

PRAISING NERO (LUCAN, *DE BELLO CIVILI* 1,33-66)

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A precedent for the strange belief that Elvis Presley is alive and well and living in Peru may be found in the story recounted by Tacitus (*Histories* 2,8-9) that in March 69 BCE Nero was alive and well and living on the island of Cythnus. Obviously, one could love or hate Nero, but one could not ignore him. And as E. Champlin has shown in his recent biography, he remains an endlessly fascinating figure. Nero is described by Champlin as ‘a man of considerable talent, great ingenuity, and boundless energy’ and as ‘a public relations man ahead of his time’¹. Obviously, this is not quite the image most readers have taken away from their reading of our main sources, Cassius Dio, Suetonius and Tacitus, whose accounts amount overall to a grim picture of a mad tyrant. If we look at Suetonius, for example, there is a careful build-up in the description of the emperor’s crimes. Chapter 34 moves from matricide to the murder of his aunt; in 35 his treatment of his relatives is characterized by criminal abuse; in 36 we learn that he was no less cruel outside his household; in 37 he shows no restraint in putting many opponents to death; finally, in 38, he does not even spare the very fabric of the city of Rome and its people as a whole. On a similar note, in the fifteenth book of the *Annals*, after describing the death of Lucan (15,70,1), Tacitus begins chapter 71 thus: *sed compleri interim urbs funeribus, Capitolium victimis*. There is no need to labour the point. Many members of the Roman élite looked on Nero as a monster. How then does one deal with praise of a bad emperor?

* I would like to thank Michael Dewar (Toronto), Ruurd Nauta (Groningen) and Gianpiero Rosati (Udine) for advice of various kinds. Some of the points made here concerning Lucan’s use of Vergil’s *Georgics* were discovered and studied quite independently by Professor Nauta in an unpublished paper first given in 2004 and entitled “*Tweemaal Emathië*”. *Het prooemium van Lucanus en Vergilius’ Landleven*. Professor Nauta informs me that he will publish this paper in due course. It is likely to advance significantly important aspects of our understanding of Lucan’s use of the *Georgics*. I would like also to offer thanks to Valéry Berlincourt and L. Galli Milic, who are currently working on a research project on the intertextuality of Latin poetry based in the University of Geneva; the former is working on Claudian, the latter on Lucan. Their research is funded by the Fond National Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique; their encouragement has been invaluable.

¹ CHAMPLIN 2003, 236.

In an article devoted to a much-discussed passage of Lucan in which Nero is literally praised to the high heavens (1,33-66), M. Dewar has used the expression ‘laying it on with a trowel’ in order to try to get to grips with the rhetoric of excess inherent in ancient praise poetry. He argues that modern readers consistently fail to understand it and the conventions which surrounded its production and reception in imperial Rome². In this paper, I will attempt to survey some recent work on Lucan in order to illustrate the various ways in which scholars deal with the issues arising from the *laudes Neronis*. It will also be argued that appreciation of a pattern of allusion to Vergil is central to the interpretation of the passage in question and that Lucan’s praise of Nero is inextricably bound up with Vergil praising ‘Caesar’ in the first book of the *Georgics*.

The text in question runs as follows and it will be useful to set it out in full at the beginning (1,33-66; ed. Shackleton Bailey):

*quod si non aliam venturo fata Neroni
invenere viam magnoque aeterna parantur
regna deis caelumque suo servire Tonanti* 35
*non nisi saevorum potuit post bella gigantum,
iam nihil, o superi, querimur; scelera ipsa nefasque
hac mercede placent. diros Pharsalia campos
impleat et Poeni saturentur sanguine manes,
ultima funesta concurrant proelia Munda,* 40
*his, Caesar, Perusina fames Mutinaeque labores
accedant fatis et quas premit aspera classes
Leucas et ardenti servilia bella sub Aetna,
multum Roma tamen debet civilibus armis
quod tibi res acta est. te, cum statione peracta* 45
*astra petes serus, praelati regia caeli
excipiet gaudente polo: seu sceptrum tenere
seu te flammigeros Phoebi conscendere currus
telluremque nihil mutato sole timentem
igne vago lustrare iuuet, tibi numine ab omni* 50
*cedetur, iurisque tui natura relinquet
quis deus esse velis, ubi regnum ponere mundi.
sed neque in Arctoo sedem tibi legeris orbe
nec polus aversi calidus qua vergitur Austri,
unde tuam videas obliquo sidere Romam.* 55
*aetheris immensi partem si presseris unam,
sentiet axis onus. librati pondera caeli
orbe tene medio; pars aetheris illa sereni
tota vacet nullaeque obstant a Caesare nubes.*

² DEWAR 1994, 199-211.

tum genus humanum positis sibi consulat armis 60
inque vicem gens omnis amet; pax missa per orbem
ferrea belligeri conpescat limina Iani.
sed mihi iam numen; nec, si te pectore vates
accipio, Cirrhaea velim secreta moventem
sollicitare deum Bacchumque avertere Nysa: 65
tu satis ad vires Romana in carmina dandas.

This extraordinary passage has provoked much scholarly disagreement. For some it is straightforwardly sincere panegyric. For others it is obviously ironic and insincere. For yet others it is simultaneously sincere and insincere or in some sense ambiguous³. In relation to the interpretation of the thrust of the passage as a whole, a number of smaller individual questions have also attracted much attention. Does Lucan describe Nero as obese and having a squint?⁴ What is the relationship between this passage and the rest of the poem, particularly in light of Vacca's testimony that Lucan had a quarrel with Nero which resulted in a ban on his work?⁵ What exactly is Lucan's conception of the cosmic aspects of his praise?⁶ But overall, the essence of the difficulties many have with this passage seems to lie in the fact that its apparent excess and extravagance mean that they cannot take it seriously. Others, however, argue that if ancient praise poetry failed to offer extravagant praise, it simply was not doing its job properly. Obviously, therefore, this passage raises very starkly the problems involved for modern scholars when it comes to interpreting encomium in imperial Latin poetry. The simple question is this: do we know how to read it?

In order to try to find some kind of approach to this fundamental question I would like to take as my starting point M. Dewar's study, one of the most rigorous attempts to come to terms with the critical reaction to Lucan's

³ For surveys of the scholarly reaction see MASTERS 1992, 137 n. 101; DEWAR 1994; RADICKE 2004, 162; ROCHE 2009, 129-130; RIPOLL 2010.

⁴ DEWAR 1994 elegantly traces the tradition, arising from Christian attacks on Nero, that Lucan alludes to the fact that Nero had a squint and was obese. Dewar demonstrates that these claims are simply based on highly partial readings of Suetonius' description of Nero's physique in chapter 51 of his life. Nero is in fact described as being short-sighted and having a thick neck and protruding stomach.

⁵ For many scholars, the easiest explanation of the problem is that our passage is a piece of serious encomium written before the quarrel with Nero; see for example LEBEK 1976, 74-107; DEWAR 1994, 210. But of course many disagree; see for example LEIGH 1997, 24 n. 31; ROCHE 2009, 5-7.

⁶ See ARNAUD 1987 for a detailed attempt to explain precisely what Lucan says about the physical position Nero will adopt in the heavens, arguing that we must imagine a world with Rome at the centre and Nero placed at the top and centre of the sky directly above Rome. He is the cosmokrator, the supreme all-seeing, all-controlling deity, assimilated to the Sun God and the Stoic *anima mundi*. He is also the new god who replaces all the old gods. For Arnaud there is no doubt that Lucan's praise is serious. He argues too for the originality of Lucan's conception and his careful use of various cosmological traditions.

eulogy. As already noted, a fundamental element in Dewar's approach to the passage is his belief that modern readers struggle to come to terms with the rhetoric of exaggeration and excess which characterizes so much ancient encomium, and that it is this failure to connect with some of the fundamental encomiastic strategies employed by the ancients which has led to modern readings which see only irony and insincerity at work. At the end of his paper, however, Dewar discusses what he considers to be the strongest attempt at an ironical reading of the passage, that of Stephen Hinds, who relates Lucan's use of solar imagery in his praise of Nero to the first episode of the second book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and sees significant allusions to the myth of Phaethon, allusions which hint that Nero's reign is disastrous for the Roman world⁷. Dewar is unconvinced by this subtle argument, which works with the idea that the text's surface meaning can be modified by the recognition of the presence of a complex allusion by readers learned enough to spot it. But from a methodological point of view, it is interesting that he has this to say at the end of his paper⁸:

'What I should like to stress, however, is that though the individual arguments adduced by Hinds do not overcome my own scepticism, it is precisely the methodology he applies which I consider most likely to bear fruit.'

In light of this suggestion that the application of Hinds's intertextual approach is the one most likely to open up new ways of looking at the passage, what has recent scholarship had to offer?⁹

In a provocative study of Nero published in 1997, S. Bartsch argues that the fact that Lucan is describing a *civil* war leads to the breakdown of stable categories and distinctions and gives rise to a world of paradox and despair and an inability to choose between the sincere and the fake. Acknowledging that the proem relies upon the ideology of the early imperial régime, she believes that Lucan in fact attempts to push that ideology to its extremes. In doing so, he produces a text that conflates different belief systems and renders standard distinctions inoperable¹⁰. For Bartsch, the reader of the text who cannot make sense of the praise of Nero is necessarily in a position which relates her/him to a Roman citizen faced with the chaotic nature of Neronian Rome, a world in which traditional forms of judgement no longer function. As

⁷ HINDS 1988.

⁸ DEWAR 1994, 211.

⁹ It will be impossible to discuss here all the relevant scholarship. I will concentrate mainly on work which adopts an explicit intertextual approach. For very useful recent surveys of Lucanian scholarship in general see WALDE 2005; HÖMKE - REITZ 2010; DEVILLERS - FRANCHET D'ESPEREY 2010.

¹⁰ See especially BARTSCH 1997, 61-62.

a result, it is impossible to come to a final decision about the true significance of the passage which concerns us.

Also in 1997, M. Leigh published a highly insightful and influential book-length study of Lucan. In his reading of the eulogy of Nero, Leigh lays emphasis on the importance of allusion to Vergil. He compares *B.C.* 1,33-34 and the expression *fata Neroni / invenere viam* to Vergil's use of the expression *fata viam invenient* at *Aeneid* 3,395 and 10,113. These two passages refer to the safe arrival of Aeneas in Italy and his eventual victory, which will in the end lead to the foundation of Rome and the emergence of Augustan Rome from the chaos of civil war. When the comparison is made with Nero, Leigh argues that the point of the allusion to the Vergilian text is that he cannot stand up to this comparison and that he is inadequate to assuming the responsibilities placed upon him by the parallel with the *Aeneid*'s story of Roman history and Augustan triumph. Leigh also sees Vergilian allusion in *B.C.* 1,37-38, *scelera ipsa nefasque / hac mercede placent*, arguing for reminiscence of *Aeneid* 7,317-322, an intertextual connection which equates the crimes and guilt leading to the reign of Nero with the violence unleashed in Latium by Juno and Allecto. In each case, the problem comes when the reader is faced with making sense of the closural trajectories the two poets impose on narratives of chaos and civil war. For Leigh, Lucan uses Vergil's text to suggest that Nero cannot be seen as a resolution of history's woes; what Vergil's *Aeneid* presents as *pax Augusta* is revealed in the *De Bello Civili* as tyranny and the slavery of the Roman people¹¹.

In his now classic 1998 study of intertextuality in Latin poetry, S. Hinds returned to the subject of Lucan's proem¹². From a starting point that seems close to that adopted by S. Bartsch, he states: 'The world of Lucanian epic is a world in which failures of aesthetic and moral consistency are inevitable; and that is precisely Lucan's point.' Hinds then goes on to read *B.C.* 7,454-459 back against the proem. When Lucan there says that the gods do not care for mankind and that mankind gets revenge on them by turning Caesars into gods and swearing by ghosts in the temples, what he is doing is debasing the divine order. On a re-reading of the eulogy of the proem after a reading of 7,454-459, Hinds argues, 'celebration of a Caesar is self-cancelling'.

In yet another book-length study, J.-C. de Nadaï starts from a narratological perspective and tries to establish a difference between the *temps du récit* and the *temps du discours*. He argues for Lucan's creation of a narrating voice which is contemporaneous with the events he is describing, a person he describes as 'un poète fictif'¹³. Obviously, in this way of looking at the text, praise

¹¹ LEIGH 1997, 25-26.

¹² HINDS 1998, 87.

¹³ DE NADAÏ 2000, 33-35.

of Nero on the part of this fictive narrating voice is chronologically impossible. But if we wish to insist that it is the same voice speaking at two different moments, then we must accept that the narrating voice ‘s’est converti entretemps à l’ordre monarchique’¹⁴. In order to explore this idea, de Nadaï turns to the first book of the *Georgics*. Vergil’s prologue, with its extravagant praise of Octavian based on the certainty of his coming apotheosis, has long been seen as a key model for Lucan’s praise of Nero¹⁵. But de Nadaï goes a step further and looks at the closing lines of *Georgics* 1 as well. First of all, he makes the obvious point that at the beginning of the poem the remarkable praise of Octavian implies a post-Actian perspective. But he then goes on to argue that the book’s closing section clearly implies a pre-Actian setting, as Vergil evokes the assassination of Julius Caesar, subsequent civil war and the hope that a young Caesar will turn out to be a saviour for Rome. Hence, in a remarkable example of hysteron proteron, the prologue of *Georgics* 1 contains the answer to the prayer formulated at the book’s close. But even as he imitates Vergil closely, Lucan distances himself from his model, creating instead a strong break (de Nadaï uses the French term ‘rupture’) between the praise of Nero in book 1 and the reality of the death of the Republic at *Pharsalia* in the climactic book 7. In the *De Bello Civili*, there can be no hope of salvation. Once again, therefore, as in the approaches of S. Hinds and M. Leigh, it is through the interpretation of allusion that the apparently sincere eulogy of Nero is destabilized.

It is S. Hinds’s original 1988 study, in which he argued for Lucanian allusion to the myth of Phaethon, that attracts the attention of M. Dinter in an article published in 2005 and entitled ‘Lucan’s Epic Body’. Dinter writes:

‘...despite echoing with reminiscences to Phaethon, Nero’s body is construed as the centre of the universe. By forcing gigantomachic imagery to extremes, the emperors turn into towering giants of cosmic dimensions victorious in gigantomachy and civil war.’

It is interesting from a methodological point of view that Dinter sees the presence of the allusion to Phaethon, but does not seem to see it as having any affect on the presentation of Roman emperors as victors.

The two most recent readings of our passage of which I am aware have been proposed by P. Roche in his 2009 commentary on the first book of the *De Bello Civili* and F. Ripoll in the proceedings of a conference on Lucan held in Bordeaux in 2008 and published late in 2010¹⁶. Roche argues for generic differences between the praise passage and the rest of the poem. For him, ‘the conventionality of Lucan’s language in the panegyric is not the pertinent issue.

¹⁴ DE NADAI 2000, 38.

¹⁵ See for example GETTY 1940 on 33-66; JENKINSON 1974.

¹⁶ ROCHE 2009; RIPOLL 2010.

Rather, it is its removal from a different genre and context and its insertion into a narrative that explicitly contradicts its content¹⁷. Lucan may praise Nero, but Nero ‘inspires a poem tracing the permanent enslavement of a free people and the destruction of the republic’¹⁸. He also argues against the thesis that books 1-3 contain praise of Nero because they were published before the split with the Emperor, which, as noted above, has often been seen as way out of the problem facing us. Finally, Ripoll comes up with an intriguing suggestion, arguing that Lucan can praise Nero in terms which are both sincere and ironic because he sees him as initiating the age which will bring imperial tyranny to an end and thus lead to the restoration of the Roman republic.

All of these studies have in different ways refined our approach to Lucan’s text, but I would like to single out one angle of approach for further discussion, because I believe it is worth reflecting on the methodologies involved in the use of intertextual approaches. In doing so, my aim is simple and limited: to follow up on the approach adopted by Hinds, Leigh, de Nadaï and others whose work on Lucanian intertextuality I do not have time to discuss in detail here, by suggesting yet another intertextual reading. In doing so, I again take as my starting point M. Dewar’s belief that this is the approach most likely to underpin any convincing attempt to puncture the rhetoric of Lucan’s extravagant praise of Nero.

The essential similarities between Lucan’s praise of Nero and Vergil’s praise of Octavian at the opening of the *Georgics* are well known and have been set out clearly in schematic form by J.R. Jenkinson as follows¹⁹:

	VERGIL	LUCAN
Equation or association of Emperor with traditional gods:	28	35f
Choice of divine spheres of influence: including astronomical conceits and vivid, grotesque	25ff	47ff
Astronomical mechanics:	32-35	48-51; 56-57
Where the choice must not fall:	36ff	53ff
Emperor as Poet’s Inspiration:	40	66

It is important to note, however, that there are also present many obvious similarities with the end of *Georgics* 1. All the words marked in the following

¹⁷ ROCHE 2009, 9.

¹⁸ ROCHE 2009, 9.

¹⁹ JENKINSON 1974, 8.

passage reappear in the first 66 lines of Lucan's first book, and this presentation of verbal similarities does not take into account other formal and thematic parallels between the two texts (G. 1,489-492; 505-511)²⁰:

ergo inter sese paribus concurrere telis
Romanas acies iterum videre Philippi; 490
nec fuit indignum superis, bis sanguine nostro
Emathiam et latos Haemi pinguescere campos.

...

quippe ubi fas versum atque nefas; tot bella per orbem, 505
tam multae scelerum facies; non ullus aratro
dignus honos, squalent abductis arva colonis,
et curvae rigidum falces conflantur in ense.
hinc movet Euphrates, ilinc Germania bellum;
vicinae ruptis inter se legibus urbes 510
arma ferunt; saevit toto Mars impius orbe,
ut cum carceribus sese effudere quadrigae,
addunt in spatia, et frustra retinacula tendens
fertur equis auriga neque audit currus habenas.

I believe that the reason for Lucan's imitation of both the start and the end of *Georgics* 1 lies in the fact that he was fully aware of the many connections established by Vergil between the two passages. These are relatively obvious and may be set out very briefly²¹. At the start of his poem Vergil predicts that 'Caesar' (*i.e.* Octavian) will soon become a god and asks for his help in guiding the course of his poem (*da facilem cursum atque audacibus adnue coeptis*, G. 1,40). The passage is extravagantly eulogistic and clearly evokes a post-Actian optimism. At the end of the book, Vergil refers to the death of 'Caesar' (*i.e.* Julius Caesar) and the civil war which followed (*ergo inter sese paribus concurrere telis / Romanas acies iterum videre Philippi*, G. 1,489-490). He then prays, in this civil war context, that another 'Caesar', this time the young Octavian, will save Rome from what seems like the certainty of destruction, as war rages throughout the world (*hunc saltem everso iuvenem succurrere saeclo / ne prohibete*, G. 1,500-501). It is this image of world war which Vergil illustrates in his closing lines, concluding with the brilliant simile of the charioteer struggling to control his horses as they rush out of control in a chariot race (G. 1,512-514, quoted above). This chariot imagery in Vergil's poem has been much discussed. It seems obvious that Vergil, in placing right at the book's

²⁰ Cf. ROCHE 2009, 22 and his rich commentary on individual elements; more generally see PARATORE 1943.

²¹ For fuller discussion see NELIS 2008; NELIS 2010.

close the image of the charioteer incapable of bringing the chariot under control, is clearly recalling the beginning of the book where he refers to his poem as the beginning of a *cursus* (1,40) and aligns his invocation of the gods with the circus ritual of the *pompa circensis*²². Lucan, I believe, was very much alive to this example of Vergilian thematic coherence, and he exploited it in two ways.

First, and more obviously, the Phaethon myth. As already noted, S. Hinds has argued for allusion to the presence of this myth in the description of Nero mounting the chariot of the Sun at B.C. 1,48-50²³. It is noteworthy, therefore, that several scholars have pointed out the implicit presence of the myth of Phaethon at the end of *Georgics* 1, where we have a description of a chariot out of control and the double use of the single name 'Caesar' to refer to both father and son, Julius Caesar and Octavian²⁴. I believe that appreciation of Lucan's allusion to the *Georgics* reinforces Hinds's interpretation of the simultaneous presence of allusion to Ovid. Lucan is in fact drawing on two models in which Phaethon is present, in Vergil rather implicitly and in Ovid quite explicitly. The reader who picks up the reminiscence of these two texts is in a position to make a connection between Nero and Phaethon. But it is precisely at this stage that this knowing reader is faced with the problem of how to interpret the significance of the allusion. Some, with Hinds, interpret Lucan's text as containing images of impending disaster and so equate Nero with Phaethon's disastrous failure. But others have argued that Nero himself deliberately played up his identification with Phaethon and that Lucan here presents him as a new and successful Phaethon²⁵. It is in fact possible to use the text of the *Georgics* to support both interpretations. In itself, the close of the first book has strong hints of impending disaster, with the chariot apparently out of control. But on the other hand, the reader of that poem has already read its prologue and so can also close book 1 with the reassurance that in the end the young saviour prayed for did indeed succeed in bringing the chariot under control. In Vergilian terms, the book's close is rather ambiguous, evoking both danger and safety, war and peace, chaos and order. As a result, it is difficult to control interpretation of allusion to a text which is itself so finely balanced.

This approach may be supported by attempting to interpret related Vergilian allusion in two lines in which Lucan predicts the peace which will accompany Nero's apotheosis (B.C. 1,61-62):

²² See NELIS 2008; NELIS-CLEMENT - NELIS (forthcoming).

²³ HINDS 1988.

²⁴ See for example GALE 2000, 35-36; NELIS 2008, 507.

²⁵ See for example DEWAR 1994, 211; CHAMPLIN 2003, 134-135. On Nero and Phaethon see also AUHAGEN 1999. In general on Nero and 'shining Apollo' see CHAMPLIN 2003, 112-144.

*pax missa per orbem
ferrea belligeri conpescat limina Iani.*

The line-ending *pax missa per orbem* is a direct inversion of *Georgics* 1,505, where Vergil describes a world at war with the words *tot bella per orbem*, also at the end of the hexameter. Subsequently, in line 69, Lucan goes back in time to the causes of civil war which drove peace from the world, an idea which he expresses with the line-ending *pacem excusserit orbi*. Vergil looks at the present reality of war and hopes for a saviour. Lucan first looks forward to Nero's deification and states that it will usher in an era of peace, and then almost immediately goes back to the beginnings of civil war and the driving of peace from the world. *Pax* first fills the *orbis* and then is driven out of the *orbis*.²⁶ A reader who picks up the allusion to the *Georgics* is once again faced with a difficult interpretative balancing act. Given that each is evoked by Vergil, should s/he give priority to the present reality of civil war or to the hope of future peace? And, in historical terms, what temporal perspective must s/he adopt? Vergil's text implies a reading of Roman civil strife during the 40s and 30s BCE from two different perspectives, one that is pre-Actium and one that is post-Actium.²⁷ Lucan both looks forward to peace and back to war. But what reality does the present offer? If it is only Nero's death and subsequent apotheosis which will bring in an age of concord and stability, is his reign to be associated with the chaos and destruction brought about by civil war? Or should the reader ultimately privilege the rhetoric of hope and accept that in both texts the figure of Caesar is indeed the bringer of peace and stability and the worthy recipient of lavish praise?

In the end, it remains extraordinarily difficult to decide what to make of Lucan's praise of Nero. But there is a more important methodological point to be made about the way in which recent scholarship has set about trying to come to a decision. Many modern sensibilities have difficulty in taking seriously the extravagant and highly mannered rhetoric of much ancient encomium and, as a result, seek to find in it destabilizing elements which permit them to offer readings in which mockery and insincerity come to the surface. One widely employed technique which has been used to bolster this approach is the study of highly complex intertextuality. But in this paper I have attempted to draw attention to examples of obvious allusion to Vergil's *Georgics* which seems to offer up no easy way of deciding between what one may usefully,

²⁶ For a reading of these two lines as also including allusion to Empedocles, who is simultaneously Vergil's model at the end of *Georgics* 1, see NELIS (forthcoming 1).

²⁷ This temporal shift is present in the connection between the opening and close of book 1, and it is reinforced even more obviously in the transition from the close of book 2, which ends with mention of war, to the prologue of book 3, which opens with triumphal imagery; see NELIS (forthcoming 2).

if a little simplistically, refer to as encomiastic sincerity and insincerity. The essential point is this, and in the end it is really a restatement of M. Dewar's conclusion: if it is accepted that there is validity in the technique whereby the tracing of allusions to other texts opens up access to further layers of meaning and so to more accurate interpretation, then there is still a lot of systematic work to be done on the intertextuality of the *De Bello Civili* before we can be sure that we are in a position to evaluate fully the meaningful complexities of Lucan's allusive art.

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