

THE SPACE BETWEEN THE STARS:
Charles Wright And Language Of The Unseen

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The Space Between the Stars: Charles Wright and Language Of The Unseen

I'll finish this poem,
This one that's not about the stars,
but what's between them.

Thinking about the night sky, I remember a poem by Tu Fu
—Charles Wright, *Negative Blue*

Language in Relation to Silence

In beginning to explore Wright's poetic relationship to silence, it is important to examine his use of sound in the context of silence. Charles Wright is clearly a musical poet and the music itself can be seen as functioning beyond the rational. According to Helen Vendler in her essay "The Transcendent 'I'" in *The Point Where All Things Meet*, "Sound adds to his poems that conclusiveness which logic and causality confer on the poetry of others" (Andrews 9), and she goes on to quote the poet himself, "Mostly I like the sound of words. The sound, the feel, the paint, the color of them. I like to hear what they can do with each other. I'm still trying to do whatever I can with sound" (qtd. in Andrews 9).

Wright often structures the poems to highlight this music much the way a painter uses color. Wright has acknowledged that in fact Cezanne provided an influential model for him, especially for the 1981 book, *The Southern Cross*: "My poems are put together in tonal blocks, in tonal units that work off one another. Vide Cezanne's use of color and form. I try to do that in sound patterns within the line, in the

line within the stanza, and the stanza within the poem. Tonal units of measure, tonal rhythms in time” (*Halflife* 20).

The poem “Homage to Paul Cezanne,” which is more of a reference to Cezanne’s style of artistic execution than to the painter’s life, is a strong example of Wright’s music. In his description of the dead, he writes, “They reach up from the ice plant. / They shuttle their messengers through the oat grass. / Their answers rise like rust on the stalks and the spidery leaves. / We rub them off our hands” (*Southern Cross* 3). The music in these lines is irregular and rhythmic, relying on internal, slant rhyme and alliteration, which helps the vivid images rise off the page—to sing them, as it were, beyond the physical dimension.

All music, all sound even, originates in silence. It is defined by the contrast between stillness and vibration. Given that Wright’s medium is words, and through them he aspires to music, his basic grounding needs to exist in silence, just as Cezanne layered color in answer to the blank canvas. As Bruce Bond explains in “Metaphysics of the Image in Charles Wright and Paul Cezanne”:

What we see in the occasional white space is the implication of a larger story, *the* larger story as Wright would have it. The understated canvas stands like a Platonic shadow this side of its source and subject, or like a sacrament, the body of what we cannot see. In Wright’s thinking, blank spaces serve not merely as barriers to a fuller knowledge but also as windows of access into the invisible. (Andrews 266)

a light to lead back to silence, sound of the first voice” (58). Voice coming from silence is expressed in metaphor as the bird song moves over black water—here voice moves across a dark unknown, which for Wright is an *Ars Poetica*, a poetic representation of the words moving out of the silence.

In the 1984 *Buffalo Yoga*, Wright alludes to silence as the absolute speech, which is the original source that underpins the words. “All my life I’ve listened for the dark speech of silence, / And now, every night, / I hear a slight murmur, a slow rush, / My blood setting out on its long journey beyond the skin” (10). Here the murmur moves both into speech and silence—the murmur could rise, descend or both. The sonorous undercurrent of life becomes a river on its own, traveling toward an ultimate silence or perhaps an ultimate voice. Wright’s use of consonants, especially the soft *s* repeated in close proximity to the harder *b* and *j*, helps the lines snake musically and continue to vibrate after the line is read, offering a linguistic image of sound beyond form—the concrete flowing into the unseen and unseeable.

Words become a symbol for breaking the silence that is perhaps the natural state for both the living and the dead, which is especially fascinating in light of Wright referencing Leonard Michaels in *Halflife: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977–1987*, “ ‘The great ones always speak from the other side.’ If that can be worked backwards, then you always try to talk from the other side” (112). Wright is attempting to speak from the space of ultimate silence.

In the poem “Nine-Panel Yaak River Screen,” Wright explores the same concept, “I’ve made a small hole in the silence, a tiny one, / Just big enough for a word. / And when I rise from the dead, whenever that is, I’ll say it” (*Short History of the*

Finally, there is the irony of seeking silence within words and the space between the words, as even the very space between them continues to resonate. In his recent *Sestets/Outtakes* poem, “Baritone Bone,” Wright acknowledges that “Poems have too many words, / and not enough silence / where words might have been” (58). The silence and the word continually point back to one another. There is no real word without silence, no real silence without word.

Wright depicts silence as the place from which language arises, but it also becomes the language—at once noun, adjective and verb—part and parcel of the words that evolve from it. Silence is also an inherent space within the poems—both in their physical existence and as a symbol that points beyond our tangible experience. And as Wright observes in *Quarter Notes*, silence is inextricable from poetry itself: “The secret of poetry is silence, the unheard echoes of utterances that wash through us with their solitary innuendos” (74). The poetry of silence is a secret Wright has mastered.

Language in Relation to Itself

Another remarkable aspect of Charles Wright’s poetry is his use of the tangible to illuminate the unseen by examining the form of language in relation to itself. He does this first as a stylist, using the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of grammar to touch language *as* a tangible medium within the natural world while simultaneously pointing to the space beyond language. Language then becomes, in the words of David St. John, a “struggle against the impossibility of inscription” (*Country Music* xviii), wherein the nature of language and the language of nature intersect in their mutual impermanence.

Charles Wright declares, in his “Commonplace Notebook,” that “Sometimes we think we’re this, or we think we’re that, but we’re never more than servants of the language. Never” (*Halflife* 30). Even if he is a mere servant, Wright’s function as a stylist and his poetic examination of word construct is surprising.

According to David St. John, “in the forging of this new line and new language for himself, Charles Wright has responded to a tremendously personal *internal* pressure—a pressure to discover the proper word construct, the right syllable mobile, the most pleasing sound ladder—in his search for an appropriate aesthetic to reflect and convey his anxious, metaphysical explorations” (*Country Music* xix).

As Wright himself puts it, “The secret of life is mathematics. It’s an equation. If you don’t believe that it’s the same way in poetry, that this piece of language, for instance, this description, equals the inarticulate ecstasy of being, then you believe in something different from what I do” (*Halflife* 29). Thus, as a stylist, Wright seeks to use language itself to point to, or more specifically to *be* the manifestation of what lies beyond words. This is no small task, but is perhaps inherent to the creation of great poetry. Jane Hirshfield writes in *Hiddeness, Uncertainty and Surprise*, “Language itself is subtle by nature, multi-stranded of meaning—and what is good poetry if not language awake to its own powers?” (31).

In *Hard Freight*, Wright demonstrates how this idea is perhaps addressed most effectively in poetic terms:

If it were possible, if
A way had been overlooked
To pull that rib of pure light

Out of its cage, those few felicitous vowels
Which expiate everything

But nothing has been left out,
 Nothing been overlooked.
 The words remain in the dark, and will
 Continue to glitter there (30)

Wright acknowledges the ultimate impossibility of language equaling the “inarticulate ecstasy of being,” and, although “those few felicitous vowels” have not been extricated from their cage, still the words glitter in the dark. They are there, whether they can be fully accessed or not. The language is awake to its powers, but also to its inherent limitation. Some states of being cannot be fully captured by language.

Although Wright is exploring linguistic theory in both his interviews and his poetry, he is foremost a poet. He writes in *Halflife*, “Poems are put together with words, not Language. Word by word. Theory comes after the fact, it is not the fact. The line is a fact, it is not a theory” (3). Poems become a manifestation of the tangible, superimposed on the invisible. Wright describes this process: “Since the poem ‘The Southern Cross,’ I’ve been doing a kind of ghost graft: splicing real situations and incidents (language, even) onto an imaginary ‘tree’ until the ‘tree,’ by virtue of its appendages, has materialized into a whole, a recognizable thing. A sort of grafting onto the invisible until one gets an outline or two from its invisible garden. A garden of the infinite” (*Halflife* 32).

The closing lines of “The Southern Cross” depict that grafting of the known onto the unknown as the speaker writes of birth, inherently unremembered, in relation to death, inherently unknowable:

It's what we forget that defines us, and stays in the same
 place,
 And waits to be rediscovered.
 Somewhere in all that network of rivers and roads and salt
 hills,
 A city I'll never remember,
 its walls the color of pure light,
 Lies in the August heat of 1935,
 In Tennessee, the bottomland slowly becoming a lake.
 It lies in a landscape that keeps my imprint
 Forever,
 and stays unchanged, and waits to be filled back in.
 Someday I'll find it out
 And enter my old outline as though for the first time,

 And lie down, and tell no one. (65)

The (presumably real) network of rivers and roads and salt hills is grafted onto an invisible birth and death, the unknown city. The unknown, or indescribable, has a face.

Words themselves also become symbols of the known as a gateway into the unknown. According to Jacques Lacan, language is the symbolic signifier of the signified world, which moves beyond, “the arbitrariness of the sign, the one-to-one-correspondence between word and thing, despite the appearances suggested by the role imputed to the index finger pointing to an object” (*Ecrits* 498). Language exists in the relationship between signifier and signifier—the words in relation to one another. The poetic spark comes alive as words “flash between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other’s place in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain” (*Ecrits* 422). Charles Wright allows language the space to create these sparks as the words inherently relate to one another in his poetry.

In *Bloodlines*, Wright describes a handwriting class: “The words, like bees in a sweet ink, cluster and drone, / Indifferent, indelible, / A hum and a hum:/ Back
stairsteps to God, ropes to the glass eye” (30). The written words, a new discovery for the child, are signified as bees humming and as opening the “back stairsteps to God.” The pen and ink, the imagined and real page, the stairs and rope, become the symbols of a tangible image that is grafted onto something larger that cannot be contained by the words—the signifying chain of language clusters around and alludes to what is hidden.

One of Wright’s aspirations in his word construction is again the ability to speak to the other side through the transient present. “I did see that no one could last for good, / That no one could answer back from the other side. / Still I’d like to think I’ve learned how to speak to them, / I’d like to think I know how to conjugate, ‘Can you hear me?’” (*The Other Side of the River* 92). The construction of language itself is the vehicle for reaching the space beyond words. Here, the words are less important than the symbolic conjugation—the appropriate vehicle of form is essential. Again, this echoes Lacan’s concept of the language chain, that there is room for words in their very relation to one another to point to the mystery.

Wright also uses the function of grammar and syntax to touch language as an almost physical reality that again points to the unknown. In “Cryopexy,” Wright offers an unforgettable image of language *as* the natural world, “Looming and phosphorescent against the dark, / Words, always words. / What language does light speak? / Vowels hang down from the pepper tree / in their green and their gold” (*The Other Side of the River* 51). The speech of light is revealed at its most basic level, the vowels, as it hangs

in the tree. Here, Wright is pressing against the barrier between language and what it represents.

In *Bloodlines*, he writes of the Naxian lion statues, “Splinters along the skin, eyes / Flicked by the sealash, spun, pricked; / Terrible vowels from the sun” (36). The lions stay in a silent roar, eroding from the sealash and the language of the sun. The image of the sun, often symbolized as creator or sustainer of life, sending “terrible vowels” is startling and true—this is a language of destruction as well as creation, alluding to the impermanence even of the non-living. And of course the phrase itself being vowel laden underscores the power of this language and helps the symbolic words stretch to almost touch the natural world.

Again in *Bloodlines*, Wright refers to the natural world as syntax: “There are birds that are parts of speech, bones / That are suns in the quick earth” (43). Here is an intriguing reference to the origin of language. Are the birds themselves parts of speech in the way that, perhaps, *cardinal* is verb, *robin* noun, *blue heron* adverb—or does our language grow out of our sight, our hearing, of which birds are certainly an ancient and compelling part? The question is perhaps irrelevant in the context of the statement, one to which, either way, the assertion holds. Yes, there are birds that are parts of speech. This is another example of the poetic reference bringing us closer to the heart of the matter than a philosophical discourse on linguistics ever could—the poetic reference is immediate, a flash that almost seems to emerge, birdlike, from our sight.

Wright himself claims, “I live between the adjective and the noun” (*Half-life* 25). Is this, then, the residence of the poet—the place between witness of what is and descriptive mythology that gives value and meaning to the concrete? Or does he mean

(*Appalachia* 61). Of course there is a double meaning to the last line—what does it really mean to finally find the right word, and is authentic language truly possible in this life, in spite of a lifetime’s attempt? Is this a fundamental disconnect between the world as we experience it and the purely symbolic nature of language that inevitably strives but falls short of capturing what exists?

Despite the imperative of language choice, construct and syntax, there is the issue of impermanence and the tension between striving for the perfect expression and its inherent impossibility. There is also the inevitably transitory nature of expression itself. In his forward to *Country Music*, David St. John writes that “many of Wright’s poems keep seeking some ideogrammatic form, and as such exist almost as some other language. It’s no accident that the natural elements often appear in the act of ‘writing’ themselves across the face of the earth or the sky. It is this singularly physical signature of passage, both man’s and the world’s, which so intrigues Wright” (xvii).

Again we find the tension between the world and the word. Perhaps they cannot truly meld, but Wright is going to come as close as he can to reconciling this tension through his poetry.

In *Sestets / Outtakes*, we find the poet continuing this career-spanning theme as a poet in his seventies: “Splendor surrounds us, as Kafka says, / invisible and far away. / Will the right word reveal it? / Will the right name enter its ear / and bring it forth like a sun?” (42). And what will the right word mean, if it is still symbol? Wright is again striving against the veil that separates language from experience, and this striving is part the natural urgency that engages us in his poems.

When the oak tree and the Easter grass have taken my body,
I'll start to count out my days, beginning at one. (20)

Language is impermanent, but it is still the act of offering voice, here, even after death, that bears note. Despite the futility of the act, the days are counted and life is named again.

In his 2002 *A Short History of the Shadow*, he writes of,

the heart,
That legless bird, circling and circling, hoping for anywhere to
land.

A moment that should have lasted forever and
forever
Long over –
it came and went before I knew it existed.
I think I know what it means,
But every time I start to explain it, I forget the
words. (67)

Here, the landless heart is legless and wordless, yet full of apparent meaning.

The speaker attempts the explanation—voice is still offered, though the words will fall away.

In his 2010 book, *Sestets*, he writes,

Description is expiation,
and not a place to hunker down in.
It is a virtual world
Unfit for the virtuous.
It is a coming to terms with.

Or a coming to terms without.
As though whatever we had to say could keep it real.
As though our words were flies,
and the dead meat kept reappearing. (31)

Here, the speaker denies the idea that giving voice to the world could offer even a shred of permanence. Our words will not anchor us, will not save us from our decay.

It is amazing to witness this consistency over a lifetime's work. Clearly this issue of the sacred importance of expression despite its utter transience, is something important enough to Wright that he continually returns to it, and paints it anew.

Despite this continued theme of impermanence, there is also an underlying sense of the construction of the self within words, even if there is no possibility of the self's permanence, either. In *Chickamauga's* poem "Tennessee Line," the same conundrum ends with the continued existence, even of the forgotten: "I remember the word and forget the word although the word / Hovers in flame around me. / Summer hovers in flame around me / We *are* our final vocabulary, and how we use it" (20).

Despite the natural tension that exists within an art of impermanence, there is a meaning behind striving to give voice to experience; the attempt itself ultimately becomes what we are.

Language of Nature and Nature of Language

Throughout Charles Wright's work, language is used as a signpost to illuminate the hidden. The language is almost a Platonic pointing toward the ideal, the vehicle through which we can almost understand the unknowable. Language cannot hand this knowledge to us: it can only point us more firmly in the direction of the mystery. One way Charles Wright achieves this in his poetry is through his exploration

of the language of nature, a search for the natural world's voice, and the nature of language, or the pursuit of language in its very essence.

According to Kevin Clark in *The Point Where All Things Meet*, "The brilliance of *Zone Journals* is in its ability to link details of natural phenomena to the discursive and paradoxical insights of a man energized by a belief in an invisible world, a world which cannot be known in any ordinary, direct way, if at all" (164).

Details of the natural world become signposts, or the "ghost-graft" that Wright alludes to. One of Wright's major poetic claims is that there *is* a world beyond the tangible as well as beyond our rational ability to encounter it.

The natural world becomes a powerful intersection between the known and the unknown, as we can witness the physical reality of the world while not fully understanding the why or how of nature. Moreover, metaphor itself lends to this understanding, as Wright claims: "A metaphor is a link in the long chain which leads us to the invisible" (*Half-life* 30). Although Lacan would substitute the word unconscious (in a Freudian sense) for invisible, his theory of linguistics validates the very same idea. What is not seen is alluded to through a verbal grafting. The invisible becomes somewhat accessible through the vehicle of language. And according to Jane Hirschfield in *Hiddenness, Uncertainty and Surprise*, the idea of metaphor, or poetry, breaching the invisible through language, is the root spark of poetry's power: "It is their inability to be known completely that infuses aliveness into good poems" (23). This of course does not mean that good poetry is incomprehensible: rather much of good poetry, and certainly its use of compelling metaphor, balances on the edge of mystery. Deeply encountering the natural world as a way to shed clarity on the invisible is

To the absolute, whose words are a solitude, and set to music. (*Negative Blue* 158)

It is interesting that this tangible language is “insoluble in blood,” as if it needs to be revisited continually or encountered directly, much the way poetry is written and read. It is not a given. This passion for the landscape is not something that can be incorporated simply. Unlike the absolute, the relative is not set to music.

Wright himself says, in an interview with *UVA Today*, “I’m always looking at and thinking about how the exterior landscape reflects the interior and vice versa. And almost all my poems begin with something I’ve seen, something observed as opposed to some idea I have for a poem” (Arnold). In this way, the natural world becomes voice and the poet is an active translator.

In a 1981 interview with Sherod Santos, Wright describes his “particular look out the window,” that inspired the start of his poem “Homage to Paul Cezanne”:

I was watching TV one night—I think I was watching the news—it was just getting dark and I looked out into the field through the window in the door, and there were three white pieces of paper just catching the last light. And I wrote down the line, “In the fading light the dead wear our shirts to stay warm.” then later on the moon came out and by god those same three pieces of paper were so white that they were picking up the moonlight! And so I went back to that line and rewrote it, “At night, in the fish-light of the moon, the dead wear our shirts to stay warm, and litter the fields.”

(*Halflife*101)

The poet becomes the voice of the wordless but also the untranslatable, the mystery that exists in the natural world, the mind, and the intersection between the interior and the exterior. Wright's poetic process is not surprising. His insight into mystery comes through a keen observation of the natural world.

The world does carry its own language, but nature is also a place to access wordlessness, or the place that is pre or post-verbal, as in "Meditation on Song and Structure" from *Black Zodiac*: "Swallows darting like fish through the alabaster air, /Cleansing the cleanliness, feeding on seen and the unseen. / To come back as one of them! / Loose in the light and landscape-shine, language without words" (59). Here is the almost mystical place of words emerging from the place of wordlessness, which we see again in "T'ang Notebook": "A water egret planes down like a page of blank paper / Toward the edge of the noon sky. / Let me, like him, find an island of white reeds / To settle down on, under the wind, forgetting words" (*The Other Side of the River* 54). The egret itself is a metaphor for the wordless, the unwritten, a blank page, and the speaker wants to become that opened, which perhaps can only be done in the brief moments where words, even thought, fall away. Yet this place beyond expression *is* expressed, as here in the notebook the poet offers words.

If there is both language and the language beyond language to be found in the natural world, it is the poet's job to hear and translate it. In *Scar Tissue*'s "Time Will Tell," the speaker describes the language of the tides: "In distant countries, tides nibbled / our two feet on pebbly shores / with their soft teeth and languorous tongues. / Words formed and flew from our fingers. We listened and loved them all" (66). It is the poet's keen ear that can hear and give word to the language of the tides "soft teeth and

languorous tongues.” It seems natural that upon that clarity of hearing, words would fly from the fingers—from the fingers to the blank page. The ear, of course, is the other crucial component of voice. To love is also to hear.

In *Bloodlines*’ “Delta Traveler,” Wright again shows the relationship between true hearing and ability to witness, or love. “If the wafer of light offends me, / If the split tongue in the snake’s mouth offends me, / I am not listening” (45). In *Scar Tissue* he writes that there is nothing to hide from, nothing for the earnest ear to close to, no mouth to appall.

Therefore, when the Great Mouth with its two tongues of water and ash
 Shall say, suffer the darkness,
 Suffer the darkness to come unto you,
suffer its singsong,
 And you will abide,
 Listen to what the words spell, listen and sing the song. (69)

It is not enough for the natural world to have a voice. The poet must listen and sing the song.

Not only does Charles Wright explore the language inherent in the natural world, he also closely examines the essential nature of language.

Charles Wright’s experimentation with the vehicle of the line brings marked variation to the poetic form in the arc of his work, even though his poetic themes have not changed much. In a discussion about his 1977 *China Trace*, one of Wright’s most compressed collections (the other being the recent *Sestets* and *Sestets / Outtakes*), Wright says, “I did have the idea of compression, which is maybe as close as we can get to the ideogramic method. To compress the language and the thought to such a point

that it stops being small and starts to enlarge, it expands. Which is to say, rather than writing a lot to get larger and larger, you write less and less” (*Halflife* 79).

This hearkens again to Lacan’s idea that metaphor comes alive most strongly in the space between the words themselves. The fewer and more powerful the words, the more space for the spark between them to ignite.

In contrast to the condensed *China Trace*, Charles Wright is also known for his sweeping, journal-style poems with his characteristically dropped lines, such as are found in *Littlefoot* and *Zone Journals*. Wright is still looking at compression, though, and claims, “All my long poems are short poems in disguise” (*Halflife* 29). Some of this is his style of Cezanne-like layering, with the stanza becoming almost a discreet unit, but some of this is also his specificity, almost an ethic of how Wright uses language. It is interesting that Wright references ideograms, as the writing from the land of the poets that largely inspired *China Trace* is more closely connected to the natural world in its written form than are the more abstract alphabetical languages. As ideograms evolved from pictures of the natural world, they point more directly back to that nature, and they carry rich references within their own characters, which lends well to compressed language.

Language and the natural world are impermanent by nature, and Charles Wright explores the ephemeral nature of language in relation to the natural world. He writes, “I write your name for the last time in this mist, / White breath on the windowpane, / And watch it vanish. No, it stays there” (*Country Music* 21). Here, the writing may vanish yet the marking remains, which is a fascinating spin on the

ephemeral. Nothing lasts, and yet everything lasts for having happened. Nothing is permanent, but neither can what is done be undone.

The nature of language is intimately connected to the natural world in Charles Wright's poetry, "An inner necessity and a formal uniqueness is what I want for and from my poems. The *Zone Journals*, for instance, are about language and landscape, and how they coexist with each other, and speak for, and to, each other" (*Halflife* 38). In *Littlefoot*, we find the speaker gleaning the language of the natural world: "Little lost squawks in the natural world, lost voices. / I gather them unto me, I become their mouth piece" (80). The natural world is voice, and the nature of the poet is giving voice to that voice.

Even if the natural world's voice is heard, it is another thing for it to be kept in any kind of permanent, rational way. In *Grave of the Right Hand* we find that "some misguided pilgrim might imagine he hears the slight off-rhythm of some hexameter line deep in the olive grove, as the slither of night birds moves toward the darker trees. But that is all" (28). The hearing is just to the side of being clear: it may be imagined or it may be contained and written down, in an off-rhythm hexameter.

In *Negative Blue*, Wright quotes Paul Mendes to offer insight into the totality of the poet's (mystic) vision and the inability of the nature of language to capture this whole: "The mystic's vision is beyond the world of individuation, it is beyond speech and thus incommunicable" (169). Wright certainly enters the mystical in his writing, yet his poetry suggests that the nature of language itself is to be grounded in the natural world and have its movement going in the direction of the mystical. The mystic's

Hovered, my mouthpiece for meaning,
my claw and bright beak (29)

Language is an essential part of our being, perhaps even primal armor—the claw and bright beak. It is also the idea of God, which, theology aside, is the essence of life's unknown, the spirit of the form.

Charles Wright has written a wide arc of work, and his exploration of language and the unseen is a sizable aspect of his poetry. Through the lenses of silence, form, and the language of nature, the essence of language can be alluded to, if not fully attained. This is the conundrum—how does one rationally examine the space between the stars? We know it is there by the surrounding light. The words are not what poems are about. It is really the resonant space of the words in relation to one another, and what exists between the poet and the reader, across space and time. Through his philosophical depth, musical language and arresting metaphor, Wright offers us a way to almost glimpse the unseen and the unknowable. And it may be that great poetry is the most effective way.

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