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A Metacritical Approach to Eminescu's Myth. With a Look to Florina Ilis's Novel *Parallel Lives* [*Viețile paralele*]

Abstract. The centrality of Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889) in the Romanian collective imaginary has been repeatedly acknowledged in the last one hundred years. His figure – and to less extent his poetic and journalistic work – enabled the proliferation of a wide gallery of cultural, political, and literary myths, which collided with one another and inspired vivid debates in the public arena. My article seeks to examine one recent contribution in this area, namely the novel *Viețile paralele* [Parallel Lives] published by Florina Ilis in 2012. Drawing on concepts such as national poet(s) and cultural saints, I suggest a more cautious approach to Eminescu's myth, which is often seen as a form of Romanian cultural pathology. Comparative research stresses that in East-Central Europe the figures of national poets are subject to collective mythization and ideological annexation. The first part of my article comments on the mechanisms of national myths production and reiteration, while the second part focuses on the role played by literary works in these processes. In this respect, my analysis of Ilis's novel shows that literary fiction both enables and disables collective myths. However, as a postmodern and postcommunist female author, Ilis approaches the myth of the Romanian national (male) bard from a deconstructionist perspective, which asks for a rethinking of the collective representations on Eminescu.

Keywords: collective imaginary, cultural myth, national poet, Mihai Eminescu, Florina Ilis

In this article I will examine the centrality of Mihai Eminescu's myth in the Romanian cultural imaginary by employing concepts which deal with the public "usage" of canonical writers, such as "national poets" (Neubauer 2010) and "cultural saints" (Dović and Helgason 2017). Recent comparative research (Wachtel 2006; Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2010) shows that, in the cultures from East-Central Europe, the figures of

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national poets from the 19th century are often given the privilege of living posthumous "lives", i.e. of entering a regime of cultural existence that allows for extraordinary levels of public celebration, including ideological reinterpretation and promotion by various political groups, collective mythization (Boia 2001, 5) and even various forms of "sanctification" (Dović and Helgason 2017, 2). In this respect, Eminescu's story of uses and abuses no longer appears as an exceptional situation, particular to Romanians, but as a somehow normal process, common to various European cultures. The first part of my paper provides an overview of the literature on this topic, and discusses mechanisms of national myth production and perpetuation. The second part of the article focuses on Florina Ilis's novel *Viețile paralele* [Parallel Lives], published in Romania in 2012 and translated in French three years later. Ilis, who is the first female author to write a novel on Eminescu, approaches the myth of the Romanian national (male) bard from a meta-critical perspective, by means of several postmodern literary strategies including hypertextuality, media mixing, autoreferentiality and so forth. Her novel calls for a rethinking of the cultural representations on Eminescu, while putting into question the canonicity of some of the major texts in the field of Eminescology[1].

1. A myth naturalized?

The simplest, essential definition of modern myths was proposed by Roland Barthes, for whom myths are "systems of communication" (Barthes 1991, 107) which involve structures of the imaginary, textual and intermedial processes, and social rituals. The figure of the national poet, present especially in East-Central European cultures (Neubauer 2010, 11), is an extremely dense myth: keeping to the territory of semiology, one might say that it triggers associations with interrelated semes such as "*idol, icon, hero*, or *prophet*" (Dović and Helgason 2017, 5). "National writers" appeared mostly in European countries which consolidated their statehood in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, and this historical particularity led to a specific predicament in the literary systems from this geographical area. More precisely, since literature at the time of state-formation sought to gain legitimacy as a national institution, it profited from the emerging cult of national poets in the public sphere. And the same dynamics stayed active

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[1] The ample domain of "Eminescology" refers both to the study of *vita*, and to the study of Eminescu's *opera*. In the frame of Romanian literary studies, Eminescology is often seen as a core discipline.

also in the period after 1945, when national writers in East-Central Europe were annexed by the communist ideology of totalitarian regimes: such appropriation played an important role in maintaining literature's national prestige as a field. However, Romanian literary studies kept on claiming all this time to have total possession of Eminescu and his work, and went as far as to integrate his political journalism with his literary achievements. After 1989, the analysis of the national poet's myth gained in Romania ample space, and critical interventions were heard from revisionist historians (Boia 1997; Boia 2015), literary critics specializing in Eminescology (Creția 1998; Bot 2001; Costache 2008) or writers from the 1980s and 1990s generations (Bădescu 1999). Such discussions were taking their cue from the general effort for de-ideologization in the humanities, where the communist cultural revolution had taken its greatest toll. In the field of literature, this effort led in the 1990s to intense calls for a revision of the disgraceful "east-ethics" (Monica Lovinescu's famous pun) of writers who had folded under the pressure of the totalitarian regime.

Most of the works mentioned above document the appearance and the avatars of the Eminescu myth from its emergence in the 1880s, while the poet was still alive (Costache 2008, 177-178) and up to the postcommunist period (Creția 1998, 232-247; Bot 2001, 9-107). Three dimensions of the myth may be identified, which are present in various degrees in each of the stages of its creation and consolidation. There is, first, an *aesthetic* component (illustrated by the processes of canonization within the system of national literature), then a *collective* component (Eminescu's reception in the wider public, by means of his exemplary biography and sentimental poetry), and, finally, a *political* component (the annexation of Eminescu's poetic and journalistic work by various political ideologies: militant nationalism before the First World War, the far-right in the interwar period, communist ideology after 1945, postcommunist nationalism after 1989)[2]. At the same time, these necessary and well-documented studies of the Eminescu myth are circulating ideas, either explicitly or implicitly, such as (1) underlining the uniqueness of the Eminescu cult both within Romanian culture and in a wider European frame; (2) defining the myth of the national poet in the terms of a cultural syndrome (a collective "need" for compensatory cultural myths) and (3) associating national mythologies reactivated in the postcommunist period with the epiphenomena of communist-era Romanian nationalism. Certainly, Eminescu's status as a national symbol

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[2] For a detailed analysis of the chronology of the myth, see Bot 2001, 9-107.

is beyond doubt, if one considers the huge impact of the debates in the 1990s and 2000s on the Romantic poet's place within Romanian culture, debates which drew in very diverse categories of people, from intellectuals and politicians to "simple folk" (as shown by the so-called "*Dilema* case" (Bădescu 1999)). Still, we should ask ourselves whether this insistence on the ancient and still ongoing mythization of Eminescu doesn't come to create an "artificial myth" (Barthes, 1991, 134), which not only "steals" the language of the myth in order to expose it as false, as it happens in the Barthesian model, but instead lets itself be "stolen" by it. The circular return to the Eminescu myth, and especially its treatment as a form of collective pathology particular to Romanian culture, are they not actual symptoms of the naturalization of myth?

2. How "national" is a national poet

Despite the fact that the myth of the national poet is based on a mechanism of singularization, the Romanian case is in no way unique. In his volume *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*, Andrew Wachtel states that: "although this phenomenon occurs throughout Eastern Europe, there has been little recognition among ethnicities that they shared it with neighbors. Rather, *each country's discourse insists not only that a given poet was uniquely able to express the nation's soul but simultaneously that no other country possesses any figure remotely similar*" [emphasis mine] (Wachtel 2006, 15). Although Wachtel's observation is accurate, the idea of a national poet is not fully specific to East-Central Europe. While analyzing the commemorative fever of 19th century Europe, Rigney and Leerssen point out that many West European states celebrated the centenary (in some cases, the bi- or the tercentenary) of national writers, among which Goethe, Schiller, Tasso, Shakespeare, Dante, Walter Scott, Petrarch, Rousseau, Voltaire and others (Rigney and Leerssen 2014, 9). Even if they were not always seen as "national" writers in the East-Central European sense of the word (which conflates the aesthetic and the political dimension of the national poets' works), the two authors note "a certain preference in the 'cult of centenaries' for writers who themselves were already involved in the business of narrating history or whose works lent themselves to appropriation in these terms" (Rigney and Leerssen 2014, 12). This comes to prove that, in 19th century Western Europe, canonical works also had to have a regional or national component that was essential to the definition of a wider ethnic and political collective identity.

In East-Central Europe, however, poets were more likely to be vested as national icons (Neubauer 2010, 11)[3]. This was due to a number of factors, among which: (1) the "national allegories" in the emergent literatures in Eastern Europe, starting with the end of the 18th century, were more often written in verse (Juvan 2017, 13); (2) for the young literatures in the area, poetry seemed as the main medium whereby national language could be "created" and cultivated[4]; and, last but not least, (3) poetry was more easily accessible to the wider public (given the practice of occasional poetry, of public recitations, of setting the lines of poems to music, of printing poems on loose sheets or copying them in personal albums, and thus lending them ample circulation). Not only the Romanian postromantic Eminescu is attributed the merit of having "created" the modern poetic language in Romanian, by producing a mutation in the incipient literary tradition (Bot 2012, 247-271), but other romantic national poets are also counted as language "creators", among them the Slovenian France Prešeren, who some critics have called a "postmodern romantic" (Juvan 2017, 17-18)[5]. Another important problem of the myths concerning national writers is that of the "national" element, i.e. the patriotic and political component of their work, which is highly variable from one author to the other. If the Hungarian Sándor Petőfi and the Bulgarian Hristo Botev write a politically committed poetry, Prešeren or Eminescu rarely cultivate militant rhetoric and nationalism. According to Juvan, "the prominence of the political in Prešeren's poetry does not arise from the mere quantity of 'political' words and themes, but from the semantic power and context of his poetic speech acts, together with the effects that his texts triggered among contemporaries" (Juvan 2017, 21). Eminescu's situation is slightly different, since his mostly apolitical

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[3] Yet, such national canonization does not fully describe the status of a „national poet" and of his/her literary work. As Andrei Terian shows in a remarkable study which focuses on Eminescu's case, the national writers are integrated into the "intercultural and intertextual network" of world literature (Terian 2017, 36), and in this "archive" they often find the material for constructing their most "autochthonous" pieces. For instance, Eminescu surpasses the lack of a "Dacian", i.e. national mythology, by connecting Romanian historical legends to Indian myths (Terian 2017, 46-50).

[4] In this sense, Adrian Tudurachi affirms that "literatures which reinvented themselves in the 19th century appealed to a mythology of lyricism" in order to differentiate themselves from the authoritative French model, whose linguistic "genius" was that of prose (Tudurachi 2016, 25).

[5] This perspective is also visible in the tradition of state prizes bearing the name of national writers. In Iceland, for instance, the Jónas Hallgrímsson Award is given yearly since 1996 "to an individual who has been exemplary in cultivating the Icelandic language" (see Helgason 2011, 181).

poetic work is written concomitantly with an intense journalistic activity in the service of a political journal, *Timpul* [The Time]. But it is not the politics in his writing which made him a national poet. Boia noticed that Eminescu's militant "Romanianness" was discovered only when his posthumous poems were published, at the start of the 20th century (Boia 2015, 49). It is true, on the other hand, that Eminescu's political articles played an important part in his being annexed by various divergent political movements, especially by the communist regime beginning with 1950, but similar processes took place with other poets from ex-communist countries, such as Petőfi, Botev, or the Czech Karel Hynek Mácha, who have been subjects to similar processes of appropriation (Neubauer 2010, 14). Hence the political dimension functions as an essential part of the myth of the national writer, since it relies on strategies of mass-diffusion through publications, official commemorations, and so on. The political annexation of national poets coincides with a reconfirmation of their canonical status, and may even engender aesthetic reevaluations: maybe the most striking example is the „purist" aesthetic exegesis of Eminescu done by I. Negoițescu in his *Poezia lui Eminescu* [Eminescu's Poetry] (1968), a book written in the early 1950s, at the height of dictatorship and socialist realism (Goldiș 2011, 244-245).

A second issue central to the dispute around Eminescu, apart from his status as a national poet, is his cult in the Romanian society, a topic which regards mainly the collective component of his myth. Eminescu's "sanctification", i.e. the appropriation of his life and work as the object of a "cult with all its inevitable dogmas, with its martyrs, its rituals and ceremonies" (Creția 1998, 6), recalls a whole series of social rites developed around national figures. In their comparative study *National Poets, Cultural Saints: Canonization and Commemorative Cults of Writers in Europe*, Dović and Helgason are paralleling cultural canonicity with religious (Christian) canonicity and focus on the mechanisms through which takes place the "production and reproduction" of the canonic status of the biography (vita) and work (opus) of writers (Dović and Helgason 2017, 77-78). They submit several indices of canonicity that may be relevant for national poets, among which: *confirmation* (including official approval by state authorities), *commemoration* and even veneration, *appropriation* through "interpretation and usurpation", and *indoctrination* (especially through the educational system) (Dović and Helgason 2017, 87-90). The concept of "cultural saint" enlarges and democratizes the idea of canonicity, usually associated in literary studies around with aesthetic value and critical authority, by integrating the social

dimension of the canonization processes and transferring the discussion of the (political) myth of national poets to the field of social and cultural memory. In Eminescu's particular case, Terian observes that the "lateral canonization" in other academic domains than literature (Terian 2018), reinforces the canonical status of the poet by linking his literary, political and "scientific" pieces in a web of cross-references; nonetheless, the resulting synthesis has the potential to canonize itself as an alternative narrative of Eminescu's sacred "mission" in the Romanian culture.

Finally, one should take into account the role played by Eminescology in the dynamics of Eminescu's myth. In his book *Eminescu. Negocierea unei imagini* [Eminescu. The Negotiation of an Image] Iulian Costache suggests that, far from being a neutral metadiscourse on the Romanian poet's work, the scholars dealing with Eminescu appropriated for themselves the management of the reception (i.e. of the "image", in Costache's words) of an exemplary work. The result was that Eminescology participated to the collective negotiation of this national myth (Costache 2008, 46). There is indeed a constitutive paradox in this nuclear discipline within Romanian literary studies: the drive to develop as a "pure" science of Eminescu's work clashes with its need to account for Eminescu's reception in non-academic media and the social manifestations of his myth. The role of Eminescology in the construction and perpetuation of the Eminescu myth could evolve into a specific field of research. Eminescology helped in establishing numerous influential beliefs regarding the Romanian national poet: the belief that his poetry is untranslatable; the belief that his work does not support literary comparison and, conversely, that it is "universal"; the praise of the literary value of all of Eminescu's jottings; the reverence due to a tragically unfinished work, etc. The scholarly literature on Eminescu played an important role not only in re-defining the aesthetic component of the poet's myth; it also shaped the collective component – by means of curricula and school books –, and also the political component of Eminescu's myth, by championing the aesthetic exegesis against the purely ideological one in the communist decades.

3. The Afterlives of Mihai Eminescu

In what follows, I will investigate the treatment of the "national poet" myth in literature, focusing on Florina Ilis's 2012 novel *Parallel Lives*. Even if the novel did not generate substantial debates on national mythologies and their presence in postcommunist Romania, all reactions

to it, coming from important literary critics, touched on the problem of the deconstruction of the Eminescu myth (see especially Crețu 2013, and Mironescu 2013).

First of all, it is important to point out that Ilis had previously explored cultural myths, and also religious, technological and political ones in her earlier works. For instance, in *Cruciada copiilor* [The Children's Crusade] (2005), the author drew upon the mythologies which were active in 2000s Romania, for instance the myth of the „stolen revolution" (about the political capitalization of the anticommunist revolution of 1989), the myth of the mass-media, of popular culture, of the Internet and virtual reality. With *Parallel Lives*, Ilis approaches the polysemantic figure of Eminescu; as the title suggests, her idea is to parallel the poet's personal biography and his "afterlife" in the Romanian culture. The literary afterlife, as defined by Astrid Erll, refers to inter-textual processes, such as intertextuality and intermediality, on the one hand, but also to the "active appropriation of a literary text by social actors" (Erll 2011), on the other hand. If the concepts of *national poet(s)* or *cultural saints* prominently address the political or social dimension of the myth, the idea of *literary afterlives* proves more useful for an analysis of its aesthetic dimension. The book opens with the onset of Eminescu's mental illness, in the summer of 1883, but it progresses within a hypertextual structure, in which the quotations, the commentaries, the rumors and the theatrical asides are used as narrative strategies. Ilis blends and remixes elements of several genres, such as fictional biography (the first part of the book leaves the reader with the impression that he/she is reading the chronicle of Eminescu's last years of life), documentary novel (various kinds of authentic documents are used in the book) and experimental novel, in a textualist fashion which was championed especially by the members of the 80s generation in Romania (the narrative is fragmented due to frequent changes of rhythm, changes of point of view and style).

Ilis employs a postmodern technique, mixing intertextuality and intermediality, whereby the *écriture* relies on the co-presence of various texts and media – epistles, journal entries, clinical records, photographs, fragments of Eminescu's poetry, excerpts from the canonical Eminescologic exegeses, articles from the press, and, last but not least, informative notes written by the informants of the Securitate (the secret police of the communist regime) – each with its own way of reflecting the outside world and the inner monologue of the characters. It is worth mentioning that many of these texts are, originally, "authentic" pieces,

which enjoyed (and still enjoy) a large circulation in the public discourse on Eminescu. Although the author changes the original message by placing these texts in different contexts, and eventually by integrating them in a polyphonic, Babylonian narration, their paternity is always indicated to the reader through anagram or allusion: for instance, the literary critics which are often quoted at the foot of the page are given transparent code names. In doing so, Ilis signals the decanonization of the established readings of Eminescu and puts into question the very foundations of Eminescology; it is also significant that, in the novel, literary critics are seen as informants of the state secret police, and their exegeses are used as incriminatory materials to be used against the poet they are dedicated to.

In *Parallel Lives* various categories of texts collide and interact, each with its own specific regime of production and reception: (1) Eminescu's own works, which deliver a number of fictional egos of their author; (2) memories about Eminescu, emerging in the public space after his death and continuing to appear well into the 1930s; these highly stereotypical testimonies facilitated the coagulation of a canonical image of the man; (3) personal and official documents, letters, medical papers, and (4) authoritative critical texts. By choosing to have all these types of documents be quoted side by side in her novel, Ilis highlights the fact that they coexist within the sphere of Eminescology and enter a chain of virtual interactions. After the beginning of Eminescu's mental illness, which is when Ilis opens her novel, the poet's work is drawn into a cycle of intertextual relations, which turns it into a hypotext (in the words of Gérard Genette) for all the other kinds of documents that take part in the constitution of the Eminescu myth. This is why the author has no interest in establishing a new authoritative narrative on Eminescu, in the manner of E. Lovinescu's *Mite* (1934) and *Bălăuca* (1935), or Cezar Petrescu's trilogy *Eminescu's Novel* (1935-1936). Instead, she is captivated by the hypertextual outgrowth around the poet's work and biography, and she continuously deals with these excrescences in a (most of the times) parodic manner.

The question remains, however, how could this potentially endless archive of texts and metatexts receive a concrete form and a meaning in the novel? In order to surpass such difficulty, the author recourses to the "Securitate myth" (Mironescu 2012) and integrates in the book the topic of communism. Despite the fact that Eminescu is perhaps one of the most spectacular cases of a classic author's appropriation, rewriting and reinterpretation by a totalitarian regime, Ilis's option was seen by many of

the Romanian reviewers as disputable. In the book, the Securitate opens an informative file, with the code name "National Poet", and sends its informants back in time, to the 19th century, to try to influence Eminescu's political opinions and have him rewrite his work in friendly terms to the socialist regime. While in Mircea Cărtărescu's novels *Orbitor* and *Solenoid* communism appears as an archetype of evil, as it produces the destruction of the world, Ilis is interested in the propaganda of the state apparatus, and in the numerous texts produced and circulated by the Securitate (in his review, Marius Chivu happily describes the Securitate as a "informational hub" (Chivu 2012)). In the end, all of Eminescu's acquaintances, historical figures or not, who are utilized as narrators throughout the book, are exposed as "sources', i.e. collaborators of the Romanian political police, or as foreign spies, and all manifest a special (although not very clearly explained) interest in the poet. The "communist plot" has a merely didactic function in the novel when, on many pages, it offers simplistic notions on the role of the ideological propaganda to a reader (presumably) born after 1989. Better results are obtained when the myth of the Securitate borrows parodic patterns of thinking from Eminescologic conspiracy theories (Terian 2018), which thrived in the public sphere especially after 1989.

Finally, in Ilis's novel there is a subtle discussion of gender. The author is not very outspoken on matters of gender and even forges for herself a masculine alter-ego, F.I., evoking a friend of Eminescu, to whom an 1868 poem is dedicated; F.I. is also a character in the novel, an intellectual that the Securitate agents force to compile the informative file on Eminescu. It is noteworthy that the novelist explores Eminescu's physiology, discussing bodily odors, sore skin and other details that biographies usually leave out.[6] Eminescu's illness is not interpreted in the romantic key of the *poète damné*, drawing his misfortune from his genius, but by capitalizing on the disjointed, schizophrenic jottings in Eminescu's manuscripts from the time of his malady. Also, Ilis draws attention to the misogyny of traditional Romanian criticism and to the authoritative, "masculine" character of the Romanian cultural canon, insisting on the differences of social role imposed on male and female writers in the 19th century. In the novel, Eminescu becomes a passive subject, financially dependent on others, permanently supervised and unable to freely make

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[6] Even biographic novels used to leave physiology out of the picture; for instance, E. Lovinescu claimed to be interested only in the psychic structure of genius, lacking any interest in such details.

decisions for himself; the condition of the woman, exemplified by the poetess Veronica Micle – Eminescu's great love – is very similar.

In appealing to intertextuality, Ilis attempts to construct what Barthes called "counter-mythical" language" (Barthes 1991, 136), a language which denaturalizes the "mythical speech" on Eminescu from the gallery of texts she makes reference to. In my opinion, the semiologic theory of myth may be successfully applied in the analysis of a novel so preoccupied with codes, signs and entryways into other realities (Ilis suggests there might be a similarity between digital worlds and the "parallel worlds" that Romanticism exalted). Almost no sequence of *Parallel Lives* can be read only denotatively, and the novel has the structure of a hypertext that activates a plurality of transtextual reports. However, one should not forget that demystifying through decontextualization and re-textualization of the language of myth is a risky solution. The problem regards what Umberto Eco called, in his *Lector in fabula*, the "encyclopedic competence" of the reader, i.e. his/her capacity to use his/her wider expertise in order to decode the multi-level message of a literary text (Eco 1991, 88-91). In this case, if the novel's reader is not an expert of Eminescology, the narration loses much of its demystifying efficacy – even though the author compensates this loss by numerous excessively didactic pages, for instance in the third chapter, where the workings of communist propaganda are described at length. This observation raises an important question about literature's capacity to deconstruct myths using the instruments of inter- and metatextuality. For the Romanian writers after 1989, when the challenge is to engage with both the mythologies of communism and those of postcommunism, this remains an essential question.

4. Conclusions

In Romania, the collective myth of Mihai Eminescu, as well as the actions aiming to demystify his figure, were seen as symptoms of a national pathology. In this article, my aim was twofold. Firstly, my purpose was to draw the attention to the transnational dimension of such processes of canonization, which are typical for almost all East-Central European states, but also for other peripheral European cultures (for instance, Iceland, as showed in Helgason 2011). Within Romanian studies, literary critics often operate with a restrictive notion of canonization, centered on the aesthetic value, and with a pejorative, even dismissive attitude toward Eminescu's mythization (which is discussed in

terms of misreading, misapprehension, misappropriation, and misappreciation). Secondly, I wanted to explore the role played by literary works in the processes of myth creation. In Ilis's particular case, the cultural myth of Eminescu is approached through several strategies of subversion, among which: (1) the author's focus exclusively on the period of Eminescu's mental illness, diverging polemically from the canonical biographical narrations; (2) the construction of a "counter-mythical language" (in Barthes's words) by the use of literary devices such as hypertextuality, media mixing, switching between perspectives; it is a language that treats ironically the intertext of Eminescu's work and the metatext of literary criticism; (3) the insistence on physiology and corporeality, as a polemical response to the ethereal images of Eminescu that the memoirists and the novels on Eminescu from the 1930s preferred. This is why Ilis's novel functions as a literary device which deconstructs the Eminescu myth. But it leaves to be seen whether literature has or doesn't have the capacity to deconstruct by its specific, textual, means the mythologies of contemporary societies.

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