

Willa Cather and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes:

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In her letter to *The Commonweal* on *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Willa Cather claimed that in 1902, after seeing the murals of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes dedicated to St. Genevieve at the Pantheon in Paris, she determined to try a parallel work in prose. She would write “something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. . . . something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition. . . . In this kind of writing,” she continued, “the mood is the thing” (*On Writing* 9–10).¹ Twenty-five years later, she published *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which was a

¹Even before going to Paris, Cather mentioned Puvis’s paintings, two of which she must have seen in the Carnegie Institute Art Galleries in Pittsburgh. On one occasion she complained that the characters of a certain woman novelist “sit about in individual isolation like the figures in Puvis de Chavannes’ canvases,” and on another she singled out “the noble but angular ladies in the mural paintings of Puvis de Chavannes” and “the pale, primeval shades of Puvis de Chavannes” (*The World and the Parish* 571, 763–64.) Incidentally, some years later (May 10, 1908), in a letter to Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather affirmed that the Gulf of Salerno was as blue as the

critical and popular success and won the Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Having repeatedly visited the Southwest, Cather rooted this work in the expansive atmosphere of its landscape and the equanimity of its way of life.² What she praised in Sarah Orne Jewett's stories can be said of this novel: it "melt[s] into the land and the life of the land until [it is] not [fiction] at all, but life itself" (*On Writing* 49). Based on a variety of New Mexican histories and on the lives of two French Catholic priests who reinstated orthodox Catholicism in the South-west, Father Jean Lamy (Cather's Jean Latour) and Father Joseph Machebeuf (Cather's Joseph Vaillant),³ the novel presents three previously neglected minority components of American history: Mexican, Indian, Catholic. However, the innovative structure of the novel has perhaps generated more response than its unusual subject matter.

Critics have traditionally labelled the novel episodic, and some (including Cather herself) have compared it to illustrious "episodic" predecessors: the *Golden Legend*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the *Divine Comedy*.⁴ To James Woodress, Cather's narrative is "a masterpiece of cultural assimilation" because it "blends the reality of the Southwest and the artistic traditions of Europe ("Willa Cather: American" 61); the judgment is correct, although Woodress gives little substantial justification for it. Similarly detecting European roots, James E. Miller maintains that in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather "has used a kind of fresco or tapestry method in prose" (140); yet his assertion is not backed up by specific evidence from Cather's text. The relationship between Cather

²Cather visited the Southwest seven times (in 1912, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1925, 1926, 1941).

³Cather's main source for the book was *The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf*, a 1908 biography of the prototype of Father Vaillant by Father William Joseph Howlett.

⁴Cather compared her work to the *Golden Legend* in her *Commonweal* letter (*On Writing* 9); David H. Stewart was perhaps the first to detail similarities to Dante, and John J. Murphy develops that comparison (see "Cather's New World") and notes similarities to *Pilgrim's Progress* (see "Historical Essay"). The episodic nature of Cather's text has been commented on by Woodress (*Willa Cather: Her Life* 222), Daiches (105), Randall (288), Stouck (131), and Reynolds (172-73).

and Puvis de Chavannes has been considered in detail only once, in a seven-page article by Clinton Keeler in 1965, to illuminate her narrative structure. It is time now, perhaps, to revisit the connection between these two artists.

Puvis's panel method—incorporating stiff human figures in neoclassical poses, simplification of such figures into decorative arabesques, apparent lack of psychological depth and conflict, atemporal dimension, melancholic or elegiac tone, allegorical content, delicate colors—admirably fits the representation of holy and nostalgic themes preoccupying Cather. While quietly stressing both linear patterns and succession of planes, Puvis's mode, like Cather's, depends as much on specifics as on universals; as Cather wrote to *The Commonweal*, “[m]y book was a conjunction of the general and the particular” (*On Writing* 9). Also, Cather must have detected in the work of Puvis certain aspects of modernist originality. Several art historians have claimed that Puvis is, in effect, the hidden, inescapable master of such avant-garde artists as Cezanne, Picasso, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Seurat, Matisse, Degas, Brancusi, Malevich, Munch—that is, of cubism, fauvism, and expressionism.⁵

⁵This thesis debunks the generally accepted, well established notion that Manet and the impressionists gave birth to modern art. See Serge Lemoine, *De Puvis de Chavannes à Matisse et Picasso: Vers l'Art Moderne*, the catalogue to the exhibition of the same name that opened at Palazzo Grassi in Venice in the spring of 2002. This same thesis had been proposed in 1975 by Richard J. Wattenmaker in *Puvis de Chavannes and the Modern Tradition*. A similar approach is to be found in Jennifer L. Shaw's recent *Dream States: Puvis de Chavannes, Modernism and the Fantasy of France* (2002). Lemoine claims that Puvis influenced such artists as Edwin Howland Blashfield, Mary Cassatt, Arthur Wesley Dow, and Arthur B. Davies in the United States—where he was commissioned to paint the staircase walls of the Boston Public Library (1893–96). Also, some of Puvis's paintings were exhibited at the Armory Show in 1913 and appreciated by John La Farge and Henry Adams. Additionally, according to Lemoine, Puvis had an impact on such early twentieth-century Italian painters as Ardengo Soffici, Mario Sironi, Carlo Carrà, and Massimo Campigli. Brian Petrie recently observed that Puvis was an artist “who painted in a style that could seem aggressively modern to some and naively

Keeler maintained that there are biographical similarities between St. Genevieve and Cather's Archbishop as they are represented, respectively, in the murals and in the novel: 1. both of them established a church (St. Denis in Paris and the St. Francis Cathedral in Santa Fe); 2. Genevieve's mission is foretold by two bishops, St. Germain and St. Loup, just as Latour's is commissioned by the cardinals in Cather's "Prologue at Rome"; and 3. St. Genevieve and Cather's Archbishop have become legendary figures in the history of their people. As far as style is concerned, Keeler noticed that: 1. both the novel and the murals lack movement (even though Latour and Vaillant constantly travel, their pace is studied and lacks spontaneity); 2. there is little distinction between foreground and background in either the novel or the murals; 3. in both, colors tend to be pastel and translucent, the light effecting a distance between the viewer/reader and the objects observed; and 4. for both artists, distance and detachment are instrumental in contributing monumentality. All Keeler's points are indisputable—but can something more be added?

The Pantheon murals, dedicated to such other French saints as St. Denis, St. Louis, and Joan of Arc, were commissioned to different artists usually in sections of four parts—separated panels and tripartite ones.⁶ The large spaces allotted to the latter are divided into three by two half columns. Both single and triple panels are framed by gilded chains of wreathed laurel leaves and acorns. At the bottom and in the center of both the single and triple panels, these wreathed laurel chains are interrupted by captions explaining the painted episodes. Puvis was commissioned to paint two such series, both on Genevieve.⁷

⁶Puvis's murals are not the only ones centered on St. Genevieve in the Pantheon. Eleven panels and a cupola by four other artists illustrate her life and her miracles. Three panels by Jules-Elie Delaunay represent St. Genevieve appeasing Parisians frightened by Attila; four panels by Jean-Paul Laurens depict Genevieve's death; four panels by Théodore Maillot illustrate her miracles; finally, a cupola by Antoine-Jean Gros presents her apotheosis. None of these works, however, attains the monumental simplicity and calm

In his first series, painted between 1874 and 1878, the separate panel presents the child Genevieve praying before a cross affixed to a tree and being observed by two peasants with their small child (illus. #1). In the distance are a flock of sheep, trees, oxen, and a range of blue mountains. The central of the three consecutive panels depicts St. Genevieve being blessed by two bishops, St. Germain and St. Loup, while a crowd of prayerful people surround her; in the distance are houses, trees, and low blue mountains (illus. #2). While this central panel is quite static, the two lateral panels depict movement: poor peasants and fishermen are emerging from huts and a boat to bring people to be blessed by the young saint. These lateral scenes converge, as it were, on the central one, which, in fact, presents figural elements that link it to the other two: trees, women in long dresses and carrying children in their arms, and the upright and oblique poles of a hut (similar to the poles of a ladder and a sail in the right and left panels, respectively). These elements are found in the single panel as well, in which two tree branches are correspondingly oblique. The prevailing luminous glow in all four panels is pink. In the second cycle, painted between 1895 and 1898, the isolated panel illustrates a pensive and serene St. Genevieve keeping vigil over the city of Paris (illus. #3). In the tripartite panels, the central one represents St. Genevieve on the prow of a ship and dispensing food to the besieged Parisians (illus. #4). In the panel on the right men carry sacks of food, while in the left panel men and women outside the city walls pray for provisions to reach them in time, as one figure has collapsed from starvation. Again, both lateral scenes converge on the central one, each presenting figural elements connecting it to the other two: bushes in the foreground, uplifted arms, monumental city walls or sails—the latter providing a backdrop for the saint in the central scene. The separate panel is integrated with the others through a vase of flowers (a substitute for the bushes) and the towers and walls of the city. The prevailing

⁷Puvis must have liked the idea of the tripartite panel since he often divided his large rectangular surfaces into three parts. He also had a predilection—shown in these murals as well—for open spaces where vertical lines could be



Illustration #2: Genevieve meets St. Germain and St. Loup

luminous glow of these four panels is light blue.

If we now compare these murals and Cather's novel in content, we notice that the subject of both is emphatically the sanctity of their church-building protagonists: St. Genevieve and Archbishop Latour. A difference in gender divides them, although their mutual celibacy and his androgyny blur this difference. In addition, both are models of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. This similarity of subject and theme is also matched by a similarity in mood: a general feeling of nostalgia and a downplaying of strife predominate in both works. In fact, both Puvis and Cather superimpose a mood of serenity on their material through attention to landscape as well as to the mundane details of daily life. Both works favor rural over urban settings, and it is usually from the countryside that the city (Paris and Rome) is perceived: in the murals, the setting is either the country around Nanterre or the walls outside Paris; in the novel, the Prologue is set outside Rome, while the rest of the book takes place in and between less monumental communities (Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Taos). The figures placed in these settings seem intended as subjects for allegorical representation more than for character analysis or motivational complexity.⁸ In addition, both murals and novel interweave myth, legend, religion, and history: both St. Genevieve and the two priests are historical as well as legendary figures, and events like the 451 siege of Paris, the Mexican War (1846–48), and the Navajo Long March of 1864 root them in specific historical contexts. Also, there are similarities between the tasks of these protagonist subjects: Genevieve had to contend with Attila, and Latour had to come to terms with the equally barbarous (as Cather depicts him) Padre Jose Martinez, who challenges Latour's authority and tells him he "cannot introduce French fashions" in New Mexico (169). Finally, both church builders are French, and Latour's efforts are part of a long history of French missionary activity that includes Genevieve.⁹ Father Vaillant perhaps has this heritage in mind when he comments to Latour about

⁸Stewart interprets Cather's characters and their experiences as representative of the seven deadly sins and their corresponding virtues (249–56); Murphy sees Cather's priest protagonists as saintly types based on Dante's Francis of

their work in the Southwest: "Not since the days of early Christianity has the Church been able to do what it can here" (237).

Cather's novel and Puvis's murals also commemorate French patrimony. The Parisian Pantheon for which Puvis painted his murals was constructed (between 1756 and 1790) as a memorial to and burial place of great French heroes, including Genevieve (whose church and grave were originally on this site), and has through time alternately assumed secular (not by chance is Foucault's pendulum exhibited there) as well as religious significance. Like this shrine, Cather's novel memorializes both kinds of achievement: it records the construction of the Romanesque cathedral that became the tomb of Archbishop Lamy (Cather's Latour), its heroic builder, and "a continuation of himself and his purpose . . . after he had passed from the scene" (199). Both Cather's novel and the Pantheon murals attempt to integrate history, legend, and architecture not only through monumental postures but through use of color. The landscapes in both are sacralized through soft tones—light grey, azure blue, pale green, pink, yellow in Puvis's murals; in Cather's text the rising moon is a "golden rim against the deep blue velvet of the night" (129); the evening sky is "pale blue" (42); the clouds are "purplish lead-coloured" (74) or "rose-coloured" (152); the sand dunes are "yellow as ochre" (102); the "olive-coloured" rabbit brush is "covered with a thatch of bloom, yellow as gorse" (109); in the evening the "yellow rocks" turn "grey" (105); the country is "pink and blue and yellow" (188), and the moon throws "a pale phosphorescent luminousness over the heavens" (240). At times these pastels cluster and deepen, as in this passage on verberna: "It was like a great violet velvet mantle thrown down in the sun; . . . the violet that is so full of rose colour and is yet not lavender; the blue that becomes almost pink and then retreats again into sea-dark purple . . ." (304). Relatedly, the contours of the landscape presented in each work are gently undulating, the protago-

⁹For Cather, France was the source of civilized life (as Madame Auclair tells her daughter in Cather's 1931 novel *Shadows on the Rock* [20]). Cather visited France in 1902, 1920, 1923, 1930, and 1935. Her favorite area was Provence, which became the setting of her unfinished novel, *Hard Punishments*.



nists are generally placed among the poor and pious and trustworthy people, and gestures as well as scenography substitute for suspense.

Less evident similarities between murals and novel include references to dates and church hierarchy, the sustaining presence of nature, orderly arrangement, and spatial structure. Both works emphasize dates: each mural prominently displays the date of its making, just as the novel's first two books and last open with dates that frame the narrative—1848, 1851, and 1888 (other dated references, primarily to southwestern history, appear throughout the text). In addition, Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant (who later becomes a bishop) recall St. Germain d'Auxerre and St. Loup de Troyes, the two bishops who appear in the central panel of the first triple mural. When these two French bishops met Genevieve in Nanterre, they were on their way to England to fight the Pelagian heresy, anticipating Cather's two French bishops traveling together to rescue the Southwest from the grip of heathenish practices and heretical priests. More significantly, the novel and the murals emphasize nature; in both, nature (represented by trees, rivers, or mountains) becomes another character. In the murals, trees in the first cycle and ship-masts fashioned of trees in the second serve the important task of rhythmically modulating the circumscribed space; in the novel, trees and bushes are allegorized as well as described and their effect on the protagonists' sensibilities highlighted. In Cather's first book, for example, Father Latour, riding across New Mexico to reach his parish, stops to pray in front of a juniper tree branching into the form of a cross. The scene recalls Puvis's first panel, with Saint Genevieve kneeling in front of a cross made of branches and affixed to a tree. Also, in the related triple mural, peasants emerge from thatched conical huts, suggesting the haystack shape of the sand hillocks that confuse Latour (20). In the first cycle of murals, streams of water and "dazzling" white sheep appear in the background and seem to be counterparts of the life-giving stream and herd of goats Latour discovers at Agua Secreta. One cannot help but suspect that Cather had the orderly arrangement of the Puvis murals in mind when in the Prologue she has Cardinal de Allande exclaim, "Oh, the Germans classify, but the French arrange! The French missionaries have a sense of propor-

tion and rational adjustment. They are always trying to discover the logical relation of things” (10). Indeed, it follows that Father Latour is “sensitive to the shape of things” (20). In the orderly arrangement of the 1929 illustrated edition of the novel (the result of Cather’s typographical demands), there is an approximation of the divisions as well as the laurel-wreath framing of the eight murals.¹⁰ The title page of each of the novel’s books is blank but for the title itself in italicized capital letters, and on the opening page of each book and at subsequent chapter divisions titles appear in upper and lower case italics beneath upright typestyle (roman) numerals. Each chapter is prefaced by a horizontal illustration above the numerals and titles.¹¹ These illustrations are carried through the ninth book (which bears the novel’s title), although it is without chapter titles, which may be due to the fact that it just recapitulates—at its most salient moments—Latour’s life.

Of particular interest is the possibility that the spatial structure of the murals may have impacted Cather’s narrative structure. The half columns in the Pantheon that divide the larger surfaces into three equal sections allowed the painter to exclude the portions of the figures that would be blocked by the columns both to the right and to the left of each panel. Puvis’s narrative is thus abruptly interrupted, with parts of bodies and objects cut out. But it is *as if* the narrative continued behind the columns. This device may suggest, on the one hand, that reality is too large and too dynamic to be represented in its entirety or, on the other, that art claims its fierce independence from reality and thus presents only what the artist deems important—a premise, indeed, of modernist twentieth-century art. The tripartite panel is thus seen as a continuous narrative and in motion, which requires the beholder’s mental participation; significantly, Jennifer L. Shaw claims that Puvis’s “general vocabulary is not one of plenitude and pleasure but of incompleteness and lack” (23) because he wanted to set his viewers’

¹⁰Modernists, poets in particular (Cather was also a poet), were attentive to typography, and Cather was no exception, overseeing the physical format of her books.

¹¹For an analysis of Cather’s typographical choices, see Charles W. Mig-non’s



Illustration #4: Genevieve distributes food during the siege of Paris

imaginations at work. While the painter has technically performed an act of “self-excision” (see Genette, 326–31), the blank semicolumns, rather than forming an obstacle to the narration, become an incentive for viewers to fill in the gaps. Cather seems to have tried something similar in constructing her narrative by cutting the story into nine books and a prologue and then creating subtle, half-hidden links between each book and the next. In this way she implicitly invited the creative involvement of the reader; as Jo Ann Middleton has maintained, “we cooperate in the story that appears in print and the story that exists in the blank spaces” (51).¹² Through such strategy Cather fragmented her narrative far less than is generally assumed.

The first book, “The Vicar Apostolic,” is devoted to introducing Father Latour, although his companion, Father Vaillant, appears and is also present in Latour’s recollection of past events. This book ends with Latour discussing miracles with his friend and declaring his brotherly affection for his unfailing faith as well as for his warm capacity to address people. This provides an appropriate link to the second book, “Missionary Journeys,” which begins with Vaillant and dramatizes his deeply religious and shrewdly practical personality. The book ends with a reference to five Sisters of Loretto, whom Latour “brought back with him . . . to found a school for girls in letterless Santa Fe” (89). The third book, “The Mass at Acoma,” opens with a reference to this last event: “The return journey [to Santa Fe] was even slower, as he had with him *the* five nuns who came to found the school of Our Lady of Light” (93, emphasis added). The definite article explicitly indicates that the episode has already been reported and thus joins the two books. This book ends with the story of the death of the tyrannical Fray Baltazar, killed by the Acomas after he accidentally murdered a young Native servant. These first three books are further integrated by the prevalence of pink and light green colors (like the first cycle of murals).

¹²Jo Ann Middleton has named these gaps—borrowing a term used in science, a botanical and biological metaphor—“vacuoles” (54). Hermione Lee, on the contrary, thinks that the nine books are to be read as distinct anecdotes, as “‘timeless moments’ . . . with no direct connection to what preceded

Much of the third book, however, is taken up by the description of the rock setting of Acoma and its fortress-like church, which links it to the fourth book, "Snake Root." In it, Latour decides to travel to his friend, who is sick with black measles in a remote village in the mountains. Latour spends the night in the pueblo of Pecos, "pacing up and down the crust of bare rock between the village and the ruin of the old mission church" (138). The link between Acoma mesa and less dramatic Pecos rock is evident. Furthermore, in the third book there is a reference to snakes, which constitutes the main theme of the fourth book. When Latour is falling asleep at Acoma, he feels, "[s]omething reptilian . . . , something that had endured by immobility, a kind of life out of reach, like the crustaceans in their armour" (118, emphasis added). The fourth book ends with Latour being directed by Kit Carson to Zeb Orchard, a trader, for information about the snake legends concerning the Pecos. The fifth book, entitled "Padre Martinez," opens with a reference to Carson (159) and ends with the discovery of twenty thousand dollars under the bedroom floor of Martinez's friend, Padre Lucero. This prepares readers for the sixth book, entitled "Doña Isabella," which is centered on money and opens with the announcement of Father Latour's project of building a cathedral—a project for which he finds financial help in the rich Don Antonio Olivares. The book ends with Doña Isabella having publicly admitted her true age but pretending, in front of her guests, to having told a lie just to allow Latour to inherit the donation from her late husband. This happy scene takes place in the Olivares's ranch house, newly cleaned and glittering after months of neglect and mourning: "Everyone was gay, the servants and the guests, everything sparkled like a garden after a shower" (221).

The garden theme develops further in the seventh book, "The Great Diocese," in a long account of the garden laid out and pruned by Latour himself. This garden, like the murals in Puvis's second cycle, is imbued with blue—from the garden grass that has "a reflection of blue sky in it" (227) to the "lilac-colored flowers" (236) of the tamarisks. Additional details relate this book to the second cycle. For instance, the sleepless Bishop, who gets up, looks out of the window, and gives comfort to Sada, recalls Puvis's Genevieve, who, in the sin-

gle panel of the second cycle, keeps nightly vigil over moonlit Paris. Latour performs his charitable task under the “pale phosphorescent luminousness” of a “full moon” (240) in the “blue vault” (248) of the sky. Throughout the four chapters of this book, he resembles Genevieve in his pensiveness. “[T]he shadows of walls and buildings [that] stood out sharply in the faint light from the moon” (241), as Latour makes his way across the snowy court, not only recall the single mural of Puvis’s wistful Genevieve bathed in moonlight and overlooking the city but also the saint facing the thick walls of besieged Paris in the central panel of the triple mural. Chapter three of Cather’s seventh book ends with the telling meta-phor of Eusabio’s hogan (where Latour considers recalling Vaillant from Arizona) as “isolated like a ship’s cabin” (261), echoing the ship on which Genevieve appears in this central panel. The fourth chapter depicts Latour’s journey with Eusabio back to Santa Fe, the two horsemen dwarfed by the expansive sky, “that brilliant blue world of stinging air and moving cloud” (264), duplicating the setting of the novel’s opening. The seventh book confirms the fundamental importance of *this* world in the following: “Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky” (264). The book ends with a eulogy of the Indian way of living—a way that does not upset nature. As Latour muses, “The land and all that it bore they [the Indians] treated with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it” (267).

The eighth book, “Gold under Pike’s Peak,” opens with the view of the hill chosen by Latour for building his cathedral. The hill’s golden color matches the gold of the sunlight so that nature, unspoiled by man, shows all its glory. Not only does Latour declare, “That hill . . . is my Cathedral” (274), but he wants to build his church in the Midi Romanesque style because, as he claims, that is “the right style for this country” (275). Like the Indians, he yearns for harmony between nature and the work of man. The book ends with the moving scene of Latour and Vaillant saying goodbye to each other for the last time.

Book ninth, “Death Comes for the Archbishop,” opens with a letter written by Latour to Vaillant’s sister in France in which he maintains that, after Vaillant’s death, he feels “nearer to him than before” (301).

Even if, throughout the novel, Vaillant seemed more a foil than a protagonist, at the end Latour emphasizes the unity in their diversity. In the murals, Puvis too celebrated the complementary potential of diversity in his saint: Genevieve's ascetic (first cycle) and practical (second cycle) qualities. This last book contains two episodes that echo both cycles of the Puvis murals. In chapter four a legend is related to Latour that reminds readers of the single panel in the first cycle, where a peasant family of three (a couple with a child) beholds Genevieve as she is praying. In the legend, two Spanish friars, lost in the middle of a desert, come upon a house where a shepherd, his young wife, and their infant child give them shelter and food (319-21). Subsequently, when the friars discover that there is no such house nor family in this place, they realize that the Holy Family had miraculously come to their aid. And in chapter seven Latour remembers his encounter with the Navajo chief, Manuelito, who, while declaring that he will never leave his land as ordered by the American government, compares the high crag in his territory, "Shiprock," to a "one-masted fishing-boat" (337), thus recalling the fishing boat prominent in the central panel in the second cycle. With possible reference to these episodes from both cycles of murals, Cather's novel comes to a close. In some ways, the episodes summarize Genevieve's life: her finding God in nature in the first cycle's single panel, and her bringing help to Parisians, who make her their patron saint, in the second cycle's triple panel. Similarly, in Cather's novel, the building of the cathedral summarizes the Bishop's faith in God and contribution to his community. Finally, just as Genevieve was buried in her abbey church, Archbishop Latour is laid to rest in his cathedral.

Cather's modernist quest probably found in Puvis's art an inspiration and model for her own masterpiece, its chromatic hues, moods, details, and, above all, structure.

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