

To E—

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“[...] La Tour is a good portraitist because he is a *veritable* painter (one who paints veritably), because he is a painter and nothing else. He rigorously reproduces nature without embellishing it, without transforming it through the rules of art. What he does ‘is not poetry; it is nothing but painting’ [...]. The term *poetry* must be taken in its etymological sense here: to be a poet is to *produce* with complete freedom, without slavishly submitting to a model in order to *reproduce* it as rigorously as possible. The opposition between painting and poetry is the traditional opposition that comes from Aristotle, between a mimesis that reproduces nature, a given model, and a productive mimesis, which supplements some deficiency in nature [...] and that perfects nature by ennobling it, in embellishing it.”¹

Double mimesis: is there not a space within this scene of a ‘good’ (reproductive) and a ‘bad’ (productive) painting and of a ‘good’ (productive) and a ‘bad’ (reproductive) poetry, a scene set out within a reading of Diderot, for complication and complexification? Are there not raised (in the first) the questions of the artist’s selection of the model and of the agency availed to the “good painter” in his choice of “slavish submission” to one or other father, to one or other ‘law’? And would these questions not as such open onto a strange parody of ‘agency’ which would complicate and impinge upon the ostensible “freedom” of the “good poet”? The agency of he, the artist, who would take himself to be without model and to be

¹ Kofman, Sarah. “The Resemblance of Portraits: Imitation According to Diderot”. In *Selected Writings*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007. p221-222.

disavailed of both ‘law’ as such and his complicity in its exercising. (But for whose sake, and to what ends?)

Is there not a further and significant complication of such diverging relations present in Sarah Kofman’s supposition within the course of this text (*The Resemblance of Portraits: Imitation According to Diderot*) that “this radical opposition is the product of polemic and rivalry alone”?² A thesis which, accentuated over the course of the text, allows Kofman to conclude (in a conclusion which “the whole of [Diderot’s] *Salon of 1767* implies”) that “the rigorous opposition between the two types of mimesis is purely fictitious.”³

I

By way of setting in question this distinction of a “reproductive” mimesis (a *mere* repetition) and a “productive mimesis” (escape from law: capacity to dream), we would begin with the articulation of an economy which might inform the course of this text, a brief reading of Kofman’s *Autobiogriffures* (a short book subtitled *Du Chat Murr d’Hoffmann*).⁴ Exploring an ostensibly novel (‘Kofmanian’) conception of a theme to some degree reducible to that of the ‘pet’ or of the animal ‘domesticated’ or otherwise proper to man by way of this little remarked upon text, this opening fragment may allow us to inscribe our reading within the doubled themes of such a ‘domestication’ and that of mimesis.

² Kofman, Sarah. “The Resemblance of Portraits”. In *Selected Writings*. p221.

³ Kofman, Sarah. “The Resemblance of Portraits”. In *Selected Writings*. p236.

⁴ For a partial translation of the seventh chapter of this text by Winnie Woodhull, see Kofman, Sarah, “No Longer Full-Fledged Autobiogriffies.” In *SubStance* 9, no. 4 (1980): p3–22.

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Autobiogriffures: a text articulated entirely around the imaginary of the writing of an (autobiographical) animal. A text concerned, in the first, with the significance of considering the following scene:

“Writing such as a cat... writing in an illegible, obscure, slapdash fashion, paper, malforming its letters, scribbled. Writing of the cat? Indecipherable.

And if a cat did meddle with writing, and aspired to being not a scribbler or a scratcher, but a veritable author? Nothing could be read [...]. [It being] such as simple smears of ink destitute of sense (if it is not, such as in the tests of Rorschach, that projected by the reader). A writing of the cat, taken to the letter, is not only indecipherable, it does not have to be deciphered: it is not writing. A cat cannot ‘write such as a cat’: it cannot write: writing, proper to man.”⁵

To begin immediately: an indecipherable and as such ‘intolerable’ scene the reality of which offers, “taken to the letter”, nothing to speak of. Not merely on account of this indecipherability but because it concerns properly speaking non-experience: the non-writing of a cat. *Autobiogriffures*: a text thus concerned with the senseless and with the imagination of sense. With the ‘madness’ of that which is except to representation and to thematisation nevertheless thematised by way of the figure of the cat. A text which so begins by exposing itself in a particular fashion, and despite the force of the content and critiques therein, to being contingent solely upon the sense “projected by the reader” into the obscurity of such a scene. This is to say, which exposes itself to being always already relegated as solely a ‘veritable’ autobiography.

⁵ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. Paris, FR: Editions Galilée, 1984. p9-10. [Note—translations of texts available only in French are my own.]

Since intolerable and since ‘atopic’ this originary scene is doubly displaced. In the first by way of the occlusion of this structure (of the senseless and absent writing of the cat) with an ethical exigency set out in regards to an ostensibly now familiar conception of ‘humanism’. This is to say, in regards to a now familiar ‘deconstruction’ of particular elements of a ‘Western’ discourse and tradition by way of its inattention to (or ‘repression’ of) the animal. And in regards, too, to a now familiar pursuant call for critical analysis of a quasi historical conception of ‘man’ and of his vaunted excellence and propriety which allows for or admits “the existence of peoples ‘without writing’, ‘without history’, whom are refused the name of man”:

“A certain ethnocentrism ‘refuses the name of writing to certain techniques of consignment’ [and as such] to admit the existence of peoples ‘without writing’, ‘without history’, whom are refused the name of man. *A fortiori* we do not admit within the animal a certain disposition to writing, a certain disposition to acquire a certain writing. [...] at question fundamentally is ‘the name of man’, the unity of this concept and that which makes systematically ‘proper’ to man his divinisation, his particular election, his mastery over the universe.”⁶

If this exigency supplements and displaces a purely ‘literary’ question with the ethical, this exigency is itself too displaced within Kofman’s text. Is itself supplemented and thematised—in a thematisation justified by the suggestion of its capacity to elucidate that which systematically renders writing “proper to man”—by a hermeneutic impulse: the endeavour of a critical reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s fictional autobiography of the *Kater* or *Tomcat Murr*, a reading which henceforth constitutes the entirety of *Autobiogriffures*.⁷

⁶ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p10-11.

⁷ See Hoffmann, E.T.A. *The Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr*. London, EN: Penguin Books, 1999. The full title of the text is *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr together with a fragmentary Biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler on Random Sheets of Waste Paper*, originally published as *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler in*

It is perhaps significant to note the ruse wherein the turn to such a scene (that of the writing of the tomcat Murr and of an analysis and reading thereof) allows an ostensible return to the thematic and conceptual vocabulary with which the text begins whilst being, in a significant fashion, structurally distinct from that “atopic” (non-) writing of the cat ‘proper’. Such a ruse, to some degree a diversion from the abyssal, allows for the pursuit of a distinct and fruitful operation: the exposition of the “subversive power” of the fiction of the acquisition of language, of writing, of poesy, and of ‘humanity’ by a cat:

“[Therein is] the subversive power of the following fiction: imagining that a cat could write, had even the ambition to become an author. It is as such with the cat Murr, set in place by Hoffmann within *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*. A fiction the stakes of which we are nearing to examine.”⁸

A subversion the intent of which, in Kofman’s wielding, acts to confound such a discourse wherein the denigration of the animal is operated as an expedient for affirming man’s election. A discourse which imagines the proficiencies and knowledges of the animal—whether “the prowess of the horses and the trained dogs”, “the calculation of certain beasts capable of medicine” or “the mathematical gifts of tuna, learned in astrology, geometry, and arithmetic”—as solely that of the “reproductive mimesis” of the “good painter” with which we began.⁹ A polemic wherein even the most “merited” animal may thus be avowed not as veritable poets (and here we may see the continuity between Kofman’s

zufälligen Makulaturblättern. Amending “censures” throughout with reference to Hoffmann’s text, Kofman cites Albert Béguin’s translation *Le Chat Murr* within *Autobiogriffures* [see footnote 2, p11 of *Autobiogriffures*].

⁸ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D’Hoffmann*. p11.

⁹ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D’Hoffmann*. p12.

‘aesthetics’ and Kofman’s critical relation to ‘humanism’) but remarked upon solely as ‘pets’; mere subjects of domestication and dressage.¹⁰

More specifically, in Kofman’s analysis (an analysis of Descartes, “among others”) this reduction of any vaunted “excellence” and ability of the animal to evidence of their being *mere* painters is capitalised upon so as to produce the imaginary of “the sign of a radical break with humanity” which allows for a precluding of man’s assimilation to the order of the base:

“[...] the scission between man and animal-machine which evades the horror of being assimilated amongst the oyster and the sponge, allows for the safeguarding of the immortality of the human soul, the ultimate issue of the Cartesian polemic.”¹¹

Hoffmann’s “substituting for the ‘great man’, ‘great cat’” acts,¹² in one of a multitude of operations presented in Kofman’s reading, to situate the figure of the animal assimilated to the automaton and to automaticity as the ironic reflection of a conception of an ideality of man which we might characterise, following Kofman, as that of an “admirable technician” driven by a desire to be superlatively technically proficient and knowledgeable, “to be the best—the rival of God”: “the ultimate aim of this ‘technical genius’ is to transform himself into a stiff automaton, into a perfect machine [...]”¹³ *Man*: he too *merely* a pet, subject to the law of the idyll or of his own idealisation? In ‘his’ parodic repetition, the tomcat Murr exposes the mimetic and theological basis of an “ethnocentric” humanism by effacing as such the metaphysical oppositions which predicate such a discourse: “the writing of the cat deplumes, since he plucks at the quill, the privilege of man, erasing the opposition of man

¹⁰ See also Kofman’s chapter within *Autobiogriffures* entitled *Le rêve*, devoted entirely to the question of the distinction of “states of dream [and] states of poesy” as proper to man. Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p51-56.

¹¹ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p13-14.

¹² Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p68.

¹³ Kofman, Sarah. “The Resemblance of Portraits”. In *Selected Writings*. p225.

and animal, of animal and god.”¹⁴ Man himself is thus characterised as *mere* subject of ‘god’ and of a theological conception of the effectuation of ‘man’, such as the tomcat Murr is *mere* subject of ‘man’ and of a humanistic conception of the effectuation of ‘cat’.

If the tomcat Murr is in the first subject to man, to the mimetic enfoldings and assimilations of some or other ‘humanism’, by way of his simple domestication as a housecat (as a pet *per se*), and in the second by way of the threat of his assimilation to the workforce (“he writes unbeknownst to man and escapes thus eventually the threat of becoming secretary to Master Abraham”) then he is subject too, in the third, to his ineluctable mimesis of human literary achievement and discourse: his only means of fulfilling a desire for establishing his ‘greatness’; his ‘humanity’.¹⁵ For his entire ‘autobiography’, itself scratched into and cannibalising passages and scenes of a fictional literary work by his master, is too exposed by an ‘editor’ of this cats work as consisting primarily of a generalised grafting (*greffe*) of fragments appropriated from the ‘great men’ of Western civilisation:

“*Editor’s Note*: I am sorry, Murr, that you so frequently deck yourself with false feathers [...]. This will rightly lose you the sympathy of the gentle readers, I fear. Do not all these comments with which you are giving yourself airs come straight from the mouth of the Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler [...]?”¹⁶

“*Editor’s Note*: Murr! Murr! A plagiarist so soon again! In Peter Schlemihl’s *Wondrous Story* the hero of the book describes his beloved, also called Mina, in the same words.”¹⁷

II

¹⁴ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p91-92.

¹⁵ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p79.

¹⁶ Hoffmann, E.T.A. *The Life and Opinions of Kater Murr*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1969. p325. (See *Autobiogriffures*, p133.)

¹⁷ Hoffmann, E.T.A. *The Life and Opinions of Kater Murr*. p276. (See *Autobiogriffures*, p134.)

Turning presently towards the specificity of the articulations of Kofman's reading, if a "deliberately citational character" of Hoffmann's text "aims to deconstruct the theological conception of the book and of the author, original genius, as the father of the work" then the self-same "generalised grafting" on the part of Murr proper has the contrary ambition:¹⁸

"[Murr] by the same procedure of citation, by the display of his noble parentage, strains to assure, narcissistically, his identity and his genius. His writing elevates [*relève*] in a project which we might qualify as paranoiac."¹⁹

Continuing with the theme of the graft, we may characterise the writing of the cat as always double—as always, with reference to the *griffe* (signature; stamp; claw; scratch, and a term by which Kofman characterises the writing of the cat) an ironic *bi-griffe*, 'written' with two hands. Always pluralised, perhaps above all on account of an identification of this writing (this *griffe*) with the *greffe* (graft; addition; transplant).²⁰ An identification and near homonymy (*griffe—greffe*) deployed throughout the text so as to establish the exchangeability of the inverse movements of grafting (from) and the scratching (into); of citation and cannibalisation. See, for example: "*The Cat Murr*, is therefore at first a text, and a text on writing as though generalised grafting [*greffe*]"²¹

¹⁸ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p17. On this "theological conception of the book", see also p94-5.

¹⁹ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p17.

²⁰ For a limited identification of the various connotations of the *greffe*, the *griffe*, and the *autobiogriffure* solely in relation to the French language, see the translators note appended to Winnie Woodhull's aforementioned partial translation, *No Longer Full-Fledged Autobiogriffies*. Kofman, Sarah, "No Longer Full-Fledged Autobiogriffies." p20.

²¹ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p17.

The *griffe*—the sharpened writing of the ironist, such as Hoffmann; Murr’s “parodic repetition of human writing”;²² the claws particular to the tomcat’s feline comportment, and malformation of the Greek *graphē*—is defined specifically within *Autobiogriffures* as:

“[...] an instrument of writing yet also of self-defence, a means of the seizure of the property of the other [*autrui*]. *Griffe*, sign of rapacity and of fingerprints [*empreinte*] imitating the signature: a term solely for designating the violence of writing which lacerates the paper, and that of the author. The *griffe*, (of German, *Begreifen*, grasping), relates all writing to a harpy, and the cat, to the devil.”²³

This is to say that the *griffe*, in its very ‘positive’ movement of denoting the entry of the tomcat Murr into writing—the movement of his “imitating the signature”, that which is both avowed and disavowed as proper to man—is conversely provisory of the reduction of all ‘writing’ to the *griffe*, to mere inscription (to that which Kofman elsewhere names “*écriture*, writing in the Derridean sense”).²⁴ Provisory of the effacement of the metaphysical opposition of writing (“proper to man”) and its other (mere “techniques of consignment”)—“of life and of literature, of literature and its outside”—²⁵ the *griffe* is operated so as to expose the ‘animality’ of the will to self-preservation at work behind the ‘nobility’ of a humanistic division of such categories. Parodied in the figure of the cat seeking to disjunctively police and assure his personhood, this exposure of the function as a means of “self-defence” allows for the ‘perception’ of the ‘instinctual’ drives behind the texts of all ‘great men’. The ‘perception’ of such texts pre-eminent operation as *autobiogriffures*; and of the text, of any

²² Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p152.

²³ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p63-64.

²⁴ Kofman, Sarah. *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*. London, EN: Athlone Press, 1998. p3.

Without space to venture a comparative study, we note here too Kofman’s presence within Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I am*, wherein *Autobiogriffures* is noted as a text which “keeps vigil over this conference [*L'Animal autobiographique*] and asks to be permanently quoted or reread.” Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008. p6.

²⁵ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p16-17.

‘great text’, as though identifiable as a “portrait brandished afore, erect such as a penis, for intimidating... for the exhibition of identity and the guaranteeing of originality.”²⁶

The complexity of Kofman’s ostensible disruption of this “paranoiac project” of narcissistic reassurance may be identified in the following passage, in regards to a representation of Murr:

“Yet this reproduction of the portrait [...], his repetition in a double, suffices to introduce the other into the same, to cut into this flaunted identity: does then the ‘resemblance’ of portraits not mean, for Hoffmann, the theft of the soul of the model by the painter, the suction of their blood, the wasting of the proper? And does this diabolical theft of the soul of the cat, reproduced in his double, not in this case in return mark too the theft of the quill, by this ‘personage with a soft and affable manner’ who nevertheless makes usage of his claws for reappropriating his blood always already lost?”²⁷

Illustrative of a general procedure which Kofman attributes to Hoffmann, this complexity of the exchanges at work in the scene of the resemblance of portraits opens up onto the ambivalence (and perhaps the novelty) of Kofman’s own ‘double thesis’ in regards to the animal. For even as the tomcat Murr is subject to the entrapment of a ‘humanistic’ conception of the animal, of the inhuman except to the ideality of some or other humanist subject, he nevertheless operates as though an artist taking such a subject for his model, making of himself a “double [which] disfigures the original, [which] calls up and disturbs what, without it, might simply [have been] identified, named, classed in this or that determinate category.”²⁸ Wasting the propriety and the ‘lively’ self-assurance of the model (a determinate and categorical conception of ‘man’) the tomcat Murr is nevertheless himself

²⁶ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p150.

²⁷ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p150.

²⁸ Kofman, Sarah. “The Melancholy of Art”. In *Selected Writings*. p209.

herein too drained of his blood, of his “*jouissance*”.²⁹ Yet in making “usage of his claws for reappropriating his blood always already lost” he regains for ‘himself’ in this very malformation of man and animal alike, a degree of liveliness. Prefiguring the expedient or ‘thesis’ offered at the conclusion of the text by Kofman, this pretence of a ‘liveliness’ gained by Murr at the hands of the effacement of propriety and metaphysical election thus too identifies this ‘cat’ with that ‘philosopher’ who would be operating his figure, and with the methodological operation (both identifiable with and irreducible to ‘deconstruction’) which plays out across her oeuvre.

This double movement, the ambivalence of Kofman’s thesis, is repeated once more in the final sentence of the paragraph immediately following this passage, which enjoins this scene (of the dispossession of the quasi human *griffe* and of ‘the resemblance of portraits’) once more to that *human—animal* dyad with which *Autobiogriffures* is at some level concerned:

“[...] the editor dissimulates the scratches of this devil and the deathly behind this serene and smiling portrait, destined for playing an apotropaic role. The editor gives us to view a portrait, an image through a text, which reinstates the author, made to remain standing, narcissistic; he gives the illusion of being re-appropriated, he is permitted to fall [*retomber*] upon his paws.”³⁰

²⁹ See a second passage on the play of blood in an aside referencing Hoffmann’s text explicitly, set within Kofman’s *The Melancholy of Art*: “In Hoffmann’s *Kater Murr*, the painter Ettliger compares himself to a vulture, [announcing]: ‘I am the red vulture and I can paint when I have eaten rays of colour. Yes, I can paint when I have the hot blood of the heart for paint.’” Kofman, Sarah. “The Melancholy of Art”. In *Selected Writings*. p208.

On this passage of Hoffmann’s, see also the entirety of Kofman’s *Vautour Rouge*. Kofman, Sarah. “Vautour Rouge: Le double dans *les Élixirs du diable* d’Hoffmann”. In *Mimesis Des Articulations*. Paris, FR: Aubier-Flammarion, 1975. p97-164.

³⁰ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D’Hoffmann*. p151. [Note—whilst *retomber* seems to mark here, in accordance with the logic of the sentence, to ‘fall’ may too be understood as to ‘subside’ or to ‘wane’, to ‘die down’.]

Whilst the cat Murr is returned to his standing among men by the machinations of the editor, his animality apotropaically repressed by the provision of an assuredly human stamp of identity, this very desire to remain standing and to hold an aversion to one's falling is suggested as itself instinctive or instinctual, itself animal. In the last, the apparently jubilant re-affirmation of the tomcat Murr as a proper name and as a man among men is—in the very same instant—identified with the feline, all too feline, instinct to land (from any height) on all fours.

The writing of Hoffmann thus gives the impression of a break with a logic of identity in its erasure of the singular signature proper to man, denying the sanctity or security of this “erection of *one* portrait.” A writing which, in Kofman's reading, “rends vain the efforts of this assurance, through it, of a mastery.”³¹ Condemned to such an aporetic state by a critical negotiation and ‘deconstruction’ of any *man—animal* dyad or distinction, a negotiation which ironically upholds both poles whilst exemplifying the double bind therein produced, Kofman's conclusory ‘expedient’ within *Autobiogriffures* is the identification of a “writing which freezes such as the Medusa or entrains both man and cat in the derision of laughter [...]”³² Highlighting, perhaps, the lack the most notable in this text (and I insert this short reflection many months after its writing) such a conclusion would demand an entirely novel form of analysis.

III

³¹ Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p152.

³² Kofman, Sarah. *Autobiogriffures: Du Chat Murr D'Hoffmann*. p152.

“Habituation to irony, moreover, like habituation to sarcasm, spoils the character, to which it gradually lends the quality of a malicious and jeering superiority: in the end one comes to resemble a snapping dog which has learned how to laugh but forgotten how to bite.”³³

“The ironist belongs to the ‘foolish species of men’ who want to feel superior to others; in reality, in his malicious joy he only resembles a ‘snapping dog which has learned how to laugh but forgotten how to bite.’”³⁴

Without space to adequately characterise the implications of this “entrainment” in laughter with which Kofman concludes *Autobiogriffures* we might rather ask, by way of a conclusion, of the consequences of inscribing the text and our reading thereof within the economy of this Nietzschean fragment, and within its repetition by Kofman. A fragment that would thereby condemn the ironist, too—yet in an ironic fashion—to being partaken in this will to superiority, this will to erection.

A fragment yet written in a doubled writing, with a doubled *griffe*: for is there not, beneath the ruse of criticality, the affirmation here of one’s own becoming but a “snapping dog”? An ‘affirmation’ thus aligned in a fashion with the conclusion of Kofman’s reading of Hoffmann. An affirmation defined by the substitution of—in the place or on the basis of the poles of a ‘humanism’—an abasement of nobility and titles, alongside an entraining in the laughter and the aporia which arises from the double bind of such an abasement and such a position. Could we conclude that *Autobiogriffures* thus marks a text affirming—by way of that ‘Nietzschean’ scene—the malicious sacrifice of one’s own capacity to ‘bite’ in favour of an irony and laughter which would entrap both ‘man’ and ‘animal’ (yet also, this philosopher

³³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Cambridge, EN: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p147.

³⁴ Kofman, Sarah. *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*. p238.

and her readers alike) in the position solely of duplicating this aporetic and derisory model?
In the position of laughing once again and except, in some or other particular sense, from
some or other particular humanism? Once more a 'mere' pet?

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