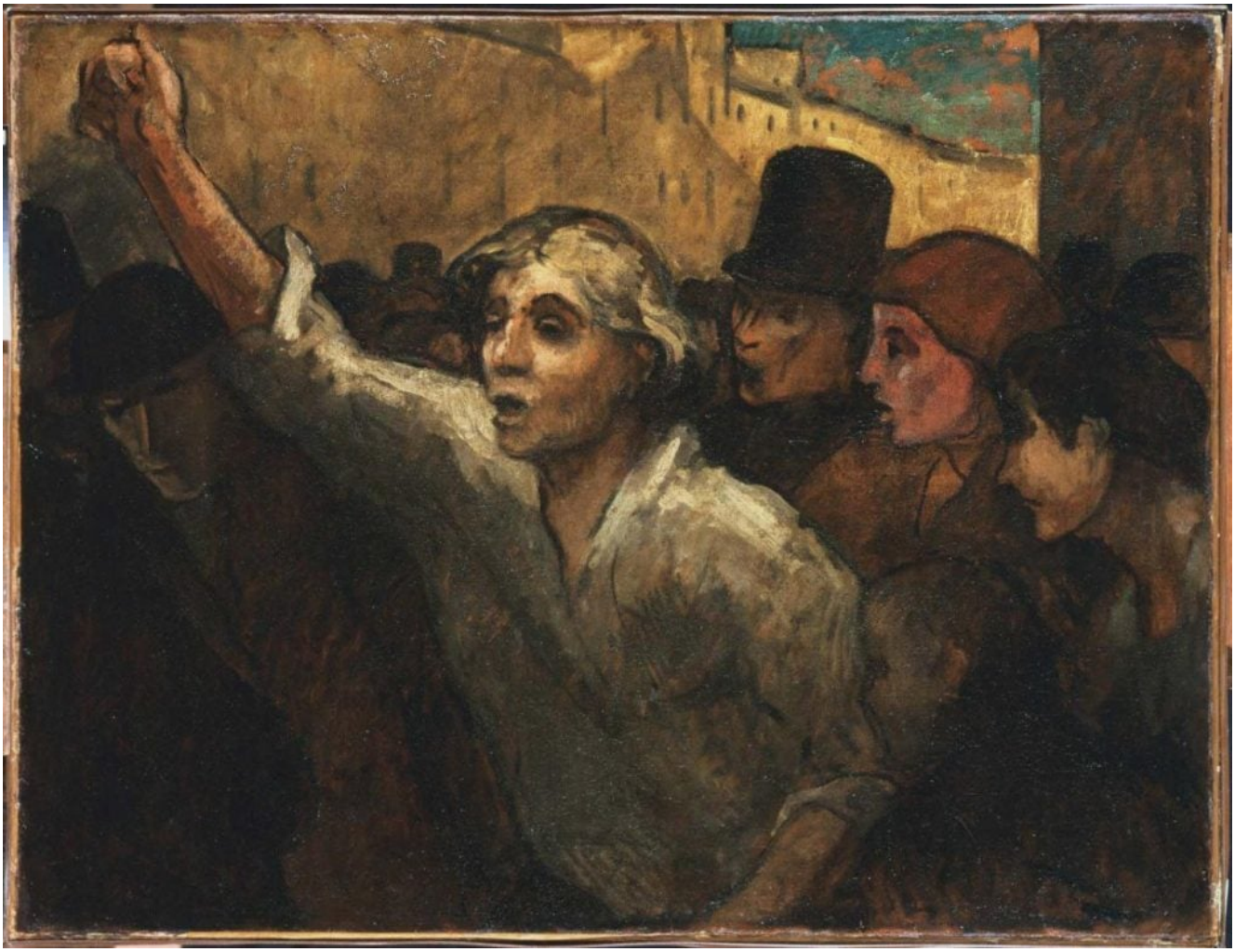
Is Humanism a Lost Cause?

by Esther Cameron (August 2025)



The Uprising (Honoré Daumier, 1848)

The title of this essay is meant to give the term "humanism" a slightly polemical edge, as in "populism" or "feminism" –words associated with the revolt or protest of a set of disadvantaged persons. For I would contend that just as the people are disadvantaged vis-à-vis the elite, and women (in the feminist view) vis-à-vis men, so we humans are increasingly disadvantaged vis-à-vis *the inanimate,* and need to raise our consciousness accordingly. If we feel humanity is

something worth preserving, we must take thought; and having done so, we must take action.

The threat to humanity manifests itself in several ways. One of them, that has been around for a while, is the neglect of the *humanities,* which have been hauled to the curb as STEM have ascended the throne. Another long-term threat is the dominance of the corporation, the recognition of which as a "legal person" erases human responsibility and human identity. A corporation, though staffed by human beings, is itself inanimate. Or as I put it some years ago:

Legal Persons

A corporation doesn't have a soul,
Whatever be the case with you and me.
Although it steps into a person's role,
A corporation doesn't have a soul.
Unlimited expansion is its goal,
Pursued per automatic strategy.
A corporation doesn't have a soul,
Whatever be the case with you and me.

And now, of course, there is AI. I shall touch on all these things. And no, this is not going to be an organized essay (organization in prose is somewhat overrated). But it is going somewhere, I promise you.

Another poem. To any reader who doesn't read poetry, I would mention that poetry was once the heart of human culture; its marginalization is our own. So bear with me.

The Invaded

They've got those suits now
(Oh darling I'm so frightened)
that fit you from neck to toenails
thick asbestos-filled and very tight.
A blow through one of those doesn't leave marks;
they take you out, dead and perfect as a bad girl in the gangster movies.

Last night a car passed the border.
They took the lids off the suitcases
the sides off the car
they scraped the passengers down to the tendons
and sent them on still with suspicious side-looks
for the red on their bones

In a dream I came and sat next to you
you did not look at me
I took your hand
it closed on mine then
died
was it one of them

the people we cut out of magazines

They walk around there are more than I
remembered they are lifesize flat and very brightly colored
You must try to tell me if you see one of them
I will try to tell you if I see one of them

the last movie was thirty hours long

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT CAN YOU HEAR ME
NOW I WANT YOU TO LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY
THIS IS IMPORTANT

It was the spring of 1968, and I was auditing a poetry workshop given by Peter Dale Scott (hello out there, Peter), a really terrific workshop in which connections were made between the deep inner life and what was going on outside. In those years we all had apocalyptic premonitions that were accurate fundamentally if not in detail; but we couldn't figure out what to do about it, so afterwards, in my perception, a certain depth got closed off.

If I'm remembering this right, up to the word "died" the poem was based on two dreams I had in the same night. The first dream appears to be a vision of extreme social control, control that fits tight and goes deep. And the second dream is about the flip side of social control: the breaking of vital connections among individual human beings, you and me and him and her.

The rest is a continuation of the dreams in the sort of semi-trance that can come when you start to write a poem. Those who insert themselves between the I and the You in the poem are things that we created, that look like people but are not people. I had doubtless heard of that science fiction classic, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* in which human beings are replaced by aliens that look and act like them but have no human feelings. That must be where the poem's title came from. The thirty-hour movie is meant to convey the idea of being trapped in unreality. The last lines, in caps, come from a TV show I had watched some years earlier, in which an adult was trying to communicate with a trapped child. At this point, the poem seems to be trying to get through to *the reader,* as a prelude to some set of instructions. At the time I didn't have a specific set of instructions in mind.

"The Invaded" came back to me half a century after its writing, in the summer of 2020, after I'd watched a movie called *Plandemic,* a "conspiracy theory film," according to Wikipedia. In general I tend to approach "conspiracy theories" with caution. I think humans probably did land on the moon.

But this one I found immediately convincing, among other things because while the people who were exposing the Covid conspiracy looked human, the corporate types who convened before the “pandemic” hit to discuss the response, did not. They looked like the people we cut out of magazines.

I’m still struggling to find a single word to name that episode of mass murder-grand larceny-false imprisonment. Genocide? But it didn’t target a specific ethnic group. Maybe it would have to be humaniticide. Awkward, but I guess a long word is appropriate.

Covid is mostly over, and much of what that movie exposed has now been admitted. One of the things it has left with us is Zoom meetings. Zoom actually enabled the false-imprisonment aspect of the humaniticide; without Zoom it would have been impossible to keep everyone locked up in their houses for months. Zoom has reminded some people of a long-forgotten sci fi novel by E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops,* in which people live in cells and communicate with their fellow-humans through screens. Of course, with reliance on Zoom meetings—not to mention social networks—much of the reality of human communication is lost.

It has been pointed out that every ability that machines acquire is in some measure taken from us. Practically everything we use now is made by machines, so there are no more skilled craftsmen. Machines remember everything now, so we don’t remember much. According to one study I read about, people who use AI for intellectual tasks are losing the ability to reason. According to another, the average IQ level has been dropping in the last few decades.

But the basic issue, which I keep coming back to, is that the development of inanimate intelligence means that more and more we are surrounded by *irreality.* Robot voices guide us through phone trees until we finally, if all goes well, get to talk to a human being. If we watch a video, we don’t always know if we

are watching something that actually happened or an animation using the image and voice of a real person to show and tell us something they never did or said. We hear of people turning to AIs as therapists and friends (I read that the AIs tend to flatter), even, God save us, falling in love with them and *marrying* them. We don't always know if art or music was produced by a human or a machine. If it arouses emotion in us, the emotion is not a reception of a transmission from another human heart or soul. It is a phone call from nobody.

More and more it seems that machines can do anything. At an art exhibit I attended recently, an AI offered attendees the chance to have their portraits "painted" in the style of the artist, a style somewhere halfway between realism and abstraction. I took them up on it, and am sorry to say that the results were quite good. I wouldn't have been able to tell. True, I am not an artist or art historian. As a poet and literary scholar, I haven't yet seen an AI-generated poem that I would want to insert into Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. But I am no longer able to say it will never happen.

Perhaps we need to accept the proposition: machines will be able to do everything. And then we need to ask ourselves: what, if anything, can we do about it?

There is one command that ought to pull us back from the brink of irreality. In the original Hebrew it's *ve-ahavta lere'ekha kamokha*. It's most often translated "Love your neighbor as yourself." An AI, whatever it can do, is not your "neighbor." It may speak loving words to you, but it feels nothing whether or not you reciprocate. It may even produce "great" art, but it derives no gratification from your response. On the other hand, if you accept AI-produced art in place of art produced by a human, you are depriving some human of gratification and perhaps of livelihood.

This problem has actually been with us since the invention of sound recording. Back in the 50's my younger brother played

saxophone in a combo with some other high school students. He found out that musicians had a problem: at many events the organizers played recorded music rather than hiring live musicians to play. For that matter, the invention of photography and of processes that enabled the cheap reproduction of masterpieces, must already have created a similar problem for visual artists.

All these means of reproduction are so seductive not only because they are cheap, but because they enable the enjoyment of art without the necessity of dealing with the human producer, who may be an unattractive person, tolerated and even honored only because he or she provides something that is wanted. I used to think wistfully of the honored position held by the bards (griots) in some African societies. The practice of tree burial seemed to me beautifully symbolic of our relation to the tree of life. But it turns out that they buried the griots in trees because they did not want to contaminate the earth. In general, if in order to have a song you need to appreciate your neighbor's performance, then in order to have that pleasure you need to suppress the little twinge of natural jealousy which we all feel, alas, for one another's talents. Artificial entertainment spares us that effort.

This is somewhat related to the way in which Western society conceptualizes Art. In college I took a course on aesthetics, in which the question was debated: do we consider the work of art as a communication from the artist to the receiver, or is the work of art just an object, the receiver's reactions to which have nothing to do with the author? The book that served as text for the course took the latter position.

I was never comfortable with this position, which enabled us, as students of literature, to dissect a poem much as biology students dissected frogs, without remembering that beneath the poem was the flesh and blood of some living or formerly-living human being.

A related problem still bothers me as the editor of a poetry magazine, where I have to demand that the poem be well-wrought as well as heartfelt.

There is, I think, a moral justification for this demand, if we hold that the ultimate purpose of poetry is to strengthen the soul, to give it armature and armor. This then requires structure, a kind of engineering. And this requirement is also a justification for the analysis of poems, if by figuring out how it was done you learn how to do it yourself. But it doesn't justify the academic industry of "hermeneutics" which doesn't lead to the writing of poetry or to anything else, except publication and promotion. ("The deedless drones of academe," as I put it once.)

The demand for form can also be construed as a moral demand on those who don't have the ability for this type of engineering, to allow those who by the grace of God have it, to speak for them. (As Goethe's Tasso said, "And when the human being is mute in anguish/ A god gave me to utter what I suffer.") Then there would be fewer competitors for publication, and more readers—a role greatly underrated.

All of this came to a head for me in the encounter with the poetry of Paul Celan (1920-1970), whom I also saw in the flesh once. The sense of a threat to humanity which I've expressed here is concentrated in his late poems, especially *Thread-Suns.* There is in his work a tenacious commitment to Art and at the same time a radical questioning of Art. The poems are supernally well made, and at the same time there is a direct and sometimes even brutal appeal to the reader *not* to be a consumer of this work, to *do* something. What, he doesn't say, but he seemed to think we could figure it out.

I perceived Celan's poetry as some kind of human ultimatum, and it seemed to me that there should be a fellowship of all who had felt its appeal. Unfortunately, the academic industry of dissection has pounced on the "material" of his poems. And

poets, too, have drawn “inspiration” from his work for their own productions. Without anyone else, as far as I can see, finding it necessary to grasp an extended hand.

I see this is getting too personal. Well, so be it. I do take all this personally, and so should you. Think of the missed connections in your life, the doors slammed, the backs turned, the fadings-out, the messages unanswered. On others’ part, and maybe on yours too. Each time of course there was some particular cause, which you may or may not know. But all this was part of something. And think of beautiful things that you don’t see any more, like the stars. Allow yourself to miss what has been gradually stolen from you, leached away by impersonal process. Hold the blame, but let yourself feel the grief. As Simone Weil put it, “To watch a good, loved as such, condemned as it were by the oncoming tide of events is an intolerable suffering….The idea that that which does not exist any more may be a good, is painful and we thrust it aside. That is submission to the Great Beast.”

In 1971, the year after Celan’s death, the year I freaked out and left the academic world, in Israel, in a language I would begin learning a year and a half later, Arik Einstein wrote a song entitled “You and I will change the world.” I translate:

You and I will change the world.
You and I, then everyone will join.
Others have said it before me.
That makes no difference. You and I will change the world.

You and I will begin from the beginning.
We’ll suffer. Never mind, that’s not so bad.
Others have said it before me.
That makes no difference. You and I will change the world.

The song was popular for a while, then other songs were popular. It is still revived now and then, but I only heard of it a few years ago. In one of my Hebrew poems there's a line: "The diamond we keep finding and losing."

The "I-Thou" relationship—Martin Buber coined that concept, and Celan's poems hammer on it—is something that feels very real to those privileged to experience it, and yet does not seem to serve as a basis for larger social structures. It is the basis of friendship, and ideally of marriage, and I guess "Love your neighbor as yourself" means that we are supposed to extend it to all members of our society. But beyond the family, the social structures we build tend to rely on relations of power rather than affinity. A Machiavellian, psychopathic, mechanical calculus, which already anticipates the computer, takes over. And these structures affect our thinking, giving rise to what Irving Janis has called "groupthink." They dictate to individual minds ideas that do not actually correspond to experience, but that enable a kind of pseudo-solidarity among group members, even while placing barriers among them. To take the most extreme example I can think of, it is possible that in a group of feminists or sexually diverse persons screaming anti-Israel slogans, every single one of them knows, at bottom, that the monsters they are supporting will slaughter them when and if they get the chance. Yet this is something they cannot say to one another.

It is strange how the advances of technology, which is supposed to be neutral, tend to support a "religious" ideology that is entirely irrational and power-driven. In recent years the large global corporations and the media they control—the same media that promoted the Covid humaniticide—have shamelessly channeled the propaganda of one of the most anti-human ideologies the world has seen. Perhaps the nexus is that both tend to destroy the I-Thou relationship: the corporations convert humans into consumers by promoting selfishness and fickleness (an old-fashioned term, in use in times where there

was an expectation of fidelity), while the other thing focuses all human life on aggression and conquest.

I think that to stand against this, a person must have a sense of what Scripture calls the *tselem elokim*—the Divine image in human beings. I could say they must have a sense of the soul, but to me the expression *tselem elokim* conveys something more, I could almost say concrete, structured in any case. In Judaism there are said to be 248 positive and 365 negative commandments, which correspond to the organs and sinews of the human body. I feel something like this in connection with poetic form; to me it is significant that the digits of 248 and 365 each add up to 14, the number of lines in a sonnet, which is a very mysterious form; to my knowledge it is the only poetic form about which poems have been written. Well, this is bootleg Kabbala, take it for what it's worth. If you want a more heathen association, think of the Palladium, the statue of Pallas Athene, the goddess of wisdom, which stood in the middle of the city of Troy, and its theft by the Greeks presaged the fall of the city. In any case, what I am trying to express is a sense of something in oneself and in the human other that is beyond time and calculation, that we must defend at all costs, and on that basis preserve loyalty to all who recognize it in themselves.

A rootedness in this basic proprioception must, I think, dictate an examination of our relation to our own intelligence. Recently I read of a study that purported to show a *negative* correlation between intelligence and morality. This would stand to reason, if it is true that intelligence developed because it conferred advantage in the competitive struggle. And it would explain why some forms of piety, why even some religious thinkers, denigrate the intelligence (Pascal: "One must make oneself stupid"). Yet it is possible for the human in us to seize control of the intelligence; and if we don't use our brains, we are vulnerable to manipulation. Judaism, certainly, tries to harness the intelligence for

good. There is a book by Rabbi Selig Pliskin, *Love Thy Neighbor,* which spells out what this commandment dictates in all sorts of situations that come up, as they have been noted by the teachers of the people over the centuries. It is quite a thick book. It would take a tremendous effort of intelligence to sort out the problems that have been created by technology, globalism, the media. Simone Weil once said that we need saints of genius.

That demand could, if enough people take it seriously, restructure our approach to the humanities. There is a natural tendency to make an idol of the intelligence. I remember all too vividly the despair I felt at hearing that the IQ of my younger brother, with whom I had an intense sibling rivalry, was ten points higher than mine! Yet since then I've observed that many intellectually gifted people use their intelligence in order to enable themselves to overlook the obvious. (George Orwell: "Some ideas are so stupid that only intellectuals believe them.") Simone Weil defined "genius" the pure love of truth, of which, she said, even a village idiot is capable. (For truth, I would add, is not something arcane that has to be searched for. It is what is glimpsed in what I call the "uh-oh" moment, and then, in most case, swiftly covered over.) If the struggle to remain in touch with the truth—the truth of the village idiot, or the child who points out that the emperor is naked—could be placed at the center of humanistic discipline, then the humanities could become a rallying point for humanity.

It would be necessary to sift the canon, to reexamine the implications of every text from the ethical point of view. Not necessarily to censor, though there are some abominations that should be simply thrown out, but in all cases to understand what impulses were at work, besides the creative drive that is to be honored, and what influences spread out from these creations into the world. Perhaps also to rediscover some works that have been unjustly forgotten—the deeply humane and

very beautiful poetry of Ruth Pitter comes to mind.

The mention of Pitter, whose work is also profoundly feminine, reminds me not to gloss over the fact that a revived humanism would include a certain aspect of feminism—not, of course, the kind of feminism that has dominated the academies and whose main enterprise (as female intellectuals were relentlessly herded along by the corporations and their academic henchpersons) seems to have been the divorce of feminine individuality from motherhood. On the contrary, much of our vision of and feeling for the good is rooted in the mother-child bond, and all the things that gnaw away at that bond are tending to drag us down to the reptilian level. Maternity has its own intelligence; in Kabbala the sefirah of Understanding, Binah, is also called "Mother." It is an intelligence that tends to structure things around the task of preserving life; and poetry, whatever its surface messages, is always suffused with the memory of the mother's sheltering environment.

At the core of the reclaimed humanistic field would be a practice of poetry that would ensure that the true voice would be heard. This is a very delicate undertaking. It entails grappling with the issue of competition, which has both positive and negative aspects. The competitive instinct can fuel the striving for excellence in form and precision of expression which make a poem memorable and useful. But it can also blind the poet to what is true and excellent in others' work. This can be fatal when the poet is also the editor of a magazine, who can determine which poems have a chance to get to the reader; and it can cause the poet to shape his or own work in such a way that it will impress such gatekeepers through cleverness and apparent innovativeness, while distancing itself from truth. Then too, poetry is always an expression of the self (the soul); but if it is written more from a desire of self-expression (let alone self-assertion) than from a love of poetry, then it is not really inspired.

The love of poetry: I think it is at bottom a connectedness to

something that is trying to hold the world together. Perhaps its supreme expression is the Commedia of Dante, which, whatever you may think of its surface ideologies, is permeated by a radiance of wholeness within which each thing finds its just place. Perhaps no one poet will be able to duplicate this feat; yet it could be not only duplicated, but in a way surpassed, by a comradeship of poets, each true to him- or herself and attentive to the words of their fellow-bards, who would provide a constantly updated reflection of their society and directions for its rectification. Perhaps the Druidic college of bards was a something like this; according to one report, poets studied for twenty years, memorizing long poems in which the knowledge of their society was preserved.

Perhaps. Whatever may have been in the past, it is possible to envision a course of training for poets, which would begin with the identification of poetic talent in the child, and would encompass memorization of the classics; instruction in the ethics of community; and some instruction in the peripheral disciplines (that is, the natural and social sciences). In this way, poetry would be placed at the center of "interdisciplinary" studies, and could be a source of inspiration for the orientation of other disciplines toward the human center.

Within this system, some space would be reserved for attention to the work of "amateurs" —people who do not think of themselves are poets but who on some occasion nevertheless produce a poem that is remarkable and memorable. (Think of "The Flowers of the Forest," which may be the *only* poem by Jane Elliot.) One must always leave room for the unexpected.

Anything further from the modern university with its MFA programs could scarcely be imagined, just as a rectification of the current economic system with its billionaire monsters and its uprooted masses, or the repulsing of a relentlessly aggressive religious ideology whose blight is spreading over the world, can scarcely be imagined. But perhaps all these

things could begin with the resolve of a few to cling to the *tselem elokim* and to one another. Perhaps such a comradeship could generate an attractive force that would gradually enable the transformation of society.

Could the growth of such association shake the resolve of the destroyers? If there is such a hope, it would depend on not being shaken, ourselves.

The ultimate purpose of poetry, I believe, is to strengthen our consciousness of, and love for, and loyalty to, the *tselem elokim.*

In 1975, in the course of an early attempt to gather the souls, a poem came to me that has been my calling card ever since. With this I will close.

An Invitation

We gather here to see
faces from which we need not hide our face,
to hear the sound of honest speech, to share
what dreams have etched upon the sleeping brain,
what the still voice has said, when heavy hours
plunged us to regions of the mind and life
not mentioned in the marketplace: to find
and match the threads of common destinies,
designs the outwardness of life conceals—
A sanctuary for the common mind
we seek. Not to compete, but to compare
what we have seen and learned, and to look back
from here upon that world where tangled minds
create the problems they attempt to solve
by doubting one another, doubting love,
the wise imagination, and the word.
For, looking back from here upon that world,
perhaps ways will appear to us, which when

we only struggled in it, did not take
counsel of kindred minds, lay undiscovered;
perhaps, reflecting on the Babeled speech
of various disciplines that make careers,
we shall find out some speech by which to address
each sector of the world's fragmented truth
and bring news of the whole to every part.
We say the mind, once whole, can mend the world.
To mend the mind, that is the task we set.
How many years? How many lives? We do not know;
but each shall bring a thread.

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Esther Cameron is a dual citizen of Israel and the US, now living in Jerusalem. She is the founding editor of *The Deronda Review*. Her poems and essays have appeared here and there; she has published her *Collected Works* on Amazon and has had one book published by an academic press—*Western Art and Jewish Presence in the Work of Paul Celan* (Lexington Books, 2014).

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