

**UNIVERSITE PARIS OUEST NANTERRE LA DÉFENSE**

**TROPISMES**

**N° 16**

***The Relevance of Theory***

***LA Résonance de la théorie***

Publié avec le Concours du Conseil Scientifique  
de l'Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

**2010**

**CENTRE DE RECHERCHES ANGLOPHONES**

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## **What Can Theory Do? (The Cultural Limits of Theory and Some Edifying and Practical Applications of Deleuze, Literature, and Emptiness)**

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This paper and the collection in which it appears are concerned with theory. Of course, theory, as an object of study, remains notoriously difficult to situate. While the goal of this paper is not to fix theory's limits definitively, I do hope to respond to theory's relevance today in ways that have not perhaps always been anticipated. Before being able to do that, however, it will be necessary to nonetheless address the prickly question of theory's status. Perhaps one of the best ways to do this is to take up a familiar question, one familiar to many readers. When working on literature, many people – friends, colleagues, students and especially the parents of students – often ask me and my colleagues what exactly it is that we are doing in higher education when we study, teach and write about literature. Why, they ask, do we read literature, and, why do we complicate things by reading theory with literature? These are fair questions that readers will recognize as a familiar resistance to theory. This resistance, nonetheless, has the merit of helping to outline the contours of the obscure object that is theory. That is, what so many are asking is why it is necessary to pass through so many other disciplines in order to speak about literature. Why, they are asking, must one read literature with and through

philosophy, psychoanalysis, semiotics, linguistics, economic theory, political theory or many other social and human sciences? In this plea to remain resolutely literary, those who resist theory the most help to draw the contours of theory as something of a critical mix: literature passes through other social and human sciences not to dilute the literary but to raise the literary — its critical disciplines to a higher power. In a curious and anti-intuitive turn, the resistance to theory (posed on the grounds that theory is simply not practical and diverts one from the task of reading literature) helps define theory not in terms of what it — but in what it can — . In this manner, theory comes to be understood as practice. Thus, theory raises the practice of reading to a higher power, helping the reader discover in the text (and in the reader herself) other texts, discourses, and powers that went unsuspected. This, at least, is the view of those who enthusiastically embraced its arrival in the field of literature over the last forty years. Of course, theory's detractors would say that such a definition of theory is exactly the problem: by defining theory in terms of what it can do, one opens the door to almost any reading, diluting literature to any number of disciplines other than literary. In the following pages, I would like to trace a middle path between these two extremes, exploring theory as an empowering practice. This reading will lead me down paths that theory's detractors might see as typical of theory's excesses, but it is this path of "practices of theory" that will allow me to pose some cultural limits on Western theory. To practice is to experiment and this essay is an experiment in readings that theory opens for us.

One of the main narratives of theory over the past few decades has been to show how so-called "centered" readings conceal a number of faults and fissures. De-centering certain readings and texts allowed one to reveal how much this repressed force remained to be discovered in various texts and textualities. This narrative of theory's recent history takes a number of forms, but for my argument, I would like to give it a Deleuzian turn: to go beyond the territory of major languages and their molar constructions, it was necessary to focus on the manner in which language stutters, de-territorializing itself, moving away from the historical, biographical and personal voice to the multitude of the impersonal and the plane of immanence that such a construction

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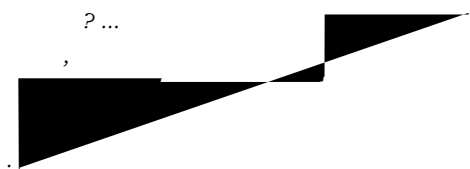
implies. Answering the Nietzschean question of why one desires the conditions of one's proper servitude, Deleuze offered a Spinoza-inflected reading of desire as a power that, when oriented correctly, increases our ability to "see and hear things that were never seen or heard before," and to create new concepts, new ways of reading, new ways of living. For Deleuze, the stakes of reading are Life itself and reading is a practice that elevates one to a fuller plane of existence, if undertaken in the correct manner.

It should be obvious that approaching this project from the point of view of Deleuze is no accident. Deleuze never made a secret of his desire to see his work applied practically in any number of ways (readers will easily recall his description of his work as a "toolbox" to be used where and how one saw fit). It is in the spirit of this exhortation that I would like to extend his work in a way that might come as a surprise. If reading is a practice that elevates one's manner of living, then some interesting ways of understanding this particular theoretical mix of philosophy and literature emerge. While many readers will be familiar with Deleuze's corpus, I would like to return to a few often overlooked passages to make this point.

From the very beginning of his published work, in his study of Hume, Deleuze underlines the fiction that our experiences create: "...the world (continuity and distinction) is an outright fiction of the imagination. Fiction becomes principle necessarily...fiction draws its origin and its force from the imagination, insofar as the latter makes use of principles which fix it, and allow it therefore to go further" (*E*

, 80). A similar reading is made later with Spinoza:

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While perhaps surprising coming from Deleuze, this idea is doubtless the oldest one in philosophy: the world we see is an illusion the roots of which are in our ways of thinking. It is, however, in the description of what lies behind the fiction of the subject and the dream of consciousness, that Deleuze is the most fascinating and the most difficult. In his final published essay, he fam

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This rather surprising final text, in which Deleuze also compares pure immanence to Beatitude, bears examining. Implicit in Deleuze's argument here, as in his entire corpus, is that thinking is not going beyond the illusions of consciousness or the fiction of the subject but that the subject and consciousness are products of the plane of immanence. For Deleuze, the task of thinking is to uncover the construction of these illusions and link them up to the larger machinery of immanence of which they are part. When this is accomplished, the illusion fades away, the bonds of transcendence are slipped, and thought reaches an infinite speed that is beyond the language of experience as it is framed in the transcendence of subject or object.<sup>1</sup> Again, as far as the first half of this project is concerned, Deleuze's work can be safely inscribed within the long Western tradition of philosophy as "medicine" applied to the illusions of thought. It is, however, this shocking attempt to point to something exceeding experience, for lack of better words, an "experience beyond experience," which Deleuze famously equates with Life itself that surprises.

The Deleuzian declaration that theory should be used as a toolbox takes on its full force when this final destination of "pure immanence" is laid bare in Deleuze's thought. As we shall see below, this particular application of theory to literature reveals some powerful new ways of thinking and seeing the world when one understands Deleuze's pleas for a philosophy of pure immanence. Before turning to such an application, I wish however to open a surprising line that will both extend and point to the limits in the way theory helps one read literary texts.

Deleuze's assertion that the subject and its world is a fiction and consciousness only a dream with one's eyes wide open is part of a long

<sup>1</sup> It is important here to understand transcendence as something that does not necessarily need "overcoming" but, rather, as something to be "brought back" to the plane of immanence in which it is articulated. It is important to always recall the Deleuzian call to go beyond judgment and pose questions in terms of what they allow one to say or do and not whether they are "good" or "evil." Transcendence in this view (when it forgets immanence) is simply a weak way of thinking and not necessarily "bad." The influence of Spinoza on this point will be obvious to many readers.

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history in Western thought, but it also finds a very familiar echo in another tradition of teachings that most readers will recognize:

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This excerpt from the Buddha's first teaching or "turning of the wheel of the Dharma" (this is what the sutra's title means in the Pāli language) lays out the Buddhist path. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are well known and can be paraphrased as: the everyday condition in which we live is characterized by suffering (perhaps a better translation of can be offered as dis-ease); this dis-ease is the result of the illusions of one's consciousness: one becomes attached to what gives one pleasure, displeased by what causes one dis-ease and indifferent to what gives neither pain nor pleasure; there is a way of living that overcomes this illusion of self and object and it is the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhist training. A Western viewpoint often overlooks the gradual nature of the eightfold path and the training necessary in right action and right speech before one can properly turn to right thought and the ultimate accomplishment of Buddhist teachings: right view of the emptiness of reality. While it is relatively

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easy to describe, emptiness is very difficult to realize. It has often been described as a mode of being: the more one identifies and attaches oneself to emotions such as attachment or anger, the more one tends to reify the illusion that an “I” or subject or consciousness exists that identifies and “owns” these emotions. In meditation, one learns to see the emotions for what they are, effects of a complex series of interactions that have no independent existence. The more one becomes accustomed to this idea, the more one is able to extend this idea to other illusions such as the “I” that is the object of such emotions. Eventually, one is able to drop the illusions and to think and experience life in terms that go beyond the transcendent categories of subject and object. This experience is *non-dual* experience and expression. Nonetheless, famous attempts have been made, such as the first century Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, founder of the *Madhyamaka* or Middle Path schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism who at once asserts and undercuts the idea of emptiness:



( *ū* , *ā ā*, C 24, 18).<sup>2</sup>

The line of interrogation I wish to open by this sudden digression into Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy may not be immediately visible but is nonetheless at the heart of the question of theory. What this quick visit to Buddhism shares with the definition of theory proposed in this paper shared and inspired by the work of Deleuze is a certain practical approach. Theory read with Deleuze is a practice of thought (dare I say of living) that aims to continually transform one’s everyday and deluded experiences of thought. Buddhism proposes a path that aims at the same deluded and mistaken views concerning one’s subjectivity and the distinction between subject and object. Could

<sup>2</sup> As translator and commentator Jay L. Garfield notes, this verse has attracted so much attention that interpretations of it alone represent the foundations of major Buddhist schools in East Asia (Garfield, 93).



theory not be understood as a distinctly Western practice of the self that takes aim at many of the same illusions as the Buddhist tradition? Could one not say that what theory can do is transform one's experience in life in such a radical way that one becomes "free" in ways that the Western tradition has difficulty articulating? Could one not trace a certain practice of reading that corresponds to the "practices of the self" found in Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path?

Of course, this radical linking up of contemporary philosophy with Buddhism is just the kind of intellectual maneuver that makes theory such a deeply suspect enterprise both within and without the academy.<sup>3</sup> Above, it was noted that defining theory in such broadly practical terms poses a serious problem in that the barriers between disciplines and readings cease to exist and everything becomes "practice" for theory. Indeed, this juxtaposition of Buddhism and (Deleuzian) theory nonetheless poses some interesting limits, the first of which is a cultural one. In the excerpt from the Buddha's teachings above and the short gloss on the essence of these teachings and the Buddhist path, the Western eye tends to see a philosophical and "psychological" practice. Indeed, the term "practice of the self" is emblematic of such a reading. The fact remains, however, that no matter how much the West would like to look at it differently, Buddhism remains a religious practice. From a Western point of view, one can see the danger of extracting a purely philosophical or psychological reading from Buddhism through the rise of institutional

<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, this turn towards Buddhist thought should not come as a surprise. Indeed, an entire cottage industry of academic publishing exists examining the ties between various contemporary Western thinkers and Buddhism. While there are the obvious precedents of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, much recent thought has examined post-structuralist philosophy and various schools of Buddhist philosophy. The majority of this work has centered on similarities and differences between Nāgārjuna's "middle path" philosophy and Derridian deconstruction, questions themselves opened by Derrida and his long and complicated relationship with negative theology. The journal, "Philosophy East and West," regularly publishes articles in this direction and on similar questions. The work of Deleuze, however, in general and specifically as a philosophical practice (in terms that will be more fully elaborated below) has received little attention in this direction.

disciplines in the academy such as religious studies and its sub-field of Buddhist studies over the past thirty years. Initially, religious studies (in a very general and broad way) and Buddhist studies focused on Buddhist practice as a theological choice about what Buddhism should be. This is a product of the nineteenth century and the “discovery” of Buddhism by Western scholars as a sophisticated theological system which offers many of the “advantages” to be found in the four noble truths: no god, no soul, no myths of creation and fall, no guilt and redemption and no salvation through a redeemer, no absolution through the rites of a church. All that remains is the individual and his/her ignorance and a system that is actually a collection of practices aimed at transforming the character through ethical, psychological and intellectual training. This early Western reading of Buddhism has left its marks since it conveniently leaves out the rest – elaborate cosmologies, pantheons of gods, saints, and spirits, mystic rites and magical formulas, abject repentances and pious supplications – as the accumulation of cultural belief and practice picked up from Asian societies. Practice then in this context ignores the larger cultural practices in which Buddhism is inscribed and has the dangerous tendency to extract the theological and meditative practices of Buddhist thought as an essence. In other words, an attempt to extend theory to Buddhist thought and be an effort to discover Buddhism in theory or re-write theory as Buddhism.

Having noted this, the outlines of this cultural limit nonetheless open up an interesting space. By analyzing the attack theory makes on the subject and consciousness in this practical vein one is able to more firmly grasp a certain internal limit in theory that has rarely been explored. That is, by explicitly making a reading of theory as a practice which shares many aims with Buddhist practice, one is able to articulate a powerful practice in a culture that has, historically, resisted radical attacks on the subject and the full formulation of emptiness and dependent arising that follows more ferociously than most. (One measure of this resistance is probably the vague discomfort many readers feel as this article has turned from familiar theoretical ground to a more un-familiar and religious one.) Indeed, to make one last return to the cultural limits of theory, everything that has been noted

above distinguishing the difference between Buddhism as philosophy and theology and as a cultural and religious practice is a product of theory and what might be called the narrative of “cultural construction” in theory. However, it would seem that one of the most radical points in Deleuze (but certainly not limited to him) that have gone unexplored is the point to which this cultural construction remains limited by humanism. “Culture” in this theoretical context remains limited to the horizon of the human. While theory cannot become Buddhism, in its radical and trans-human overcoming of the categories of subject and object in favor of emptiness, Buddhism points the way for a certain empowering practice of theory that has not yet been fully appreciated.

Where does one start such a practice? One place might be with the interesting phrase, noted above, “practice of the self.” Many readers will recognize the late Foucault in this term. It was during this late period, when Foucault was turning toward Stoic thought and Stoic meditation manuals as philosophical practices of the self, that he gave a famous series of interviews where he compared his historical work to that of fictions. Perhaps it is with this opening toward fiction that one might at last bring this long theoretical exercise back to its literary partner. However, the opening Foucault makes in this direction is so tantalizing in light of what has been examined above concerning the practice of theory that it is fruitful to explore the argument that takes him from “practices of the self” to “fictions.” In the series of interviews with Duccio Trombadori, Foucault notes that all of his works are “expériences.” Of course, “expérience” in French has a double sense as both experience and experiment and it is interesting to note what he says in the original French, where the semantic richness of “expérience” is preserved:

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knowledge and its rupture appear. A similar project is at work in Deleuze. For when he says that transcendence is the product of immanence, could one not then understand the Deleuzian project as a series of practices aimed at overturning the “truth” of transcendence for a “fiction” of immanence? Could one not read this interesting Foucauldian “practice” of fiction on oneself with Deleuze’s own reading of the fiction of immanence? The question nonetheless remains, what kind of “practice” can help one make this discovery?

Perhaps the answer lies in the word “fiction.” It is curious that Deleuze would entitle one of his chapters in *D* as “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Fiction.” How and why can Deleuze turn to one national literary tradition and make such a claim? Of course, what interests him here is not a national fiction but a concept of fiction, which he will then term “Anglo-American” but which corresponds to a creative power of fiction. Most readers will know that a concept for Deleuze is something that is created, that allows us to see and hear percepts and affects of thought: to, in other words, go beyond the fiction of everyday thought and see the immanence that participates in and allows for the creation of concepts. Deleuze repeated many times what interested him about fiction: the “stuttering” of language, its invention of an impersonal voice, the creation of a “people to come” and a “fabulating function” proper to literature. This then allows us to come full turn and propose a theory of reading as a “practice” of the self that inverts the illusions of subjectivity or consciousness. Theory in this manner helps one to see that encountering fiction is a practice, that, when done correctly, elevates one to a more powerful experience of life that is trans-human.

Of course, the heart of this thesis is not new and is simply a sophisticated version of the valuable but ideologically perverted view that “reading makes one a better person” which served to help create various national literatures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the canons, and indeed national “fictions” on which those canons were based. But this objection does not take into account the unexplored power of literature proposed by this “practice of the self” reading. To make this point, let us attempt a brief and practical demonstration

using a text that is extremely well-known, Nathaniel Hawthorne's

As many critics have noted one of the reasons Hawthorne's novel remains so powerful and attractive today is because it dares the reader to undertake a strategy of reading based on judgment in which one overlays one's own prejudices or worldviews in order to better "see through" the text and decipher its lessons. That is, the plot is propelled forward by the thinly hidden but nonetheless extra-textual affair between the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne for which Hester suffers and pays her debt of the scarlet letter while Dimmesdale apparently escapes his judgment but suffers another more debilitating and fateful punishment in the end. In such a plot, the reader often very willingly goes along with Hester's Puritan judges and ministers and is also only too happy to follow the investigations of Roger Chillingworth, Hester's "lost" husband who has returned to the Puritan colony to exact his revenge on Dimmesdale. The fiction at work in this reading is the web of innuendo and lies that the characters erect and which the reader happily pierces.

However it is just this manner of "seeing through" the text that is debilitating and weakening. What has occurred from a Deleuzian point of view is that the text has been read backwards and the creative power of the text, its inventivity and fiction have been reduced to a simple one-to-one correspondence of symbols and tropes that narrow down the search for the novel's "secret:" the scarlet letter "means" adultery, the illegitimate Pearl "is" the symbol of sin, Dimmesdale's illness "is" his guilt, etc. Yet as most of us know, Hawthorne's text is not as satisfying as it appears for secrets are never truly exposed and when they are, they only appear so, as with the novel's conclusion where the scarlet letter seems to loom visible behind a textual cloud of hallmark Hawthornian style made up of contradictory hypotheses, plays on points of view, tortured revision, and the undecidability of signs:

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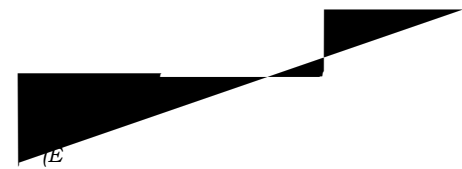


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oneself up to the “passage of Life itself” (*E C C*, 5). Reading is not meditation, but something very interesting happens when “practicing reading” in this manner.

Another way of putting it is that the confusion and power that one feels when confronted with a text such as Hawthorne’s forces one to let go of one’s desire to judge, to personalize the stakes of the text, to say “I” or “mine.” In place of a personal reading based one’s position as judge there is what Deleuze calls the impersonal of the text:

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At one point in Hawthorne’s text, when the minister gazes at the sky in the light of a meteor shower, he does not see the scarlet letter but immense letter and it is this impersonal but highly singular and powerful letter/text that speaks to the empowered reader of Hawthorne’s novel. As one moves from the desire to judge, to personalize the stakes of the text to this larger and impersonal reading, one moves through two different “fields” or deployments in life – one weaker and servile and another stronger and freer. Deleuze once again affirms: “There is no literature without fabulation, but as Bergson was able to see, fabulation – the fabulating function – does not consist in imagining or projecting an ego. Rather, it attains these visions, it raises itself to these becomings and powers” (*E C C*, 3).

This is what one might consider to be the practice of reading with Deleuze. Two observations emerge from this quick and practical demonstration. The first follows the path of the argument made above concerning fiction as a practice, experiment and indeed life experience. Through encountering literature, one’s unexamined images of life fall away and a new way of thinking takes root. Fiction allows one to move



beyond the transcendental illusions and fictions one erects, stripping one of the power to say "I." In the place of this "I" is a vast, powerful and immanent "fiction."<sup>4</sup> Deleuze is fond of quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald and particularly the observation he makes in *Catch 22* - about life as a series of blows where the subtlest of blows, those one never recovers from and which change one's life forever, are only felt after the fact and too late. Fitzgerald's text is about alcoholism, but practicing reading in this sense could be understood in the same way. The goal of such a practice is to establish a habit of being so that when that final blow comes and is realized after the fact, one can never go back to the same way of reading or to the same way of living. One is raised to a higher and irreversible power of life. Of course, Buddhist meditation practice has a similar goal: over many, many years of practice, subtle changes in the way one apprehends oneself and life are made so that the proper conditions are in place for that most subtle and life-changing of blows.<sup>5</sup>

The second observation is less explicit but perhaps even more important. As noted above, the extremely delicate cross-cultural question of looking toward Buddhist thought for inspiration in Deleuze and vice versa presents many dangers, but framing the question of practice in terms of a "threshold" experience in which one encounters a vision (in Buddhist terminology the term is "wisdom") of a trans-

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, one meditation practice often recommended in Buddhism encourages the practitioner to see the world as an illusion or dream (or, one might say, fiction) in order to go beyond one's fixed and delusory habits of taking oneself (one's "I") as a solid and unchanging presence. For Buddhism, the "I" is a fiction and the more one becomes acquainted with this fiction, the more one is able to overcome its illusions.

<sup>5</sup> One could argue for the presence of a "moral imperative" (although Deleuze would never define it in such terms) in Deleuze's work, calling on each individual to "practice" not only reading but life in such a manner so as to continually search out empowering encounters that change one's perspective forever while avoiding those that are debilitating, decreasing one's capacity to change. Once again, the Spinozist current of Deleuze's thought can easily be sensed. Of course, it has often been noted that Spinoza's project of an immanent God in the *Ethics* can find certain echoes in Buddhist thought. Indeed, one might say that the Noble Eightfold Path is just such a moral project, exhorting one to avoid debilitating encounters in favor of those that allow one to increase one's capacity for wisdom until the ultimate, life-changing blow is encountered.

personal articulation (the impersonal in Deleuze) of being is extremely important. While it would be foolhardy (for the reasons enumerated above) to determine if the “experience” beyond subjectivity of Deleuze’s transcendental field is the same as enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition, the value of reading in this particular manner with Deleuze in and around Buddhist thought is to bring the power of theory up to some of its cultural limits. To recall the arguments made above, Buddhism is indeed a religious practice, but many of its religious practices exist to remind one that the web of sentient life extends far beyond one’s shortsighted subjective and humanist limits.<sup>6</sup> It appears that by reading and practicing literature in and through this particular theoretical lens, one comes up against that limit in our own cultural framework.

Theory cannot offer some form of Enlightenment, but it can offer a glimpse of a trans-human wisdom at the very moment when a Western cultural model that has always refused such a vision reaches its highest historical pitch of domination (and barbarism).<sup>7</sup> This is something that is not easily admitted since it requires one to release so many dearly held and created fictions. Theory is very helpful and even welcomed when it helps to point out the “centered” and “major” or “majority” discourses of any number of cultural constructions, but the resistance to theory begins when it undoes even those values or fictions in the name of which one practices theory. In Buddhism one is told to give up all hope of success as a way of fighting against the facile error

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that at this point, at the fault-line where Buddhism moves from a philosophical practice to a religious one, is where the most radical and most intensely resisted manner of seeing one’s life and the world comes into play.

<sup>7</sup> On the question of a “trans-human” articulation of subjectivity, Derrida has always been particularly helpful. As early as the essay on *différance*, he pointed to the articulation of an “order” that eluded the transcendent opposition of two terms (presence/absence, speech/writing, etc.). The question of the non-human and animal was also a steady recurrence in Derrida’s work beginning in the late 1980s and extending into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and it is fruitful to place these reflections in relation to the concurrent explorations Derrida made of the particular mode of Western thought he termed “*mondialatinisation*.”



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