



Petals from a Flower, Crystals from a Germ

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Introduction

Making disparate, associative, and deliberately unsystematic links to biology, immunology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, this paper attempts to (re)introduce a handful of ideas drawn from the work of Gilbert Simondon, exploring potential applications for philosophy, culture, spirituality, and psychology, and applying them to human experiences of grief and mourning. Even though critical attention has been given in the past to this innovative philosopher of science – notably by Canguilhem, Deleuze, Stiegler and others – the world of the humanities, and psychology in particular, is still far from confronting and being willing to learn, for instance, from Simondon’s far-reaching and potentially liberative notion of transindividuation, briefly sketched at the end of the paper.

It remains to be seen what would happen if some of the minoritarian concepts explored by Simondon – and, by implication, Deleuze – were to percolate, and their implications absorbed by larger sections of the humanities and psychology in particular. These may implode, explode, or turn from reactive endeavours to undertakings at the service of active emancipatory forces.

Of the Dead that Seize the Living

“We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead”, Karl Marx wrote in the 1867 Preface to the first German edition of *Das Kapital*, adding in French: “*le mort saisit le vif!*” (1976: 91) – the dead seize the living. This is open to several interpretations. Originating in medieval French law, the phrase designates the immediate transfer of sovereignty from the king to the heir, or of property to the offspring (Clemens in Barthélémy 2012: 119n). It is also closely linked to the familiar expression *The King is dead. Long live the King!*, indicating among other things the transfer of power and wealth directly associated with biopolitics, and inextricably linked to the implacable historical yoke of colonialism, racism and class hatred. History is burdened with the suffering of the oppressed, and those receptive enough to see beyond the neoliberal veneer, will know in



their bones that Western democracy is founded on slavery. They will know in their heart that the paved streets and squares of our cities fail to disguise the gory nightmare of history, the ever-present horror of a long chain of oppression and iniquity.

More generally, Marx's phrase may also imply that we are affected by the dead, that there is an affective side to historicity. Everything is something someone made. The presence of the dead is all around us through various artefacts, be they the streets we walk, the buildings we dwell in, the books and artworks we read and absorb. There would be no tradition or counter-tradition without the work of many who came before us. Humanity consists more of the dead than the living, and to this discovery Auguste Comte dedicated his positivist calendar replacing saints with those who contributed to the advancement of our species. There is deep historical continuity in humanity, and Comte (1998) went as far as proposing a sociological characterization of the brain as the organ through which the dead act upon the living.

One more reading of Marx's phrase unfolds, via the parallels Marx himself goes on to make, in the same passage, with microscopic anatomy and physics, a meaning now corroborated by contemporary biology and immunology. For example, in *La Sculpture du Vivant*, the immunologist Jean-Claude Ameisen maintains that the living organism relies on the presence of *nonlife*. At cellular level, nonlife is the very condition of life, and one of the ways in which this takes place is through *apoptosis* or cellular suicide:

From the first days that follow our conception [...] cellular suicide plays an essential role in our body in the course of construction, sculpting successive metamorphoses of our form in becoming. In the dialogues that are established between different families of cells in the course of being born, language determines life or death. In the sketches of our brain and our immune system – the organ that will protect us from microbes – cellular death is the integrative part of a strange process of apprenticeship and auto-organisation whose accomplishment is not the sculpture of a form but that of our memory and our identity. (Ameisen 2003: 16, my trans.)

Apoptosis, a term whose Greek etymology suggests the falling off of petals from a flower and leaves from a tree, is the word used to describe one of two modes of cellular death. It involves several molecular steps, and is one method the body uses to discard superfluous or abnormal cells. It is different from another form of cellular death, *necrosis*. The latter is the more typical example of cellular death, occurring as consequence of a serious trauma suffered by the cell. While a cell dying of necrosis endures swift, unrestrained inflammation before eventually bursting, the death of a cell by apoptosis is, on the other hand, *programmed*.

Studies on cell suicide began in the 19th century, but in-depth examination did not take place until the mid-20th century. From the 1960s onwards, several labs showed



that cell death was biologically programmed, and by the 1990s “the genetic basis of programmed cell death had been established and the first components of the cell death machinery [...] had been identified, sequenced, and recognized as highly conserved in evolution” (Lockshin 2005).

What apoptosis reveals is that nonlife within a living organism becomes a deposit or storage for vital individuation. The life of the organism is, in this sense, a form of inhibited death. This has wide-ranging implications in many fields, including organismic psychology, a mode of understanding psyche and human experience present (if increasingly subdued) among several orientations. In humanistic psychology the actualizing organism often tends to be portrayed as ever expanding, flourishing, and forever progressing – as in the proverbial light-seeking humble potato in a cellar sprouting towards the faint glimmer of the distant heavens. Little or no attention, however, is normally paid to the ailing organism or to entropy.

Are expansion and entropy opposite? Do they belong to different domains? Classical philosophy (from Heraclitus to Hegel and beyond) teaches us that the static notion of *being*, journeying through its own equally static negation of *nothingness*, is sublated in *becoming*, a term which more accurately comes to describe the river of lifedeath/deathlife. Something is + something is not = something becomes. Similarly, sublating expansion through entropy generates a ‘life’ at all times implicated in the workings of nonlife. In Julie Webb’s words: “We contain death and the dead and we are containers for death and the dead” (personal communication).

We are seized by, and indebted to, the dead and their legacies. The living organism relies on a kind of memory, “an inherence of the past in the present” (Grosz 2012: 41). Understood in this way, the living organism is not a stable phenomenon, one at rest or equilibrium, but *metastable*, constantly taking form. In the Japanese avant-garde dance/theatre practice of *butoh*, the dancer takes on different forms. Different forms, organic and nonorganic, may inhabit the dancer at any given time. A dead father, an oak tree, a scorpion, a caterpillar and a butterfly may move through the dancer. In the words of one of the founders of *butoh*, Hijikata: “The basic concept of my dance is rooted in the discovery of the possibility that the human body may metamorphose into anything, from animals and plants to inanimate objects.” (Kayo 2016: 73)

On Gilbert Simondon

A brief introduction is needed at this point to an author whose remarkable work is key to our present investigation. A doctoral student of Canguilhem and Merleau-Ponty, Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989) laid out the basis for his innovative ideas in his 1958



thesis (2020), a work dedicated to Merleau-Ponty and only recently translated into English.

Although Merleau-Ponty shared with Simondon a desire to understand the genetic dimension of human beings, he “could not conceive of an ontology that would not [...] remain attached to a pole of subjectivity, albeit redefined in terms of perception”¹. A different ontology is needed if we are to move phenomenological inquiry beyond subjectivity – an ontology which Simondon’s work helps formulate and whose implications are invaluable for the practice of various disciplines, including psychotherapy.

In mounting his powerful critique of the tradition, Simondon applies to the living organism the (anti)theories and (anti)methodologies of the counter-tradition, a mode of thought which has consistently explicated an ontology of becoming and resisted the blunders of substantialism. Recognised mainly as a philosopher of technology, whose research and creative speculative forays anticipated the world of information and communication we inhabit today, his ground-breaking ideas and overall subversion of the tradition have far-reaching implications for how we think of philosophy, spirituality, social theory, feminism, politics, and – last but not least, psychology. His contribution is particularly relevant to how we understand *individuation*. For Simondon, the philosophical tradition has consistently failed to understand individuation. It did so by building a foundation on the individuated rather than the *process* of individuation. Many beings are never completely individuated but continue to do so as they go on existing and becoming. The tradition has a habit of positing the individual as starting point. It does so through two widely influential modes of thought, namely “atomistic substantialism” and the “hylomorphic doctrine” (Simondon 2020: 2).

The error of substantialism consists in presupposing a principle of individuation devoid of ontogenesis – whether by positing the *individual*, as the term suggests, as indivisible (*atomos*), or by appealing to a theologically-derived notion *sub-stance*, usually as divine essence, individual soul etc.

The error of hylomorphism, a mode of thought originating with Aristotle, consists in seeing the genesis of the individual as confluence of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). It presupposes the discreet existence of matter and form before their union. It ignores the fact that this taking-form is actualized by a contingent confluence of forces in a state of *metastability* – a notion borrowed from thermodynamics to describe a state that goes beyond stability and instability.

¹ This and further discussions on passages from this text, as yet untranslated into English, rely on highlighted citations in Barthélémy 2012.



A few hypotheses may be drawn at this point, based on a first reading of some of Simondon's ideas:

(a) The life of the living organism depends on *nonlife*. The presence of nonlife within life may well constitute the *condition* of life. What is under scrutiny here is the traditional metaphysical partition between death and life. At an immediate, *physical* level, the inertia as well as the virtuality of nonlife within the living organism, creates a reservoir of potentiality which provides the raw material for the organism's further individuations. Death may be understood in two ways: as adverse, oppositional to life, and as crucial for individuation. Considering the second instance, "death as final event is only the consummation of a process of deadening that is contemporaneous with each vital operation as operation of individuation" (Beistegui 2012: 169). As with the material temporarily discarded by the artist in the making of an artwork, death becomes *dépôt* or 'storage space' to be utilized for further individuations. While the first and more common understanding of death focuses, according to Simondon, on the "precariousness of individuation [and] its confrontations with the conditions of the world", death in the second sense comes "from the convergence of internal transformations" (in Barthélémy 2012: 117).

(b) For Simondon, the physical and the vital are both realms of individuation, originating in a *pre-physical* and *pre-vital* reality. Vital individuation is the continuation of an amorphous stage of physical individuation. Vital individuation takes different forms: while animals other than humans create artefacts geared towards bio-social life, humans and primates aim at creating psycho-social life.

(c) Psycho-social/cultural life is possible via the presence of nonlife in life – a series of artefacts which in turn makes transindividuation possible:

The technical object taken according to its essence, that is, the technical object insofar as it was invented, thought and willed, assumed by a human subject, becomes the support and the symbol of this relation that we would call *transindividual* [...]. Through the intermediary of the technical object, an interhuman relation that is the model of *transindividuality* is created. (Barthélémy 2012: 113)

One of the artefacts in question is *language*, a point which will be later developed by Bernard Stiegler in relation to what he calls 'tertiary retentions', closely linked to communalization – that which makes culture possible (through the creation of collective transitional spaces). Tertiary retentions (libraries, texts, an entire archive of gestures and practices, including oral traditions and the work of psychotherapy) make possible the staving off of stupidity – which is born out of the decimation of transitional spaces. The barbarous glee with which neoliberalism has wrecked individual and collective



transitional spaces may partly explain why stupidity is so lavishly triumphant today, something reflected, among other things in the kind of rulers who are popular today.²

Being-Time

In the writing of Dōgen Kigen, the 13th century Japanese monk who founded Sōtō Zen, birth-and-death (*shōji*) is a continuum, and it is not separate from liberation. In what is perhaps the most complex of the fascicles assembling his discourses, *Uji*, written in the winter of 1240 and translated as *being-time*, he renders explicit the theme which underlies all of his teachings: time (2002). Those familiar with the early writings of Heidegger but unfamiliar with Dōgen's Zen often comment on the parallels and similarities between the two perspectives. At closer scrutiny, there could be no greater disparity between the two perspectives. It is true that Heidegger, like Dōgen seven centuries before him, also maintains that we *are* time, even though his investigation is limited to humans. It is also true that he does present an engrossing critique of the Aristotelian and the Christian views of time (with their respective emphasis on linearity and eternity). However, he rests his analysis on the notion of a decisive moment of vision (*Augenblick*, or 'blink of an eye') in which the subject can take hold of the present, *own* it (the *Eigentlichkeit* or 'ownedness' crudely rendered as 'authenticity'), and resolutely look towards the future (Heidegger 1962). There is nothing wrong with highlighting the importance of a moment of vision, of deep existential clarity shedding light on one's existence and one's place in the world. We find a powerful expression of this in Nietzsche's visceral experience of the eternal recurrence. What we also find in Nietzsche is *amor fati*, the Dionysian overcoming of nihilism, the generous embracing and celebration of this ephemeral world in all its aspects, something which, unbeknown to him, brings him very close to Zen. None of this is present in Heidegger, whose intellectual effort partly appears to be the repossessing of theological notions – in this case redemption – and its adaption to a secular perspective.

One of the 'authentic' ways in which the diehard subject of the tradition is thought to assert its sovereignty is through the grand illusion of being able to apprehend one's own death. This view is not only dangerous but reifies death, ignoring that nonlife is ever-present within life. It is also untrue. It ignores the fact that for many of us our primary connection to death may not be the fear of our own demise but being destroyed by grieving and the mourning of others. It inflates the contingent event of cessation into the definitive edit of all life's sequences – all contradictions and false starts, torments and hesitations, ecstasies and illuminations now shepherded into a straight storyline,

² For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Bazzano 2021. For a good introduction to the writings of Bernard Stiegler on this subject, see Stiegler 2015.



forgetting that our vanishing is ever-present in life. This vanishing is also in itself the condition of producing a *trace*. One of Derrida's many invaluable gifts has been the taking apart of Heideggerian thought in a way that is reminiscent – as the psychoanalyst and writer Anastasios Gaitanidis suggested (personal communication) – of what Marx did with Hegel. Two months before his own death and fully aware of its imminence, Derrida took up a theme he had stressed decades before, emphasizing how we continually leave traces, whether deliberately or not. “All graphemes”, Derrida had written in 1967, “are of a testamentary essence” (1967: 69). In his last interview to *Le Monde* in August 2004, he pointed out how this is not a matter of chasing immortality but one addressing and pertaining to the very structure of living:

I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, “proceeds” from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing. It's the ultimate test: one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. (Derrida 2004)

Individuality and Transindividuality

To awake is to perceive that life and death are inextricably linked. This is what the counter-tradition taught us from Heraclitus onwards. Current culture misunderstands awakening as becoming hyperconscious, establishing a ‘mindful’ apparatus of inner policing, fostering the illusion that all experience can be apprehended through conscious effort. But to awake does the opposite: It introduces ambiguity and uncertainty; I begin to *think double* and to *see blindly*. To carry this (non)vision and such (plural)thought into the clinic would mean going back to suspended attention and to a form of diffuse ‘presence’ arising out of *absence*. In the wider sphere outside the therapy room, it would also mean to radically re-think the *organism* (its intrinsic plurality, its inevitable connivance with others and the world), going back to an innovative perspective superficially celebrated in humanistic psychology but seldom understood: the pioneering work of neuropsychologist Kurt Goldstein (2000). There is found the first example of what “a global philosophy of a biologically founded individual could look like” (Lecourt 2012: 177). A mode of research influenced by Goldstein would help us remember that from a biological perspective the correlation between the organism and the environment is the same as the one between the parts and the whole of the organism. “The individuality of the living does not stop at ectodermic borders, no more than it begins with a cell” (Canguilhem 2008: 111). The biological relationship between the living organism and its milieu is functional, therefore necessarily in flux as well as impermanent. This perspective anticipates Simondon's deeply anti-Aristotelian and anti-substantialist stance, voiding the individual of its ontological valence and reframing it as the metastable outcome of a process of individuation whose basis cannot be grounded in



its constituted form. Within this perspective it is possible to locate the potential foundations for a medical philosophy which de-substantializes the individual and rewrites normativity as a “capacity, without common measure, to create new forms that institute themselves in a relation of forces that traverse the individual” (Lecourt 2012: 182).

Concerted forms of critique of the medical model over the last few decades have clarified how urgent it is to construct a new way of thinking health, equilibrium, and homeostasis. The same critique has yet to be applied to the humanities – philosophy and psychology included. In the case of psychology and more particularly psychotherapy, notions of mental health have gone largely unchecked. The profession has on the whole chosen to acquiesce to the modes of thinking and practicing dictated by neoliberal agendas and by the demands of the market, to the point where fundamental questions have been disregarded. One of these questions pertains to the double bind of *individuality/individuation*. It is in this area that Simondon’s work can provide valuable material for those of us who are still committed to notions of emancipation and transformation.

Simondon invites us to pay close attention to the *pre-individual* forces that create the conditions for individuation, and to actively question the orthodox tendency to begin a phenomenological investigation by assuming the existence of an identity. The aim is “to grasp the entire unfolding of ontogenesis in all its variety, and to understand the individual from the perspective of the process of individuation rather than the process of individuation by means of the individual” (Simondon 1993: 300). Ontogenesis refers to the genesis of the individual *and* its associated pre-individual milieu. It is a mistake to regard pre-individual forces as raw material or backdrop for the ‘birth’ of the individual. It is hard to detach from this conventional way of thinking because it is deeply embedded in both the religious and the philosophical tradition (respectively, the *fiat lux* of creation out of the alleged uncreative chaos of pre-history, and the unity of ‘Being’ in relation to which phenomena become secondary). Pre-individual forces are not static, nor are they mere raw material pre-dating the individual but also constitute its potentiality. “The individual is always more than itself, for it is an individual with the ongoing potential to undergo further changes after it is constituted as such” (Grosz 2012: 38). The very idea of ‘being’ is transformed from the static notion of traditional ontology to a thoroughly immanent perspective: It is simultaneously pre-individual, individuating, and individuated. It emerges; it becomes something; it leaves a residue – a reservoir for future becomings and for new forms of the living sculpture. The individual “finds itself attached to a pre-individual half which is not the impersonal within it so much as the reservoir of its singularities” (Deleuze 1994: 246).



Some will recognize similarities with Nietzsche's notions of self-creation and the innocence of becoming and may feel heartened to know that a counter-traditional stream of perception and praxis runs through the history of thought, providing encouragement for the explorers among us who may at times feel discouraged by the current deadening compliance in both psychical and philosophical domains. Re-thinking individuality is key to this counter-traditional approach: No longer is individuality understood in terms of static being but as a phase in the continuous process of becoming. Succinctly stated by Elizabeth Grosz, "an individual emerges, a metastable being, which carries within itself the pre-individual forces from which it was produced, which remain the potential for ongoing individuations even within the constituted individual" (2012: 41).

At one level, pre-individual forces may be understood as 'memories' and/or reverberations – of the past intrinsic to the present, of virtual intrinsic to the actual. Processes of individuation take place simultaneously across disparate domains – physical, biological, social, psychical, spiritual, actual, virtual. Through an operation which Simondon calls *transduction*:

By transduction we mean a physical, biological, mental, or social operation through which an activity propagates incrementally within a domain by passing this propagation or structuration of the domain operated from one region to another: each structural region serves as a principle and model, as an initiator for constituting the following region, such that a modification thereby extends progressively throughout this structuring operation. (Simondon 2020: 13)

Transduction, a term belonging to both biology and technology, was also used by Jean Piaget to identify mental operations outside the usual deductive and inductive modes. Simondon expands the concept, giving the example of the crystal as "the simplest image of the transductive operation [...] which, starting from a tiny germ, increases and extends following all the directions in its supersaturated mother liquor", with each already constituted molecular layer making the basis for another layer in the process of forming, the outcome of which is "an amplifying reticular structure" (2020: 13). Individuation is a labyrinthine process and at the level of human experience, the psyche may itself be understood as a labyrinth.

Referring to technology as a way to better understand individuation may surprise some, yet the technological paradigm is valuable, as it permits us to regard the genesis of the individuated being "*through an energetic system of form-taking*" (Simondon 2020: 31). Matter and form are then perceived in the midst of becoming rather than understood as static givens. The 'energetic' aspect is crucial given that its emphasis rests on *potentiality*, allowing us to think of individuation as an ever-unfolding process.



Individuation is *not* the same as the differentiating individualization expounded by Jung, i.e., the development of the psychological individual as different from the psychology of the collective. As with the rest of the tradition, Jung's version of individuation is atomistic and a case of reverse engineering. For Simondon, the individual atom is substituted by a continuous ontological process of individuation by means of which the individual subject is perceived as an *effect* of individuation rather than a *cause*. Individuation is what institutes and includes differentiation between individuals. The *I* is a process, not a static being; it is a tendency to become undivided, a tendency forever unachievable because of a counter-current of metastability. This complex dynamic was already present in seed form in Nietzsche's *dividuum* and subsequently in Freud's theory of the drives. It then blossomed through rhizomatic philosophy, a perspective to which the present work aims to contribute. Inspired by Simondon, Gilles Deleuze will think of identities in terms of difference, which he defined as "the state in which one can speak of determination *as such*" (1994: 28).

By postulating the notion of the transindividual, Simondon subverts and expands the concerns of both psychology and sociology. Psychology is only able to see the *interindividual* – whether as relatedness, intersubjectivity, mutuality etc. – and the *intrapsychic*, a mode of enquiry now relegated to the re-enactment costume dramas of archival Kleinian psychoanalysis lavishly enacted in training courses. For all its valuable insights, sociology mainly continues to see the *intrasocial*. Both psychology and sociology ignore that what we call the subject is "vaster than the individual" (Deleuze 1994: 28). Not taking into account the different pre-individual layers through which a subject is constituted and continues to individuate has two undesirable outcomes: (a) we fail to understand what it means to give birth to a real collective; (b) we fail to realize an individual's actualization.

That the subject is vaster than the individual implies that different intensive systems are constantly at work in producing a human being, and that this will have some influence on how we understand knowledge. For Simondon, knowledge is "the structuring of a relation between two relations in pre-individual tension" (1958: 248, my trans.), a perspective which will be expanded by Deleuze, emphasizing that apprenticeship and knowing something is not apprehending some pre-existing entity but a temporary outcome of a fluid, differential process that *implicates* the apprentice. "Qualities, intensities, forms and matters, species and parts are not primary; they are imprisoned in individuals as though in a crystal. Moreover, the entire world may be read, as though in a crystal ball, in the moving depth of individuating differences or differences in intensity." (Deleuze 1994: 247)



And yet...

A while ago I attended the London premiere of Laurie Anderson's film *Heart of a Dog* (2015), a meditation on life and death, dreamily circling via animation and Super 8 footage around the death of her beloved dog Lolabelle, poignantly and poetically musing on Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, 9/11, and wondering aloud about her lost mother. Storytelling, childhood trauma, profound insights from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the impermanence of life and the fleeting, compelling presence of love: All of this is dancing lightly alongside the poignant realization that every love story is a ghost story and that every time we tell a story, we forget it all the more. The film was particularly moving because of the death two years earlier of her husband, lover, and companion Lou Reed, an artist whose work has been and continues to be of great inspiration to me and whose song "Turning Time Around" accompanied the closing credits. A fleeting silhouette of Reed appears in the footage shot somewhere in the French countryside. After the screening, Anderson spoke briefly about the documentary. With characteristic lightness and erudition, she expounded on the Tibetan Buddhist's perspective of letting go, of allowing the deceased to disentangle themselves from the clutches of life. I am sympathetic and familiar to this view. My first training in Buddhism was in the *Gelugpa* lineage of Tibetan Buddhism where a similar emphasis is present. For instance, Kobayashi Issa, Zen poet and priest (1763-1828), upon the death of his child wrote the famous haiku *This dewdrop world is but a dewdrop world. And yet...* The profound affect implied by 'and yet...' Not piety but compassion: This world is ephemeral, but the presence of loved ones is real and their departure painful. Issa walks the tightrope between an absolute and a relative view of grief, between the wisdom-that-knows-impermanence and the pain of loss.

And yet... I don't know what took hold of me – perhaps a mixture of contrariness, the foolish longing to hold on to Lou's memory, plus an ancestral call from the recesses of Southern Europe where I had my first schooling in mourning. Whatever the reason, during the Q&A session which followed the screening I voiced my objection to the spiritual view of letting go. I told of my irritation when, sitting next to the body of my deceased father years ago, I was urged by a family friend to cry openly, to 'let it all out'. But at that moment, I had no tears. I simply wanted everybody to be out of the room and to whisper goodbye to my father alone. In the Italian South, the expectation and cultural pressure is to cry. Still in the years of my childhood it was possible to see a funeral procession accompanied by the *prefiche*, professional mourners, usually women (boys don't cry!) who were paid to weep at funerals, a practice that goes back to ancient times, to Egypt, Rome, and China. There is wisdom in that too – and the ambivalence intrinsic to wisdom. Tears make a body of water. Without tears, it becomes difficult for the departed to journey to the other shore. Mourning may be for the survivors, but the ritual focuses first and foremost on the departed. All mirrors in a Southern European home



used to be shrouded in black, a lugubrious sight to some but also an expedient way to ensure the dead do not get confused and held back by the many reflections and are then more able to make their last journey.

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