



2017

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Katie Francom

Brigham Young University, kmfrancom@gmail.com

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Francom, Katie (2017) "Dante's Divine Comedy: A Pastoral Subversion," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol10/iss1/7>

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Dante's Divine Comedy: A Pastoral Subversion

Cover Page Footnote

A huge thank you to Dr. Michael Lavers for encouraging me to write and publish this article and to Adrian Ramjoué for his editing expertise.

Dante's *Divine Comedy*

A Pastoral Subversion

Katie Francom

In Virgil's writings, "pastoral poetry came to be used as a vehicle for allegory or veiled social and political comment" ("Pastoral Poetry"). It is thus fitting that Dante, in his attempt to write what he believed to be the greatest allegory ever created, chose Virgil to be his literary and narrative guide. Dante pulls from what Prue Shaw, a prominent Dante critic, calls the "fertilising powers" of Virgil's allegorical and pastoral influences throughout *The Divine Comedy* (172). And yet, it is in his very homage to Virgil that Dante subverts the pastoral mode. Kyle Anderson "examines the particulars of how Dante as Christian poet replaces the classical model of pastoral poetry, Virgil, in Canto XXVIII, via a clever misuse of the amoebean contest," a typical pastoral device (9). Anderson argues that Dante supplants the pagan pastoral of Virgil in order to replace it with his own Christian version, but is this really accomplished in the single literary move of the amoebean contest? Or is Dante's subversion of the classical pastoral evident throughout *The Divine Comedy*? And what is the significance of Dante's decision to transform the genre? This paper will attempt to widen the scholarly understanding of Dante's ultimate condemnation of the classical and pagan pastoral by rooting themes and devices typical of this genre throughout the *Commedia*. By denouncing the pagan pastoral, Dante declares his status as the supreme poet and exalts the importance of

a Christian understanding of the pastoral. To prove this, we will first establish some typical characteristics of the pastoral mode, then we will examine the development of Virgil's role throughout *The Divine Comedy*, the presence of pastoral themes within it, and Dante's Christian reinvention of the pastoral.

Before we can begin to study the pastoral within *The Divine Comedy*, we must first review the genre itself. Alexander Pope beautifully defined pastoral poetry as "an imitation of the action of a shepherd" (4). This simple depiction of shepherd's life includes a few key characteristics. One characteristic is "that pastoral is an image of what they call the Golden Age" (Pope 5). Both the reader and the characters within the poem long for this idealized and seemingly perfect Golden Age. This longing, and the name itself, make it evident that reader and character are no longer a part of the Golden Age. In addition, Anderson adds that the pastoral is "characterized by the antithesis of Art and Nature" (16). Allegorical representation is a key feature of pastoral poetry. Samuel Johnson, a prominent literary figure of the eighteenth century, noted, "If we search the writings of Virgil, for the true definition of a pastoral, it will be found *a poem in which any action or passion is represented by its effects upon a country life*" (19). Therefore, pastoral poetry is by nature representative and thus allegorical.

Virgil is both a prominent pastoral poet and a key figure in *The Divine Comedy*; consequently, it is essential to understand his role in Dante's work. We will begin by briefly reviewing the use of exile and allegory within his pastoral writing. In his *Eclogue I*, Virgil tells the tale of Tityrus and Meliboeus. As the two discuss their flocks and land it becomes apparent that Meliboeus is jealous of Tityrus, because, as Meliboeus says, "your acres will still be yours . . . but the rest of us must go from here and be dispersed" (Virgil 23). Meliboeus is being forced to leave his land and go to foreign fields. When Meliboeus exclaims, "No more singing for me, no more taking you to browse, / My little goats," there is a clear sense that when Meliboeus leaves his fields he will no longer be quite as happy (Virgil 77).

However, Virgil's pastoral poem is more than a tale of exile; it is also allegorical. For Wendell Clausen that allegory lies at the heart of Virgil's pastoral. He explains, "the poetry of Theocritus and Virgil is never simple, though it affects to be; and in this affectation of simplicity, the disparity between the meanness of his subject and the refinement of the

poet's art, lies the essence of pastoral" (xv). Thus the essence of *Eclogue I* is more than a simple story. When referring to his journey to Rome and absence from Amaryllis, Tityrus says, "freedom gave me a look" and "there was no way out of my slavery" (Virgil 27, 40). Clausen comments upon these lines, writing, "'Freedom' (*libertas*) and 'slavery' (*seruitium*, *seruitus*) were established political metaphors, and *libertas* had acquired a current significance: it was the slogan of Octavian and his party" (31). In this inclusion of metaphors and the allusion to Octavian, Virgil makes it clear that *Eclogue I* is much more than a tale of two shepherds, but a "veiled social and political comment" ("Pastoral Poetry").

It is significant that Dante chose to use such a quintessential pastoral poet as a principle character and guide in *The Divine Comedy*. In the opening canto of *Inferno* we find Dante alone in a dark wood and in seemingly great peril. Dante is presumably about to be attacked by the she-wolf when he sees a shade and cries, "Have pity on me . . . / whatever you may be—a shade, a man" (*Inferno* 1.65–66). Virgil then reveals his identity to Dante, who reacts with great expressions of praise, declaring, "O light and honor of all other poets, / may my long study and the intense love / that made me search your volume serve me now. / You are my master and my author" (*Inferno* 1.82–85). It is clear here that Dante the pilgrim not only esteems Virgil, but that he accepts him as his superior. Part of this regard for Virgil is based on his writing, for Dante calls him the "light of all other poets." Yes, Dante draws mostly from the Aeneid, but he was certainly aware of the *Eclogues*, and thus we know that Dante accepts and recognizes Virgil for his standing as a pastoral poet. Dante extends this admiration beyond poetry and gives Virgil a practical role as his guide to bring him out of the dark forest and into "an eternal place" (*Inferno* 1.112–114). Virgil is the light that brings Dante out of darkness and gives him purpose, a view reinforced by P. Luigi Pietrobono, a famous Italian literary critic, who wrote, "Qual bene, si domanda, ci poteva essere nella selva? Molti dicono: Virgilio" (14).¹

Dante's choice to take a pastoral poet as a guide is clearly intentional. Why did Dante not choose Homer or Horace or Ovid? When he meets Virgil, Dante makes it clear that he has read Virgil's writing and heralds him as an incredible poet, and in *Inferno IV* it becomes apparent that

¹ "What good, one asks, could there be in the forest? Many say: Virgil" (translated by author).

Dante's choice of Virgil is intentional. While in Limbo, Virgil and Dante encounter four "giant shades" and Virgil introduces them, commenting, "That shade is Homer, the consummate poet; / the other one is Horace, satirist; / the third is Ovid, the last Lucan" (*Inferno* 4.88-90). Dante the poet acknowledges the greatness of these other writers of epic poetry, but he chooses as his guide the one famed for the pastoral. It is apparent here that the pastoral is important to Dante.

The way the dynamic of strength between Dante and Virgil progresses is indicative of the way Dante begins to supplant Virgil as the reigning pastoral poet. At the beginning of *Inferno*, Dante the pilgrim is weak and almost entirely reliant upon Virgil. Virgil is seen as powerful and capable of guiding and reassuring Dante. Virgil's power is manifest as they attempt to enter the fourth circle and are blocked by Plutus, "the great enemy" (*Inferno* 6.115). Plutus is a Greek god, here cast by Dante the poet into the form of a devil. Dante is apparently scared by this encounter, but Virgil, "The gentle sage, aware of everything, / said reassuringly, 'Don't let fear / defeat you'" (*Inferno* 7.3-5). Here Dante is seen as weak and Virgil is able to perceive that and comfort him. Then Virgil demonstrates his own power and asserts, "whatever power he has, / he cannot stop our climbing down this crag" (*Inferno* 7.5-6). Loyd H. Howard comments on Virgil's "guiding competence," thus highlighting the respective strength and weakness of Virgil and Dante (25). This dynamic changes as they travel through *Inferno* and Dante becomes stronger while Virgil becomes weaker. Virgil's weakness is first perceptible in Canto IX when they reach the gates of Dis, and, according to Howard, "Virgil's authority has reached a low ebb" (42). At the gates Dante and Virgil are unable to pass them, and, in the face of that obstacle, Virgil cries out, "We have to win this battle . . . / if not . . . But one so great had offered help. / How slow that coming seems to me!" (*Inferno* 9.7-9). They are stuck and Virgil can do nothing to change their situation without some greater help from above. Here we see a Virgil that knows he has an important role and doubts his ability to complete it.

This growing weakness of Virgil is also evident in Canto XXIV. At the beginning of this canto Dante and Virgil are struggling to travel to the seventh bolgia because the bridge has collapsed. In the midst of this trial Dante presents the reader with a pastoral simile. He describes a young farmer who watches the sun rise over his land in early spring. As

the sun comes up, the farmer “gathers up new hope / on seeing that the world has changed its face” (*Inferno* 24.12–13). The farmer in the simile is also a shepherd because Dante tells us that he takes his “sheep to pasture” (*Inferno* 24.15). This clearly ties the simile into the pastoral mode with which Virgil is so adept. Much has been made of this simile and the break it provides in the bleakness of the *Inferno*, but an early scholar, Benvenuto da Imola, attempts to unpack the poem’s meaning beyond its function within the canto. Benvenuto suggests that “the shepherd is Virgil, who had actually been a shepherd historically and allegorically” and that the sun represents the relief Virgil feels when “at first confused by his wrath, having expelled it, after a little has let the sheep out of the pouch to graze on new grass, namely on the fodder of new matter” (qtd in Economou 640). It is significant that Benvenuto, a contemporary of Dante, believed that Virgil was a shepherd and suggests that Dante may have believed such as well. However, George Economou, a modern Dante scholar, disagrees with Benevento’s view of Virgil as the shepherd in this metaphor and posits Dante as the shepherd and Virgil as the sun. He likens Virgil “to the sun, or, more generally, to a natural process in the cosmos” (Economou 641). This reading is intriguing because it takes Virgil out of his traditional association with shepherds and replaces him with Dante. In Economou’s placement of Dante as the shepherd we see the beginnings of Dante’s move to replace the the pagan pastoral of Virgil with his own Christian pastoral.

As we continue through the *Comedy*, Dante’s strength becomes greater and greater and he begins to surpass Virgil. This is visible in his use of other guides in Purgatory. When the pilgrims first meet Statius, before knowing his identity, Virgil tells him that he has been exiled to hell and Statius questions, “If God’s not deemed you worthy of ascent, / who’s guided you so far along His stairs?” (*Purgatorio* 21.20–21). This suggests that in some way Virgil is an inadequate guide on the mountain of Purgatory. Following their discussion, Statius becomes a supplemental guide and accompanies the pilgrims all the way to the top of Purgatory, a transition in which we see Virgil very clearly beginning to fade away and Dante begin to take his place.

Virgil’s displacement becomes complete in the Garden of Eden at the top of the mountain of Purgatory. In the Canto XXVII Dante and Virgil enter that earthly paradise and Virgil utters his last words. As Poggioli

remarks, “it is quite noteworthy that he [Virgil] is allowed to enter the Garden of Eden,” and it shows Dante’s great respect towards him (135). However, it is also the moment in which Virgil surrenders all power; in his last lines he tells Dante, “Await no further word or sign from me: / your will is free, erect, and whole—to act / against that will would be to err: therefore / I crown and miter you over yourself” (*Purgatorio* 27.139–142). Anderson writes that Dante’s new independence “proves to be as much of a poetic as a spiritual privilege” (7). This is not merely a feature of the plot. Yes, Virgil will no longer be Dante’s guide, but he is also relinquishing his poetic superiority and crowning Dante as his own superior poet.

This replacement of Virgil is also the replacement of the traditional pagan pastoral that he represents by first showing how the pastoral uses of allegory and exile are present and then by demonstrating its Christian subversion. Allegory is present from the very first lines of the poem: “When I had journeyed half of our life’s way, / I found myself within a shadowed forest” (*Inferno* 1.1–2). Dante opens, as has often been stated, by saying that he was in the midst of “our life’s way,” thus inviting the reader to take part in this life. This is important because it establishes the universality of Dante’s story and claim. By creating such a broad application, Dante makes it clear that the meaning extends beyond the events of the pilgrim’s life, and in fact symbolizes the lives of his readers.

Canto I continues to include an allegorical presentation of animals: a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. Dante describes the lion as so terrifying that “even the air around him seemed to shudder” and the she-wolf as one that “had already brought despair to many” (*Inferno* 1.46–47, 50, 52–53). These animals are plainly terrifying, but they also seem quite malicious because the she-wolf has already harmed people. The presence of these animals is important because it shows the perils that are found in nature, but they also seem to contrast with the animals found in pastoral poetry. Classical pastoral poetry focuses on sheep and goats, which tend to be harmless. Dante’s animals, though violent, are nevertheless pastoral, because they are allegorical. Benedetto Croce, the Italian philosopher, writes that in Canto I “we encounter three wild animals that are not three wild animals,” (qtd in Cassata 14) but are symbols of larger ideas. Cassata assigns specific human sins to each animal, such as the “lion of pride” and the “she-wolf of cupidity” (16). The specific meaning of

the animals may be unclear, but surely they are not simply a part of the setting as pastoral goats and sheep seem to be. Rather, they are a rich symbolic part of the text.

With the line “I found myself within a shadowed forest,” Canto I also introduces the pastoral concept of exile to the reader (*Inferno* 1.1-2). In Italian there are two ways to say “I found”: “trovai” and “ritrovai.” Both can mean “I found,” but here Dante chooses the word with the prefix “ri,” which, as in English, means to repeat or do again. Thus Dante finds himself again in a shadowed forest. Pietrobono reinforces this reading of “ritrovai,” writing that, “Quando dunque la diritta via era smarrita . . . Dante si ritrova” (11).² This implies that Dante does indeed find himself again, not on a new path, but on one that had been lost. This distinction is essential because it changes the whole setting of the first canto: it is not a completely strange place to Dante, but one to which he is returning, thus embodying a return to nature.

This allusion to exile is continued in the first Canto as Dante establishes the natural setting as dark and dangerous. Pietrobono introduces these themes when he notes, “Quel che mi par certo si è che la sua selva sia continuazione e svolgimento di quella terra aspra di spini e di rovi, nella quale Adamo fu cacciato, subito che si torse 'da via di verità e di sua vita” (Pietrobono 11-12).³ Pietrobono makes this argument by connecting the negative and dark description of the forest to the thorns and thistles described by God in Genesis 3. He then moves beyond linguistic similarities to talk more about function. Dante refers to the forest as a place “that never has let any man survive,” a fact that Pietrobono claims recalls the original sin, which also let no man survive and brought death to mankind. This connection to the Bible immediately renders the story allegorical (*Inferno* 1.27). However, it also introduces the idea of exile. Adam was exiled from the Garden of Eden, and Pietrobono’s connection between Dante and Adam implies that Dante has also been exiled to a darker place. These themes make it clear that, although Dante is changing the traditional pagan pastoral, he also values the use of exile within the genre.

2 “When the straight way was lost . . . Dante found himself” (translated by author).

3 “That which seems certain to me is that his forest is a continuation and development of that rugged land of thorns and brambles, in which Adam was cast into, immediately one contorts ‘by way of truth and of one’s life” (translated by author).

This theme of exile resonates strongly with Dante's own life and the exile from which he wrote *The Divine Comedy*. In Paradise Dante meets his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, who in Canto XVII begins to predict Dante's future. He warns Dante, "You shall leave everything you love most dearly: / this is the arrow that the bow of exile / shoots first" (*Paradiso* 17.55-57). What seemed prophetic to Dante the pilgrim was reality for Dante the poet. Caught on the wrong side of a political battle, Dante was exiled from Florence in 1302 and never returned. This exile must have influenced his choice to draw from the pastoral and its themes of exile. However, Dante's own feelings introduce a sense of bitterness not as evident in Meliboeus' nostalgia. Cacciaguida informs Dante, "You are to know the bitter taste / of others' bread, how salt it is, and know / how hard a path it is for one who goes / descending and ascending others' stairs" (*Paradiso* 17.57-61). Clearly Dante's exile was not one of nostalgic contemplation, but of real bitterness and hardship. This bitterness begins to cast a negative shade on the pastoral theme of exile.

While Dante includes pastoral themes and images, it is obvious that he is doing something different with them than simply echoing their traditional use; he is in fact subverting the pastoral. A prime example of this subversion is his description of the setting in Canto I, which becomes particularly interesting when Dante establishes that the setting is "a shadowed forest" (*Inferno* 1.1). Forests are a part of the natural world, which, in classical pastoral poetry, are usually considered to be a haven. Dante is returning to what would traditionally be a natural paradise, but instead it is "shadowed" and dark. Pietrobono's reading of the "selva oscura" reinforces this negative feeling when he calls the forest the "principio e cagione di ogni dolore" (12).⁴ Within this one initial phrase Dante begins to subvert the typical pastoral by arguing against the idea that a return to paradise is desirable because Dante's return to the natural world is anything but ideal, instead it is "shadowed" and dark. Clearly this is not the nature that pastoral poets have heralded and longed for, this is something much more haunting. Dante continues to describe this natural scene with less than positive emotions; when Dante meets Virgil in the wood Virgil invites him to "leave this savage wilderness" (*Inferno* 1.93). Virgil refers to nature as

4 "Principle and cause of all pain" (translated by author).

savage. This makes it clear that it is not simply Dante, or simply the dark woods, that is affected by this sense of fear, but all of nature and Virgil, a poet of nature.

Nowhere in *The Divine Comedy* is Dante's pastoral as elevated as it is in the final scenes of Purgatorio, in the Garden of Eden, where Dante brings together the themes of allegory and exile and makes his subversion of the pastoral final. Upon crossing the purifying flames, Dante immediately begins a pastoral metaphor. He describes goats who "when they grazed, were swift and tameless" and "herdsmen in the open fields" (*Purgatorio* 27.76–82). Then, referring to Virgil, Statius, and himself, Dante explains "such were all three of us at that point—they / were like the herdsmen, I was like the goat" (*Purgatorio* 27.85–86). This seems to be a last honor to Virgil, who has so kindly been a guide and shepherd to Dante. And it seems almost sweet that Dante would honor Virgil in that pastoral for which he was famous. It is also noteworthy that the first thing Dante does to explain the Garden of Eden is refer to the pastoral. Clearly he wants to draw it to the reader's attention and keep it there as they progress through the earthly paradise.

Using the pastoral mode of *locus amoenus*, Dante creates a true pastoral paradise in the Garden of Eden. *Locus amoenus* is "the literary description of a landscape with typical recurring features—shady trees, running water, a grassy meadow, and a cooling breeze . . . and it is the background to the pastoral poetry of Theocritus and Virgil" ("Locus Amoenus"). Poggioli notes that the Garden of Eden "may be considered as the single 'pastoral oasis' in the *Commedia*" (Poggioli 135). It is in this "pastoral oasis" that Dante merges the Christian and the pagan. Dante adapts Theocritus and Virgil's background to create his earthly paradise. He includes the "shady trees" when he describes it as a "forest—dense, alive with green, divine" (*Purgatorio* 28.2). Upon seeing Lethe, against which "All of the purest waters here on earth / . . . would seemed to be touched with impurity," Dante makes the presence of the "running water" manifest (*Purgatorio* 28.28–29). With this *locus amoenus*, "Dante is now repatterning the Garden of Eden after the bucolic versions of classical poetry" (Poggioli 137). Dante himself recognizes this when he writes, "Those ancients who in poetry presented / the golden age, who sang its happy state, / perhaps, in their Parnassus, dreamt this place" (*Purgatorio* 28.139–141). Dante acknowledges the use of a pagan paradise, or Parnassus, but he also uses this move to say that he does it better.

Dante does something with this pastoral oasis that Virgil, Theocritus, and other pagan poets could never do: he Christianizes it. Dante's locus amoenus is itself a Christianization as the Garden of Eden, but it also becomes the scene of supreme Christian spiritual experience for Dante the pilgrim. Poggioli comments, "Beginning with early humanism, clerics, scholars, and poets tried to interpret and to translate the ancient, pagan pastoral into new, Christian terms," but as Dante would proudly say, he always does it best (Poggioli 135). In a sense, Dante the pilgrim's exile is undone within this paradise: he has found the Golden Age, and it is Christian. It is interesting that Dante the poet creates such a paradise, a creation that exalts his Christian poetic prowess as the solution to pagan pastoral nostalgia.

Although at its climax in the final cantos of *Purgatorio*, Dante's Christian reinvention of the pastoral is evident throughout *The Divine Comedy*. Perhaps one of the most apparent instances is Statius' Christianization of Virgil's writings. Upon meeting Virgil and Dante, but before knowing their identities, Statius begins to heap praises upon the writings of Virgil (*Purgatorio* 21.97–136). Statius and Virgil begin talking and Statius, originally a pagan, recounts his conversion. Statius tells Virgil, "through you I was a poet and, through you, / a Christian" (*Purgatorio* 22.73–74). Statius became a Christian because of what he read in Virgil's writings. Here Dante the poet is clearly using Virgil's pastoral writings to serve his Christian ends. However, Dante extends the Christianization beyond the function of Virgil's writing to their actual content. Statius quotes Virgil's fourth Eclogue saying, "The ages are renewed; / justice and man's first time on earth return; / from Heaven a new progeny descends" (*Purgatorio* 22.70–72). According to Mandelbaum, "From early Christian times, these lines . . . were seen as prophesying the birth of Christ—the 'new progeny' who descends 'from Heaven'" (72) to restore mankind" (370). Here Dante posits Virgil as a sort of pre-Christian prophet, and he uses his most pastoral writings, the *Eclogues*, to do it.

Dante's Garden of Eden is filled with rich allegory and symbolism, which draws upon Christian theology to create an overwhelming sense of spirituality. Upon entering the earthly paradise, Dante comes upon a procession. He sees first seven candles that "flamed / more radiantly than the midmonth moon / shines at midnight in an untroubled sky" (*Paradiso* 29.52–54). According to Mandelbaum, "these candlesticks, like the seven lamps of fire burning before the throne in Revelation 4:5, may represent the sevenfold spirit of God" (390).

This biblical allusion creates a profound symbolic sense of meaning in what would otherwise simply be candles. The candles are followed by a procession of “twenty-four elders” that have “wreaths of lilies on their heads” (*Paradiso* 29.83–84). These elders, like the candles, have a greater allegorical significance and represent the twenty-four books of the Old Testament (Mandelbaum 391). Four beasts then appear behind the elders and are a direct reference to the four beasts found within Revelation 4 (Mandelbaum 391). All of this spiritual symbolism culminates in the appearance of the griffon pulling a chariot. The griffon is majestic, and Dante describes him with gold limbs and wings that reach “so high that they were lost to sight” (*Paradiso* 29.112). This magnificent creature, made of man and bird, “is traditionally a symbol of Christ, who possessed both a human and a divine nature” (Mandelbaum 391). The allegory of the procession harkens back to the allegory found within pagan pastoral poetry, but completely outdoes it. Dante’s allegory goes beyond Virgil’s “veiled social and political comment” to the divine (“Pastoral Poetry”). Here Dante has exalted the pastoral allegory.

As we have seen, throughout *The Divine Comedy* Dante subverts the traditional pagan pastoral, with Virgil as its representative, and replaces it with a Christian pastoral. But Dante does not stop there, as had many poets before him; instead, he places himself at the helm of a new poetry. Poggiolo explains that “By giving a new substance to its conventions, and novel meanings to its commonplaces, Dante transfigures not only that ancient fable but also the whole tradition of pastoral poetry” (152). Dante has created a new tradition of poetry. This new tradition is begun with a coronation; when Virgil addresses Dante for the last time he crowns him (*Purgatorio* 27.142). In what seems like the coronation of a new poet laureate, Dante has one of the greatest poets of all time pass the power to him.

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* revolutionized literature, and his Christian reconstruction of the pastoral was a part of that. Suddenly, themes that had so long been pagan took on deep religious meaning. Dante’s Christian symbolism goes beyond exalting Dante as the supreme poet to create a spiritual experience for his readers. Dante the pilgrim does not go through the darkness of Inferno, the penitence of Purgatory, and the glory of Paradise alone; he is accompanied by his reader. In creating such a spiritual experience out of what might otherwise be pagan, Dante surpasses his time. This is why his Christian pastoral matters: he makes an artistic story about Dante the pilgrim into a spiritual journey for the reader.

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