Dominant and Submerged Discourses in The Life of Olaudah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa?)

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Dominant and Submerged Discourses in *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* (or Gustavus Vassa?)

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Savior too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."
Remember, *Christians, Negroes,* black as *Cain,*
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (Wheatley 18)

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The Life of Olaudah Equiano describes the enslavement of an African who eventually embraces Christianity and Englishness. The current critical consensus, however, questions the seriousness of the conversion and acculturation rhetoric deployed in the narrative. Several contemporary critics, such as Valerie Smith, Chinosole, and Wilfred D. Samuels, see the Christian rhetoric as disguise, Equiano's affirmations of his acculturation as tongue-in-cheek comments, his pride in his achievements as the pride of the African warrior, and, if none of the above are true, his whole narrative as a sad example of mental colonization. I am going to question these readings which tend to downplay the importance of the conversion discourse, because they seem to be too shaped by our current values, and considerably undermine Equiano's already troubled narrative authority. Although Equiano's embrace of Christianity and Englishness is certainly not whole-hearted, it should be taken more seriously than the current critical debate seems to allow.

The slave narrative is no less *peculiar* a kind of autobiography than the institution from which, though antagonistically, it emerged. In his seminal essay on the conditions and limits of autobiography Georges Gusdorf asserts, "The concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal" (29). The authors of slave narratives certainly had more reason to engage in this activity than most. The public assertion of the self, to some extent a luxury for most of us, was a matter of life and death for the ex-slave, whose previous social status was in itself a denial of his selfhood.

On the other hand, in spite of their more obvious motivation, the authors of slave narratives were inevitably in more problematic positions than the average autobiographer. Their authorial freedom was complicated by a number of special concerns, such as their serious responsibilities to a community or the expectations of a likely audience. The most important complication is related to the fictional liberties the authors of slave narratives are (not) allowed to take.

Autobiographies are never purely factual, since human memory is seldom perfect and our experience is by definition subjective. In the slave narratives, however, as James Olney points out, reflections on this subjectivity had to be rigorously suppressed, lest they further undermine the already contested authenticity and authority of the text (" 'I Was Born' "). The most important reason for the fictional element in autobiography is, after all, the nature of the enterprise: the author's attempt at "reconstructing the unity of a life across time" (Gusdorf 37). The problems involved in the creation of this unified vision were quite different for the ex-slave narrators than they are for the mainstream autobiographer. Since normally the vantage point of the autobiography is somewhat arbitrary, the author, in order to establish the coherence of the story and the significance of the destination, has to project a linearity onto the path which leads to the moment of writing. This problem is virtually non-existent in the slave narrative, for the simple reason that the path obviously leads from slavery to freedom, and the moment of significance is the acquisition (or reacquisition) of selfhood. Yet there is diversity and sometimes incongruity which have to be unified in the slave narratives, which are not so much in the "pathways" of the authors' lives, but rather in the available discourses, the lines of argument for and against slavery.

The discourses which the authors of the narratives deploy in their polemic texts are indeed numerous. The most frequently used ones are Christianity (as an ideal system of beliefs and behavior, and as general practice), the possibilities and values of acculturation (including the specific issue of literacy), social and individual responsibility for actions, the degradation of slaveholders by slavery, the redemptive value of suffering, and the (im)possibility of communicating knowledge and experience.[1] In order to create what Olney calls a "coherent pattern," the authors of the slave narratives had to put the primary emphasis on one of the available discourses and submerge the others to some extent (*Metaphors* 45).

In most narratives, a number of discourses appear in the course of the whole narrative. Sometimes an argument—often an underlying assumption affirmed without being explicitly referred to—appears in a single paragraph of a particular narrative, and enlightens the issue of slavery from a new perspective in the text. However, this argument, a solitary example in one narrative, may be the organizing theme of another narrative, in which some other equally useful arguments are submerged. For example, as I intend to argue on the following pages, the organizing discourse of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* is the "conversion as acculturation" discourse. To take some other examples, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an African Slave. Written by Himself* very powerfully deploys the human-subhuman discourse both in its arguments and its imagery, submerging or embedding all other argumentation in the highlighted discourse.[2] Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* focuses on the discourse of suffering and knowledge. In each case, the basis and location of the respective claims to narrative authority are different—that difference determined by the choice of the organizing discourse. The narrative authority in Equiano's narrative, for instance, can be classified as a teleological authority, as opposed to Douglass's original generic authority or Jacobs's acquired personal authority.

A specific choice of discourse is naturally influenced by the time

period, which largely determines what discourses are available (or printable) and by many other historical and personal factors, including the author's geographical and social mobility and, quite significantly, his or her gender. The attempt to unify the diversity of discourses—or, in Olney's terms, to find a single "metaphor of self"—seems to be general, however. Equiano's chosen discourse is established in the "Dedication," in which the references to "miseries," "horrors," and being "torn away" are enclosed, as it were, by "deference" and "respect," on the one hand, and the providential introduction to the "knowledge of the Christian religion" and of the English nation, on the other (3). This short passage is fairly typical of the general rhetoric of the text continuously moving through Providence toward acquired accomplishment. One might argue—and some critics do—that the *main* rhetoric is a façade, a mask for the *real* message of the passage. The problem is one of authorial intention: Is the more prominent message to be taken at face value, or is it just a cover for smuggling dangerous ideas into the heads of unsympathetic readers. The introductory passage leaves this problem unresolved for those exercising "creative hearing" based on the text (Andrews, "First" 7-8). Legitimate conclusions concerning the seriousness and intention of the author in his use of the Christian and the acculturation rhetoric could be based, however, on the larger rhetorical movement of the narrative.

One issue central to the "bicultural perspective" of the author is his double name: one received from his old culture, the other forced upon him by his new culture (Andrews, "First" 20). Although it is difficult to estimate the authorial control over the choice of accompanying texts (let alone minor issues like capitalization), it may be telling that this first authorial text is signed with both the original African and the given European name of the author ("OLAUDAH EQUIANO, OR GUSTAVUS VASSA"), whereas the last authorial signature will retain a reference to the origin, but not the name ("GUSTAVUS VASSA, The Oppressed Ethiopian").

Equiano argues against slavery, especially the bad (in his terms, the cruel and incorrect) treatment of slaves, with the rhetoric of Christianity. His narrative has the general framework of a conversion narrative, but he does not choose to present his past before the moment of conversion as completely insignificant, as often is the case in conversion narratives. The presentation of his African past in the narrative is crucial not only because it is the most significant instance of his adaptation of the genre of the conversion narrative for his personal purposes, but also because anything with which he could complement the telos of conversion would be tied to Essaka. In other words, the potential valorization of his African home has everything to do with the seriousness of the Christian rhetoric, which could be best undermined by a positive alternative.

While the evangelical conversion narrative "sanctioned and encouraged self-hatred and the rejection of one's past" (Andrews, "First" 13), Equiano's narrative creatively reconstructs the past. He projects a potential for his present accomplishments back into the past, thereby making the past acceptable for the present on the present's terms. This he needs to do in order to be able to incorporate his African past into his present self and in order to speak for his African brethren as a public spokesman.

Equiano's edenic African home is presented in the first chapter in a way that makes it compatible with, or at least open to, his new Christian values. The description of that home may well be a fictional conflation of several African cultures. The author probably complemented his own

memories with information from secondary sources.[3] But even if these charges are legitimate, they do not challenge the overall authenticity of the narrative. And if they are, the presentation of Equiano's Africa tells us even more about the author's general intention, precisely because the presentation diverges from literal truth.

Essaka is a land of plenty with a people advocating simplicity, plainness, cleanliness. Except for polygamy, there is nothing unacceptable to Equiano's new self. The contrast is between the ways of people in Essaka and the behavior of Europeans, which is carefully distinguished from the ideal Christianity Equiano upholds. The values he chooses to focus on, but especially the "strong analogy" between the manners and customs of his countrymen and "those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise," are important connections established between the author's past and present (22). He can therefore argue *for* Benin with his new authority *from outside* Benin. But however positive his description of Benin might be, it is his acquired Christian authority which he uses when making his argument against slavery: He invokes the Christian God, who created the African "certainly" in his own image, and so deflects all attacks on the African into blasphemous criticisms of God. He also takes good care that his strong critique of the "polished and haughty European" cannot transfer to the God whom that European supposedly worships: ". . . whose wisdom is not our wisdom, neither are our ways his ways" (24).

The second and only other chapter devoted to his early life in Africa ends with a similar exhortation. The voice is that of *any* hypothetical African (". . . might not an African ask you . . .") who speaks the language of Christianity, and therefore not quite the voice of "outraged innocence," but a curious combination of innocence and learning (Andrews, "First" 20). By the same token, it is also the authentic voice of Equiano, an African who can speak back the word of Christianity at those professing it: "O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, 'learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?' " (38). What we have here is Equiano quoting any African *like* him quoting God: It is the Christian God's word that ultimately carries the authority.

If there is silencing in the slave narratives, there is also a potentially dangerous process of voicing which occurs in current criticism.

The point of view in the *Life* is almost never merely that of the unknowing (unacculturated, unconverted) self. Since the author's achievements are stated in general terms in the "Dedication," his unawareness is automatically presented in opposition to an implied later awareness. This never quite allows the innocent observer to stand completely on his own: "these ugly men as they appeared to us," "I did not know what this could mean; and indeed I thought these people full of nothing but magical arts," "I did not know what to think of these white people" (37, 41). These phrases gradually give way to assertions of increasing knowledge and a conscious process of acculturation:

> I no longer looked upon [the English] as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirits, and imitate their manners. I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing

> that I observed I treasured up in my memory. (52)

The allusions affecting the narrative point of view are also replaced by an openly teleological view of events:

> . . . the kind and unknown hand of the Creator, who in every deed leads the blind in a way they know not, now began to appear to my comfort . . . . (39)

> Every extraordinary escape, or signal deliverance, either of myself or others, I looked upon to be effected by the interposition of Providence. (58)

> I considered that trials and disappointments are sometimes for our good; and I thought that God might perhaps have permitted this, in order to teach me wisdom and resignation. For he had hitherto shadowed with the wings of his mercy and by his invisible, but powerful hand, had brought me the way I knew not. (67)

Equiano/Vassa acquires the knowledge, masters the rhetoric, and is proud of it—or at least that is what *he* says. In his narrative he becomes a Captain (106), a "first rate Christian" (133), and a gentleman. And he demands authority—to speak, to trade, or whatever else he chooses to do—on these grounds. Other arguments about the dehumanizing effects of slavery on slaveholders; about the natural rights of men, "equality, and independency"; about the economic inefficiency of slave labor; and about the needless suffering of slaves, including "the poor, wretched, and helpless females," occur as well (78-80). But the line of argument which determines the whole narrative structure is that of Christianity, in which all the other moral arguments are embedded. The incorrectness and cruelty of slaveowners, and the suffering of the slaves, will "bring down God's judgment on the islands" (78), and the violation of the natural rights of man are something "God could never intend!" (80). When deprived of both his earnings and his chance to become free, Equiano decides that, as he cannot "get any right among men here," he shall hope to get his right "hereafter in Heaven" (65).

In *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, Valerie Smith establishes, in her interpretation, a binary opposition between the Africa of Equiano's birth and "the Europe and North America of his enslavement and choice" (13). She goes on to posit that there are two equally dominant voices in the text: that of the convert and that of the "uninitiated, naïve" African boy. How equally dominant the two voices are is questionable, since the latter is only heard in two of the twelve chapters and very rarely referred to later.

Although Smith argues that Equiano's present, adult perspective disappears in the passages spoken by the innocent voice, this is not quite true. For instance, in the very passage she quotes, Equiano says, "These filled me with astonishment, that was soon converted into terror, *which I am yet at a loss to describe . . .*" (32; emphasis added). Whose voice is this, if not the adult Equiano's? Who is describing the events? But even more important are some value judgments Smith makes. In arguing against the possibility that Equiano might "ally himself with his more sophisticated reader," she equates "a sense of distance from his African past" with "self-loathing" (Smith 16), which is nowhere substantiated in the text. By her particular choice of modal auxiliaries and grammatical structures, Smith creates an impression of different levels of credibility. For instance, "Equiano *might be said to be introducing* his youthful voice at least in part to underscore the process of his remarkable development," but "at yet another level Equiano *uses* this technique as a means of commenting ironically on the ostensibly civilized nature of his European captors (and, by extension, readers)" (16; emphasis added).

Such subtleties are abandoned, however, when it comes to making a distinction between the nature of the European captors and the nature of the "European" religion. Smith also maintains that Equiano's introduction of the voice of his youth not only "gives credibility to his African origins" but demonstrates that "only as an African does he understand and value Christianity, seizing upon it as the single feature of European society that restores the metaphysical certainty he lost when he was enslaved" (17). But if one is willing to accept that Equiano's conversion is real, his sense of the relevance of Christianity must be universal. His choice of Christianity is not presented in the narrative as conditional upon its compatibility with African values.

It also seems to be necessary to *excuse* Equiano for his decision to embrace Christianity:

> Equiano appears to value the certainty of order in his life and laments its disruption. It is thus *little wonder* that he celebrates the ability of Christianity to offer him a context that attributes each event in his life to a First Cause. (19; emphasis added)

But to say that, had Equiano not been kidnapped, he would have never become a Christian convert, is an historical, not a spiritual truth.

Thus, there is an inner contradiction between certain statements in Smith's interpretation, such as:

> It [his conversion] provides the lens through which he reassesses past experiences and appreciates those to come, and it is the source of tone, rhetoric and imagery of his narration. (15)

and

> But finally that voice ["reminding the reader of the influence of providence"] does not fully usurp the emphasis from his prior conceptions. (17)

However much one would like to hear two equally powerful voices in the narrative saying nearly opposite things, the text does not provide enough such evidence. This leads to the contradictions and subtle qualifications in the arguments made.

In her essay "Tryin' to Get Over: Narrative Posture in Equiano's Autobiography," Chinosole characterizes Equiano's narrative with the phrase "non-militant elitism." The two possible reactions of a "post-Malcolm X" critic, she argues, are embarrassment and dismissal, or an attempt "to look more closely at the way in which he narrates" and "find what is most liberating in this work" (45). The latter she proceeds to do. In order to save Equiano from being a "traitor" for the post-Malcolm X critic, Chinosole constructs him as secretly engaged in undermining his own dominant rhetoric and, where he is obviously not undermining it, as a passive victim.

Equiano's "name changes" are reconstructed into a positive experience. The most significant name change occurs when (after two names used for short periods of time) a new European name is finally forced upon Equiano by a slaveholder. He does not want it, but begins to use it—sometimes with, sometimes without his original African name. In Chinosole's essay, the emphasis is shifted from this naming to the nicknames Equiano is given—by whites again ("Black Christian," "Black Sailor," and "Captain"). The ultimate assault on a person's identity thus gets "to prove the adaptability of abiding African customs in a European setting" (46). According to Chinosole, "on a deeper level," a parallel can be drawn between Equiano's experience and an African custom of naming which still persists in parts of West Africa, where a person's name can "vary with age, skill and accomplishment," which "elaborate naming process has survived Equiano's transatlantic slave experience" (46). But how deep is the level at which the slave owner's

renaming of the slave can be the means of cultural syncretism?

Another important issue in the essay is the irony of Equiano's narrative, which seems to include "the irony we later inject in hindsight" (Chinosole 47). The irony is the result of "the gross incongruity of what is experienced and what is assumed," and it is achieved by a shifting point of view. If the subject of this irony is, as she argues, Western ideological hypocrisy, the irony leaves Equiano's dominant rhetoric intact, since its object is the lack of *accord* between the actions of "nominal Christians" and their professed ideas—not the ideas themselves. On the other hand, Chinosole maintains that Equiano, "not always in control of his shifting point of view, . . . is limited by social and historical context" (47). Is "control" then *our* current point of view, or the narrative authority claimed and exercised *by Equiano* on grounds *he* takes seriously? Chinosole distinguishes "humorous or serious, stated or implied" uses of Equiano's irony. She categorizes Equiano's use of Christian rhetoric to denounce slavery, a "rhetorical lambast," as "an early example of the most explicit form of irony" (48). In fact, the point about irony is that it is not explicit. If it is apparent to us, we might want to distinguish between what the author's irony—or rather *sarcasm*—is directed at and what our assumptions are about his values. The binaries established in the passage are those between nominal Christians and real Christians, the nominal Christian's actions and God's teaching. If this, the author's most explicit argumentation against slavery, were not to be taken seriously, the whole mission of the narrative would be called into question.

In the next few paragraphs the essay constructs Equiano's acculturation as a process he is highly ambivalent about, and one that is ultimately unsatisfactory to him:

> Narration of his friendship with the mild-mannered Misses Guerins is quickly succeeded by the account of his near drowning in the Thames at the hands of some cruel boys. No sooner does he recall his eager acculturation through baptism, than he tells how Pascal's distrust results in his abrupt sale. His initial self-imaging as "almost an Englishman" is preempted by remarks aimed at putting him in his place by Captain Doran.... (Chinosole 49)

The question is whether it is Equiano who is rejecting the acculturation process. It is rather the cruel boys, Pascal, and Captain Doran who have second thoughts about it. Equiano is certainly not putting *himself* back in his place. The conclusion that Equiano's narrative "anticipates [Ralph] Ellison's type of structural regression, giving the illusion of the hero moving upward and outward to 'freedom,' when in reality he sinks to the deepest hole," is *within the scope of the narrative* simply untrue (49). Statements about Equiano's own perspective (affected by the fact that he "had internalized for his physical and psychological survival many of the values that dehumanized him and his people") and about our perspective ("with the advantage of historical hindsight" [50]) are not clearly separated. This is how a statement like "You give me language, and I curse you with it" can be put into Equiano's mouth, as it were.

Chinosole refuses the possibility that Equiano could make comments that "plead the cause of African freedom and attest to his own buoyant self-affirmation," not only not criticizing, but actually using "the ideologies of his day" (52). As she says, "In the end Equiano shows himself to be a thoroughgoing Englishman and Christian for those readers who want to believe it" (51). She certainly does not.

Wilfred D. Samuels, in "Disguised Voice in *The Interesting Narrative of*

Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African," makes another attempt to "save" Equiano for us. At the beginning of the essay, we are warned that what Equiano says is generally not to be taken at face value, and apparent discourses are devices used to prevent the alienation of the audience:

> . . . a common error is made by the critic who, taking Equiano's announced purpose ["to promote the interest of humanity"] at face value, fails to see his creation of a self whose muted voice veils covert intentions that lie hidden behind the façade—the mask, with which he disguises himself from the very opening lines of the work. (65)

Let us suppose that all these layers of communication and intention are in the narrative. There is communication: Equiano announces his purpose. There is action without communication: He creates a self. The self created speaks again, but its voice is muted. And the voice veils Equiano's covert intentions. It seems to be quite problematic to attribute to the narrator something which is doomed to be thus far removed from whatever can be said in the text. According to Samuels, Equiano is overtly genuflecting and groveling but covertly, and primarily through language, slashing away at his oppressors. I would like to argue that a distinction is established in the narrative between different kinds of Europeans. Those at whose feet Vassa lays his narrative with the greatest deference and respect are not exactly the same as those he is condemning and rebuking. The difference in question may seem negligible to us. However, one's assessment of the actual relevance of the distinction need not inhere in one's interpretation of Equiano's text.

It is equally problematic to reconstruct Equiano's "single self," a fully African self, behind the European mask. Samuels maintains that "what concerns [Equiano] more than what he has done is who he has or has not become as a result of these events"—i.e., "the events that identified his outer self" (66). I venture to say that, in the course of the description of his acculturation, Equiano does not reflect on who he *has not become.* He has to reflect on it as Samuels would have the matter, however, since Equiano is being constructed as the perfect African warrior. When Equiano fights bravely in a battle of the Seven Years' War, his "*implied* characterization epitomizes the traditional African man." Or later: "Equiano, one might even be led to conclude, wants his reader to believe that this historical battle could not have been won without the brave *Ibo's* role . . ." (67; emphases added). And "Equiano, the African, girds his loins and resolves to meet head on his task" (68). One might want to ask whether all the heroes of the Seven Years' War epitomize the traditional African man. Equiano never presents himself as a traditional African warrior or a brave Ibo who "dazzles" his British audience with "his enviable knowledge of naval vessels," among other things. He presents himself professionally, as one among many, as an equal of his fellows or one even better. It is clear that his achievements give him, in Samuels' terms, "the validation in his argument against this inhuman system that has enslaved an individual of his caliber" (68). But while his achievement and its function as a source of authority are undisputable, it is not obvious how far he moves away from an *exclusively* African identity while making that achievement.

In the essay Equiano remains an African throughout, recovering his lost "personal legacy" and "assuming the social role that was rightfully his as an Ibo, Essakan, and African" (68). The function of this interpretation is stated by the author in the last sentences of the essay:

> Equiano reclaims his voice by masking and disguising it. Indirectly, he teaches us to listen not only to the explicit voice of Gustavus Vassa, the person created by the Western enslavers who gave him this name, but also to the voice of Olaudah Equiano, the would-be warrior, whose name means "fortunate" and "favored." (69)

The key phrase of this conclusion is that Equiano *teaches us*. That is, we *want* him to teach us. He is not saying explicitly what we want to learn from him—*explicitly* meaning that he is not saying it by saying it. The above interpretation attributes to Equiano a real intention and a real sense of himself very different from what he is explicitly saying. References to his early African self and especially to a lost, potential adult self are hard, if not impossible, to find in the part of the narrative which deals with his later experiences. Therefore the evidence in the text is frequently rounded out by the language of interpretation: by subtleties of grammar, word choice, juxtaposition, or rhetorical parallel and opposition. Is Equiano not saying his real purpose explicitly because his apparent purpose is real, or because he is silenced by his adopted ideology and rhetoric (be it adopted as his own or his disguise)? This we cannot know.

If there is silencing in the slave narratives, there is also a potentially dangerous process of voicing which occurs in current criticism. In certain cases the Equiano criticism projects back some of our current values and assumptions into this 18th-century text. This is quite legitimate as long as one is speaking about what we as 20th-century readers wish to use this narrative for, what it means for us, and what we assume the real person behind the narrative could or should have wanted had he not been psychologically colonized. In other words, when making these arguments, one should admit to speaking at least as much about "us" as about Equiano. Maybe we have to accept that, for however unfortunate historical reasons, certain "realities" can only be suspected, but they cannot be recovered and reappropriated without compromising the seriousness and authenticity of scholarship.

Notes

1. William L. Andrews mentions some of these in connection with genres which lend themselves easily to certain discourses about the issue of slavery in *To Tell a Free Story*.

2. Douglass affirms man's natural generic authority as an authority independent of accomplishments, one lost in slavery but regained in an affirmation of selfhood and ultimately in freedom. This line of argument is implicit in the profuse animal imagery of the text. Portraying slaveholders as predators and beasts [-human], the text establishes the counter image of the slave as man [+human]. Representing dehumanized slaves in images of domestic animals [-human], the counter-image of a reacquired selfhood [+human] is established. Houston A. Baker writes about this animal imagery in some detail in *Long Black Song* (75-76).

3. S. E. Ogude argues that "Equiano's narrative is to a large extent fictional" and that it fuses tales about Africa published in travel literature and legends about Africa which developed among the African slaves. He bases the argument on similarities between Equiano's text and various available sources in travel literature, which he interprets as Equiano drawing on these sources. As long as the facts are true and the texts not too similar, it seems to me very problematic to decide whether it is a case of parallel knowledge or borrowing. On the other hand, it seems to be difficult to refute Ogude's argument that Equiano could not have obtained first-hand knowledge about some of the things he describes, because the taboo systems of traditional African societies would not have allowed a boy of his age to have that knowledge.

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