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A Home in the Universe: The Curious Spinozism of Clarice Lispector and Stefan Zweig

Abstract: This article considers the work of Clarice Lispector and Stefan Zweig in terms of their shared interest in Baruch Spinoza. While the two twentieth-century authors had several biographical details in common, their writing differs greatly in terms of philosophical approach and form. The divergence in their respective treatments of Spinoza in particular offers a valuable opportunity for a comparative analysis of their individual relationships to thought, literature, and the world at large. When we read through Zweig's and Lispector's textual incorporations of Spinoza, the philosopher emerges as a figure through which these two secular Jewish authors were able to engage with mystical forms of thought and with place or displacement in a world of shifting national and cultural systems of value. The treatment of him in their works ultimately reveals not only the authors' philosophical or ideological frameworks but also the radical openings for secular Jewish imagination that Spinoza offered through his own *oeuvre*.

Keywords: Austrian literature, Baruch Spinoza, Brazilian literature, Clarice Lispector, colonialism, cosmopolitanism, exile, Franz Kafka, Gershom Scholem, Holocaust, humanism, Jewish literature, Jewish mysticism, Jewish studies, Kabbalah, memory studies, migration, twentieth-century literature, Stefan Zweig

The appearance of Spinoza in works of literature has occurred over the course of centuries and continues into the present day with texts that take up his philosophy in terms of content, express it through form, or harness Spinoza himself as a figure through which to explore some aspect of his historical or philosophical life. Among Jewish writers, moreover, Spinoza can be adopted as a mode for meditation on Jewish experience that does not have to defer to religious texts.[1] By looking at Spinoza's appearance in the work of two such authors from the twentieth century, Clarice Lispector and Stefan Zweig – both of whom began their lives in Europe and died in South America, and both of whom struggled to resist a patent or primary Jewish identity – we find radically divergent approaches to navigating the known world that speak to the Jewish experience of these writers in spite of, or perhaps through,

1 This article will focus solely on Lispector and Zweig, but examples from further afield include Auerbach (1854); Singer (1961); Ostashevsky (2008). See also Goldstein (2017).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110645033-024

their respective disavowals of Jewishness. Lispector's Spinoza is not Zweig's, nor is Zweig's Lispector's, yet the two authors' relationships to the ponderable or sensible universe and their place in it arise in Spinoza's presence. Insofar as the seventeenth-century lens-grinder, apostate, and formative philosopher for Enlightenment thinking figures in a comparative reading of Lispector and Zweig, he grants a manifold sense to the Jewish place in a chaotic world and in literary imagination, with the capacity to exceed prefabricated stereotypes of wandering and nationalism, or traditional practices based on obligation.

Lispector's *oeuvre* is known for having a curiously mystical element to it, though the source of this element remains disputed. Perhaps this is why Lispector herself has continued to accrue an aura of mystique posthumously. This lusophone Brazilian novelist, journalist, and author of numerous short stories, who was born in 1920 and lived most of her life in Brazil, published prolifically before her unexpected death in 1977, and has enjoyed a resurgence among English-speaking readers in the past decade. Yet it is not uncommon for a study of the author to begin with a meditation on her appearance rather than on her literature. On one hand, it seems abusive to her rich body of work, if only by way of negligence, that so much attention be devoted to the fact that Lispector was perceived as beautiful and exotic both in Brazil and abroad. However, by investigating the world of her reception and the home that she constructed and reconstructed through language, one must to some degree reinflict these abuses in order to imagine how her public aura of glamour or foreignness might relate to her world of literature and thought.

Benjamin Moser (2009, 46) writes in his biography of Lispector that she often gave people the impression of foreignness; whether it was her name, which sounded to the Brazilian public like a pseudonym, her outdated and glamorous clothing, which gave the faint impression that she was outside of her time, or her lisp and throaty *r*s – her oddness seemed to disturb others. Yet these cultural aspects of her public image may just as importantly have been tools for fashioning a self that could not be fixed and thus could not be apprehended. Lispector's self-presentation was in many ways an elegant fiction that would not curtsy to an outside order of truth but rather crafted its own. Readers' frustrations at the contradictions in the details of her life often result in accusations of deceit, placed around the femme-fatale icon of "Clarice" like shiny adornments. In a 2005 *New York Times* article, for example, which opens with the renowned translator Gregory Rabassa passionately describing Lispector's blue eyes, the scholar Earl Fitz is quoted thus:

> She was an incorrigible liar [...]. She wanted to be thought of as a writer though she pretended she wasn't a professional [...]. She told different people different things about what town she lived in and when she was born. She wore a lot of masks, and when she would

> take one off you'd think she was revealing something, but all she was revealing was another mask. (quoted in Salamon 2005)

Indeed, this impression will hold true for any reader who demands that Lispector step outside of her Spinozist approach to narration: she is a series of lies lined up, one behind the other, for in organizing Lispector's life stories according to a linear unfolding of time, one forces her to perjure herself. To read Lispector according to the philosophy toward which she most clearly gravitated, however, is to understand each of these stories simply as a different facet of her person.

Spinoza allows not only for an understanding of immanence such as that which informed Lispector's writing and public self, but a relationship to her obscured Jewish heritage that illuminates Lispector's *oeuvre* and its multidirectional capacities.[2] Though Lispector never claimed any personal connection to Judaism or Jewish culture, it is worth considering the possibility that her attention to otherness, so fecund in thinking through colonial encounters in literature,[3] was formed by her own, necessarily Jewish, otherness.

Lispector's first novel, *Perto do coração selvagem* [Near to the Wild Heart] (1943), draws extensively on passages and themes from Spinoza through the main character, Joana, whose amoral and unaffected approach to the nature of the universe brings her into a state close to communion with nature. Spinoza's novel dispassion and renunciation of romantic love reveals itself in Joana's demeanour. "It was always useless to be happy or unhappy," reads the subjective narration as it ebbs between Joana's interior self and the world of her experience, "And even to have loved. No happiness or unhappiness had been so strong that it had transformed the elements of her matter" (Lispector 2012, 91–92). Lispector's engagement with the sensory apparatus challenges the authority of linguistic signification by prioritizing the value of being over interpretation. On the topic of visions, she writes:

> To have a vision, the thing didn't have to be sad or happy or manifest itself. All it had to do was exist, preferably still and silent, in order to feel the mark in it. For heaven's sake, the mark of existence … But it shouldn't be sought because everything that existed necessarily existed … You see, vision consisted of surprising the symbol of the thing in the thing itself. (Lispector 2012, 37)

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2 I take this term from Rothberg (2009), who presents a non-competitive approach to thinking diverse histories of oppression and genocide in terms of one another. In this case, Lispector's tenuous Jewishness can be considered as a line of memory that informs and makes possible the themes of colonial otherness in her writing set in Brazil.

3 Consider, for example, Lispector's short story "A menor mulher do mundo" [The Smallest Woman in the World] (1960), in which a Frenchman's encounter with a pregnant Pygmy woman presents colonial fascination as a vertiginous series of nesting desires.

The philosopher who worked so materially in the constitution of vision held a similar view. Vision was to be found not in ideas (the source of which, *eidos*, would compel one to grasp at some static and eternal form), but in immediate and joyful encounters that cannot evaluate, discriminate, or attach themselves to any object. As the passage continues, the character collapses time in her experience between an adult-Joana and child-Joana. Her memory is sensible and present, rather than a fixed image of a past self that would reinforce the historical narrative of the present self through temporal distance:

> Yet other confusions. That was how she remembered child-Joana before the sea: the peace that came from the eyes of the cow, the peace that came from the recumbent body of the sea, from the deep womb of the sea, from the cat stiff on the sidewalk. Everything is one, everything is one … she had chanted. Her confusion lay in the interconnectedness of the sea, the cat, the cow and herself. Her confusion also came from not knowing if she had chanted "everything is one" when she was still a girl, staring at the sea, or later, remembering. Her confusion didn't just lend charm, however, but brought reality itself. It struck her that if she clearly ordered and explained what she had felt, she would have destroyed the essence of "everything is one." In her confusion, she was the truth itself unwittingly, which perhaps provided more power-of-life than knowing it. The truth which, although revealed, Joana couldn't use because it wasn't a part of her stem, but her root, binding her body to everything that was no longer hers, imponderable, impalpable. (Lispector 2012, 37–38)

Vision and confusion dissolve Joana's sense of herself as a discrete entity. The character's sensory engagement with the world around her allows her to be bound to all substances, at home in their myriad contradictions. If Lispector's novel conveys a feeling of belonging here, it rewrites belonging, by way of Spinoza, into a mode of being with all parts of the world at once. The details of one's name and place of birth, even one's body as a discrete entity, cannot dictate the truth of one's self in this state of immanence. Joana's sense of home in the world thus reaches in the opposite direction of any features that would separate her from the rest of existence.

Lispector's own relationship to a home or origin is likewise difficult to decipher when read according to her biographical details. Born in a small, Western Ukrainian shtetl in Podolia, her family fled after experiencing the terror and violence of the pogroms that erupted after the dissolution of the Russian Empire, and she was brought to Brazil during her infancy. Her early years were spent in Recife, where she spoke Yiddish at home and learned Yiddish and Hebrew at a Jewish school, where she also had religious instruction. After the death of her mother, her father moved the family to Rio de Janeiro. Lispector attempted to keep the details of her origin minimal at best. Of her nationality, she wrote:

> I am Brazilian, and that is that. I was born in the Ukraine, my parents' country. I was born in a village called Chechelnik, so small and insignificant that it isn't even on the map. When

> my mother was pregnant with me, my parents were heading toward the United States or Brazil, they hadn't yet decided. They stopped in Chechelnik so I could be born and then continued on their journey – I arrived in Brazil when I was *only two months old*. (Lispector, quoted in Moser 2009, 7; emphasis in Lispector)

She liked to say that because of her young age she "literally never set foot" in the old country and that it "left no trace on [her] except through the blood heritage," and she was most bothered at the suggestion that she was not entirely Brazilian (Lispector, quoted in Moser 2009, 37, 10).

Lispector gave conflicting information regarding her birth and emigration, objecting to one biographical article published by Renard Perez in which the journalist wrote that the Lispector family decided to emigrate shortly after the Russian Revolution. Obligingly, Perez changed this detail to coincide with her own timeline, wherein she insisted that the family had left many years afterward (Moser 2009, 8). Although she claimed to have been only two months old on arrival, Moser points out that she was well over a year old at the time. Her writing seemed to likewise conjure up a world outside of Brazil. The critic Carlos Mendes de Sousa declared in 1969 that she deals with "themes that have nothing to do with her [Brazilian] homeland, in a language that recalls the English writers. There are no chandeliers in Brazil," he wrote, referring to her second novel, and "nobody knows where that besieged city is," referring to her third (quoted in Moser 2009, 9–10). The fact that chandeliers did, in fact, decorate the interiors of Brazil in the 1940s and even earlier, albeit in Rio's more aristocratic dwellings, does not detract from the fact that so many viewed Lispector and the world of her literature as outside of her own time or place. Yet her supposed foreign quality is, paradoxically, what the poet Lêdo Ivo finds in Lispector to be most Brazilian, claiming that "the foreignness of her prose is one of the most overwhelming facts of our literary history and, even, of the history of our language. This borderland prose, of immigrants and emigrants, has nothing to do with any of our illustrious predecessors. […] You could say that she, a naturalized citizen, naturalized a language" (quoted in Moser 2009, 10). Lispector's writing begs the question posed by Sousa's and Ivo's impressions; it gives the sense that one is both within and without a system of signification at once. Truth may be sought in her world but never found in any central or static position. The pacing of her language, as the material embodiment of the philosophical states her characters describe, tantalizes the reader into a state of knowing that threatens to collapse if one were to attempt to articulate it. Thus, the reader must rely on a sense of the text that is both intimate and strange in order to continue. In these moments, Lispector's philosophical orientation toward Spinoza seems to crystallize.

Moreover, her uncanny capacity to capture a home that is at its core foreign even unto itself seems routed through, if not rooted in, her family's experience of emigration. Lispector's Jewishness exists in spaces of that which is decidedly and

tenaciously kept unsaid. Like many other works by modern writers of Jewish heritage that, at surface level, may seem to lack Jewish themes, Lispector's *oeuvre* is subtly expressive of a variant tradition of Jewish philosophy that attends to language and feeling according to radically different frameworks of reading. As with one author to whom she is often compared, Franz Kafka, the influence of Jewish mysticism in her work appears in the treatment of language. Kafka's imagination, after all, had everything to do with Jewish mystical practices, even if his most-read works do not mention any inherently Jewish practices.[4] As Gershom Scholem first claimed, practices of Kabbalah generated a Jewish cultural space for imaginative approaches to language. While the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual development of the Haskalah and the subsequent process of Jewish emancipation across Europe had been emphasized as the greatest turning point in the development of modern Jewish thought, it was Scholem who first traced the development of the faculty of imagination in Jewish literature back to Kabbalah. (Millet 2017, 81). Traditional Judaism provided legal texts and some additional, often didactic, folk tales, whereas Kabbalah transmuted the Jewish relationship to language and to God, offering a system of reading in which the mystic would find all of creation suddenly and perfectly legible. Kabbalah, in turn, was also linked to Jewish history. "The spiritual experience of the mystics was almost inextricably intertwined with the historical experience of the Jewish people," Scholem writes, noting the tendency of mystical revolutions to follow periods of upheaval. "Mysticism as a historical phenomenon," he says, "is a product of crises" (Scholem 1967, 2).

Indeed, the Lispector family had known violence and upheaval. In a rare moment in which Lispector addressed her Jewishness, she said, "I am Jewish, you know, but I don't believe this nonsense about the Jews being God's chosen people. That's ridiculous. The Germans ought to be because they did what they did. How did being chosen ever help the Jews?" (quoted in Moser 2009, 106). This line of reasoning extends to her fictional worlds; the God of Lispector's work is not an active character, but a permeating and expansive presence that is beyond moral evaluation. To believe otherwise, according to Lispector, one would have to accept that God had an active role in the greatest horrors of human violence, and that he had chosen the side of the perpetrators.

Lispector is said to have considered the book an object in which all elements of the story are written at once, existing simultaneously. This gives her novels a dreamy quality, as the organization of the writing tends to be one of intensity,

4 Suchoff (2012) provides an excellent investigation into Kafka's Jewish relationship to language and processes of reading. Kafka's word-games, particularly in his journals, where his Jewishness was not kept at such a latent level of meaning, affirm earlier readings of the Bohemian author's clandestine Kabbalism.

motion, or relationships between bodies, rather than chronology. The excerpts that she incorporates from Spinoza testify to this, for example: "Bodies are distinguished from one another in respect of motion and rest, quickness and slowness, and not in respect of substance," or "birth is movement; if we say that movement is only necessary for the thing giving birth, a thing cannot give birth to something outside its own nature and therefore always gives birth to something of its own species and so it is with movements as well" (quoted in Moser 2009, 111, 408).[5] Spinoza's disavowal of Cartesian dualism and consideration of geometry in terms of relations and degrees of motion influences Lispector's work here in terms of both an anti-linear relationship to story and an integral coexistence of spirit and matter. She forgoes the figure of a humanized or transcendent God for the immanent experience of nature, and carries this into the substance of her text.

Spinoza provided Lispector with a mode for being at home in a chaotic universe. For Stefan Zweig, however, he was a figure of redemption from chaos. Just a year or so before Lispector began to work on *Near to the Wild Heart*, the exiled Viennese author wrote *Die Welt von Gestern* [The World of Yesterday] (1942) – his only memoir, which turned out to be a sort of extended suicide note, mourning his lost home and readership, and what he referred to as the golden age of security. Zweig had emigrated from Austria with his second wife to the Brazilian city of Petropolis in 1940, after living for short periods in London and the United States and travelling through less antagonistic European cities, as his first wife maintained their home in Salzburg. As with Lispector Zweig's Jewishness did not seem of outward importance. Of his Jewish heritage, he once said in a 1931 interview, "my mother and father were Jewish only through the accident of birth," and he regarded himself, in post-emancipation, bourgeois fashion, to be a cosmopolitan European. He was put off by Jewish nationalism, writing to Martin Buber that many expressions of Jewish pride seemed to him a form of masked insecurity (quoted in Robertson 2001, 112), yet he admired Theodor Herzl the man, as evidenced in a scene in his memoir in which he wrote for Herzl's *Die Neue Freie Presse* as a budding journalist.

5 Moser collects and translates these examples from the close of *Near to the Wild Heart*, tracing them back to Spinoza. The first is a direct quote of Spinoza's second lemma in proposition 13, part 2 of the *Ethics* ("Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind"), which Lispector uses in *Near to the Wild Heart* [Perto do Coração Selvagem] (1943). The second, from *The Chandelier* [O Lustre] (1946), is selected by Moser as another prime example of Lispector's incorporation of Spinoza's work. Though it is not a direct quote and though Moser does not make explicit the connection he sees here, it echoes Spinoza's axioms on the motion of bodies throughout part 2 of the *Ethics*.

Zweig's appearance was composed through and through in the form of a European gentleman. Photographs show him in wire-rimmed glasses with a trim moustache and dark, perfectly combed-back hair throughout his life. "He was a *Grandseigneur*," recounted his publisher, "dressed with scrupulous care, inconspicuously elegant" (Gottfried Bermann Fischer, quoted in Buchinger 1998, 331; my translation). He was a man who wore pale suits to the seaside and dark tweed in the city, who fretted that he would appear "a clown" (*Stefan und Lotte Zweigs südamerikanische Briefe* 2017, 108; my translation) when arriving on the plane from Brazil to wintry New York still dressed in white linen, who wore a shirt and tie to his deathbed. He ate artichokes and risotto as a child, still rare on an Austrian table at the time, and remembered fondly his mother's aristocratic family from various cultural centres of Europe switching with ease between languages in a Paris parlour room (Zweig 2013, 30). If Lispector's foreign glamour can be read through her clothing, coiffure, and patterns of speech, Zweig's genteel cosmopolitanism emanates just as strongly from his persona as from his work. Legible, too, is how Zweig's relationship to European Jewry differed from Lispector's; his wealthy Viennese family held an ardour for and faith in *Hochkultur* that would have felt largely foreign in Lispector's Ukrainian shtetl. Language, he wrote, was his homeland in the highest sense (Weidermann 2014, 18). As Gelbin and Gilman write of Jewish life in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, "the idea of the universal is held within the essence of the Jew. Herzl and other Jewish writers thus wrote the Jew back into eighteenth-century Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, which had promoted a universality rooted in the nation by excluding the Jews" (2017, 74). Zweig's home within Europe and European culture was made possible by this rewriting, which had distanced Jews from connotations surrounding cosmopolitanism and nomadism that would in other periods be used to promote anti-Semitic stereotypes associated with capital (Gelbin and Gilman 2017, 1). His ideal Europe is a *weltbürgerlich* utopia, and so his Spinoza is made in the image of a transcendent, cosmopolitan figure.

It may seem a foolish task to seek out Spinoza in Zweig's writing, for his novellas and stories are characteristically dualistic and quite unlike Lispector's in that they follow traditional and chronological paths of narration. Even in his later work, as he tends toward subject matter that suggests a critically destabilized world and contrasts sharply with the more Romantic sadness and loss in his earlier works, Zweig enacts crisis through a framework of dualism. His final novella, *Schachnovelle* [The Royal Game] (1941), follows the isolated and depressed character of Dr B, a secret monarchist hiding from the Nazi regime whose only comfort comes from a stolen book on chess. The book details the games of past chess masters, and Dr B commits each of their moves to memory so well that he begins to play against himself, breaking his psyche into two egos – the black self and the

white self – "Ich Schwarz" and "Ich Weiß." The homophony of "Ich Weiß" as the white self and "ich weiß" as a statement of stability through knowledge – "I know" – resounds as his internal schism and self-directed antagonism lead him to suffer a nervous breakdown and he is committed to a sanatorium, saved from Nazi imprisonment by the grace of one caring physician. Escaping to Buenos Aires, Dr B finds himself aboard a steamship with the world chess champion Czentovic, and his talents lead him to play and beat the champion by using memorized games. When Czentovic challenges Dr B to a rematch, he realizes he needs to slow the doctor down. Under the psychological pressure of slowed time, Dr B begins to re-enact every game he has known in all of its fractal possibilities, driven into an insane frenzy until he slips up in one move and is restored to his own self and sanity through human error. Time's surrender to intensity in this moment echoes a Spinozist outlook on existence. Zweig's character experiences that outlook as mental torture and must be corrected by error to regain footing in the world of right and wrong and the order that structures his memory and mind. Dr B's wrong move saves him from the infinite – of knowing, as we say, too much – whereas Lispector's protagonists are at home in confusion, free of the need to impose chronology for stability.

Although Zweig returns to dualism throughout his thinking, his flirtation with Spinoza does not fully disappear. Like Lispector, he gives particular attention to movement in his philosophy on writing. In an essay entitled "Das Buch als Eingang zur Welt" [The Book as Entrance to the World] (1931), he begins: "All motion on earth is based essentially on two inventions of the human mind: movement within space on the invention of the wheel, and intellectual movement on the invention of writing." Writing, he claims, allows one to rise "above the divided will of nature." With this transcendent movement, Zweig makes an appeal to universality as afforded by the book (Zweig 1983, 7; my translations). This is not to be mistaken for a Spinozist monism, however. Zweig's universality is the universalized humanism that he promoted in his monographs on Erasmus and Castellio and that he believed, until he no longer believed it, would save Europe. As the ideology of cosmopolitanism presumes a moral ground upon which human beings are able to meet one another, and thus a system of valuation that is at its core dualistic, Zweig's relationship to universality through resolution would never meet the sensible immanence of nature expressed in Lispector's literature. Cosmopolitanism is a mode of dealing with divergence and difference, rather than simultaneity and similarity. Zweig treats the book as a transcendent entry point, whereas Lispector sees a story in which all points simultaneously coexist. Yet, if Zweig's fiction and essays resist Spinoza in structure and philosophy, he remains thematically interested in attempting to characterize the philosopher's world.

In an early poem entitled simply "Spinoza," published in 1901 in Herzl's weekly newspaper *Die Welt*,[6] Zweig imagines an individual integrally linked with the natural universe:

> Dreamy, silver night … The black distances roar,
> The sky bulges, bare and gigantic.
> Many stars glow and bright stars hurtle
> Flaring up in the dark womb
> Of the universe that smashed their force into dust –
> And every star was a brother-world,
>
> A world in the chorus of myriads,
> A bewildered sound of harmony,
> And like the wines rich in life's graces,
> And was one day like you, and you, like it,
> In the humid, anxious night of creation
> Woke up craving, from the dream of all-being.
>
> And then its path returned to the universe,
> In which it once slept, germinating within you,
> Its urge toward death one with that desire
> That calls you out today from pale dreams
> To venture out into the star-strewn night
> And witness yourself in the world's becoming.
> (Zweig 1901, 13; my translation)

Zweig imagines the universe through a genesis scene that treats Spinoza's *conatus* as shared desire between the individual and all of creation. He depicts an interpenetrative relationship to nature with none of the fear of dissolution witnessed in Dr B's mental crisis. Even so, Zweig cannot sit comfortably with an immanent, eternal presence, and calls the subject a world of temporal unfolding in the final line, illustrating the ideology of *Weltbürgertum* in the guise of mysticism. Witnessing himself as an ecstatic component among harmonious brother-worlds, the subject is far from being a pariah either in his own community, as Spinoza was, or the world at large, as was often the case for Jewish communities across Europe, and finds a home that is composed of, in, and by him. Regardless of whether or not this representation faithfully interprets Spinoza's philosophy, it demonstrates the philosopher's importance to Zweig's early sense of himself as a Jew, a European, a writer, and a human being.

6 *Die Welt* was Theodor Herzl's side-project to *Die Neue Freie Presse* and more overtly Zionist in theme. It was printed in Berlin, Cologne, and Vienna, and ran for eighteen years, from 1897 until 1914.

Considering the general status of Jews in seventeenth-century Europe, the herem that denied him a place in the Jewish community in Amsterdam, and the resistance to the publication of his material, Baruch Spinoza knew alienation on several levels. Yet from within this lived experience he wrote of existence in a way that offered not only philosophical refuge for future Jewish writers, but a point of departure for secular Jewish inquiry amid twentieth-century crises. His divergent resonance with Lispector and Zweig demonstrates the spectrum of thought and feeling that his work could offer to secular Jews of and beyond the historical moments of both authors, and the pathways that his contributions to the – even if tenuously – Jewish literary imagination opened for creation even in acts of disavowal.

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