addition, rage enables Dickinson to escape from the tug of war between life and death. The fight for freedom, growing from her rage against suppression, provides her with endless potency to pursue the ecstasy of life in her poetic creation. In this way, she has gained a breathing space under the smoldering atmosphere of a patriarchally dominant society in nineteenth-century America.

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