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# COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PIERRE BONNARD'S "NUDE CROUCHING IN THE TUB" AND D.H.LAWRENCE'S "GLOIRE DE DIJON ROSES"

Cecilia Acquarone\*

**RESUMEN:** El presente artículo analiza el poema *Gloire de Dijon* del poeta inglés D. H. Lawrence y la obra del pintor francés Pierre Bonnard *Nude Crouching in the Tub*. Se comparan los modos de representación del poeta y el pintor teniendo en cuenta elementos contextuales y estructurales de las obras mencionadas.

**ABSTRACT:**

The present article analyses the poem *Gloire de Dijon* by D. H. Lawrence and Pierre Bonnard's painting *Nude Crouching in the Tub*. Both structural and contextual elements are taken into consideration to compare and contrast the writer's and the painter's modes of representation.

As far as we can go in the history of humanity we find traces of human beings' interest in giving expression to their thoughts and feelings. In ancient Egypt, they managed to do so by combining stylized visual images which were systematized to allow for the traces to acquire symbolical significance. From the inscriptions in the Lausing papyrus as quoted by Kristeva<sup>1</sup>, we can infer how important writing was for the Egyptians.

*Spend the entire day writing with your fingers, and at night, read. Take as your friends the papyrus roll and the palette, for it is more agreeable than one can imagine. Writing, for those who know it, is more adventurous than any other occupation, more agreeable than bread and beer, than clothes and*

*unguents. Yes, it is more precious than an inheritance in Egypt or a tomb in the West.*

The intimate connection between the iconic and the linguistic sign can be traced as far back as hieroglyphs. As other modes of writing developed, iconic and linguistic expressions started to draw apart but they still hold common ground. They are both modes of representation that activate the referential function and fundamentally they mean both at the denotational and the connotational level. Notwithstanding the similarities, each claims distinctive characteristics and superiority in specific domains.

Although a painting and a word are both signs, we must agree that while the icon is a

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thing, a material object, the linguistic sign, as a psychical entity, is immaterial<sup>2</sup>. This fact produces a feeling of greater immediacy in the observer of a painting. Another difference that is often drawn between the iconic and the linguistic is related to the arbitrary nature of language. The acoustic image does not resemble what it represents. The clearest evidence for this argument lies in the fact that the same object can be designated by different linguistic signs: apple, pomme, manzana. The visual image, on the other hand, is often seen as naturally intelligible because of its analogic character: as an icon, it is based on some sort of physical similarity with its referent. This concept which appears at first sight as obvious has been problematized by Barthes<sup>3</sup> when he sustains that no image can ever be purely denotational, that there is always a surplus of meaning usually perceived as the style of the image and which is the result of the culture that produced it. To reproduce an object through drawing or painting demands a number of regulated transpositions which imply a culture and a history (the use of the rules of perspective is a good example). It is in this way that we start to perceive that the iconic is not so natural after all.

Another aspect that offers itself for comparison is the degree of formality of the relations within each system of signs. We know with Saussure<sup>4</sup> that language is a system in which the value of each sign is determined by its relations with other signs in the overall structure. The description of one element in language then requires the consideration of the totality of associative and combinatory relations that constitute the basis of the web. A painting is equally structured on correspondences and contrasts that constitute a particular order characterized by its internal coherence. Every line, every colour will gain significance only in reference to other lines

and colours. A touch of red will shine very bright against a green background but the same touch will be almost lost if next to a field of orange. The same may be sustained about the relation figure-background and about the value of a figure as determined by its size and disposition in space as well as by its relation to other figures in the picture. This means that a picture, the same as a piece of writing, can be analysed as a structured message. A difference stands out here, though, because the practice of language activates an underlying code. The iconic message, on the other hand, uses what Metz calls "un lenguaje" as different from "una lengua"<sup>5</sup>. Language is discontinuous, it is formed up by morphemes and phonemes that articulate themselves in a particular manner following fixed rules. We cannot say the same for painting which is uncodified. Although we can differentiate certain materials as lines and colours, we cannot identify units that can be articulated in a code with relatively fixed and stable semantic and structural value. The fact that linguistic messages are based on a code explains their capacity to make communication possible. This study is not concerned with this fundamental capacity of language but, as mentioned above, with its function as mode of expression. Metz sustains that through the expressive mode, a human being can give out what he has of most different and unique. Expressive messages imply no answer, establish no dialogue but aspire to fusion. This is why a piece of literary writing or a painting imply no dialogue in the sense of exchange of information with the addressee although they may invite co-participation.

Another difference that is often discerned between the linguistic and the iconic refers to the fact that while language is temporal and then lineal, a visual image is spatial and consequently enjoys the privilege of simulta-

neity. The impact of painting is immediate although its effect might vary as a result of a later, more detailed perusal. A literary piece, however short it may be, always requires a period of time for its apprehension as a whole. Ortega y Gasset in “Ensayo de Estética a la Manera de Prólogo”<sup>6</sup> comments on this contrast between the immediacy of art and the durable and immaterial character of literature.

*La narración hace de todo un fantasma de sí mismo, lo aleja, lo traspone más allá del horizonte de la actualidad. Lo narrado es un “fue”, y el “fue” es la forma esquemática que deja en el presente lo que está ausente, el ser de lo que ya no es –la camisa que la sierpe abandona.*

*Pues bien, pensemos lo que significaría un idioma o un sistema de signos expresivos de quien la función no consistiera en narrarnos las cosas sino en presentarnoslas como ejecutándose.*

*Tal idioma es el arte: esto hace el arte.*

The piece above seems to have been written with D. H. Lawrence’s poem “Gloire de Dijon” and Pierre Bonnard’s “Nude Crouching in the Tub”<sup>7</sup> in mind. Our culture has outgrown the hieroglyph for the perfection of an alphabetic system of writing as a means of communication. However, on the verge of the XXIst century, humanity still values expression both through the iconic and the linguistic sign. With an imaginary leap we might superimpose Lawrence’s poem on Bonnard’s picture and create a new hieroglyphic script in which both the iconic and the linguistic played their part.

D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) and Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) are recognized heirs to artistic traditions in the West. They were both

born in the second half of the XIXth century and showed signs of regret for the lost past in a world that underwent an extremely swift transformation in the span of their lifetime. In his writings Lawrence expressed a deeply felt aversion for the changes produced by the Industrial Revolution and looked back nostalgically to the lost rural England. At the same time, his style is traditional insofar as he preferred realism to the major technical experiments that characterized the works of his contemporaries Woolf and Joyce. On the same lines, Bonnard was emotionally tied to the XIXth century. His contemporaries considered him old fashioned for his narrow scope of theme and his commitment to figurism. He eschewed experimentation in form at a time dominated by the influence of cubism. “Nude Crouching in the Tub” (1918) is a painting that shows the deceptive signs of the naturalness of analogy. A naïve view might sustain that there is not much difference between this representation and a photograph. But the trained eye can discover many traces of the presence of an artist giving shape to his material. Bonnard is definitely and obviously choosing which elements from the context to include in his composition as seen by the focal concentration on the figure in the foreground and her immediate surroundings. The use of white and yellow for light, and of blue for shadows stands as a sign for the presence of the artist. The same may be said of the choice of point of view that places the observer above the figure. The rules of perspective are respected and there is artistry in the use of line and colour in the picture. Bonnard’s nude series may appear easy to read but their naturalness, as Barthes sustains of realist fiction in *S/Z*<sup>8</sup>, is only a deception, an instance of the pervasive work of ideology. The same “naturalness” is expressed by Lawrence’s poem fundamentally through the use of *vers libre* of which T.S.Eliot has said “No vers is libre for the man who wants to do a good

job”<sup>9</sup>. The absence of a regular foot and rhyming scheme together with the use of enjambment might confuse us into reading the piece as prose. However, other less obvious devices mark the piece as highly artistic. The idea under scrutiny here is the dichotomy natural/arbitrary as corresponding to iconic/linguistic signs. Conceding we have proved there is arbitrariness (or artistry) in Bonnard’s painting, we can equally show there is naturalness in the poem if we think of Lawrence painting a picture with words. As Wittgenstein says:

*At first sight a proposition-one set out on the printed page, for example-does not seem to be a picture of the reality with which it is concerned. But neither do written notes seem at first sight to be a picture of a piece of music, nor our phonetic notation (the alphabet) to be a picture of our speech. And yet these sign languages prove to be pictures, even in the ordinary sense, of what they represent (Tractatus)<sup>10</sup>.*

The dichotomies that have been analysed prove of little use unless we consider them as instruments to highlight similarities and differences.

Another point of contact between the two artists we are studying is their interest in the world of the mind. Bonnard painted intimate views of domestic life through which he could express his inner world. The intimism of his pictures can be compared to Lawrence’s efforts to describe subjective states of emotion, sensation and intuition in his fictional characters. The fleeting, intimate moment is also the focal point of many of his personal poems written in a confessional style. The feeling of love between a man and a woman could not fail to attract the sensibility of artists like Lawrence and Bonnard.

The latter represented many scenes of illicit love expressed in all its frankness and at the same time rejoiced in painting countless nudes of the wife he loved. There can be no doubt looking at his work that he understood love and the pleasure it can give. “Nude Crouching in the Tub” is based on a photograph of his wife Martha taken by Bonnard at home. The expression of desire and sensuous pleasure is present in the treatment of the figure: the graceful line, the use of bright colour and the play of light on the skin. Bonnard’s interest in the Nabis movement is seen in the use of flat colour surfaces (the yellow and white on the floor which stand as background for the figure). Members of this group believed that colour could by itself express thought and feeling and that a painting had a decorative function to fulfil. The balanced use of bright and dark colours in this nude evokes an atmosphere of joy and pleasure. The dark reds and blues in the pattern of the dressing-table draperies are found in the big tub inside which the figure crouches and they contrast vividly with the bright yellow of the floor.

“Gloire de Dijon” is as much the vehicle of the author’s capacity for expression<sup>11</sup> as Bonnard’s picture. The poem was composed in 1912 in Iking, Germany where David and Frieda lived for some time soon after their elopement. According to Aldington<sup>12</sup> the couple were enchanted by the place and Lawrence “was truly and rapturously happy there”. The author’s joy at fulfilled desire is present in the poem in the choice of lexical elements: *full-blown, Gloire*. The lexemes *linger, watch* and *listen* highlight the attitude of the addresser whose senses are open to absorb any sign coming from his lover while she goes through the motions of having a bath. The description, like Bonnard’s painting, is iridescent with light: *glisten, mellow, golden, glows, yellow, Gloire de Dijon roses,*

*silver*. Sensuous pleasure finds expression not only at the level of the signified. Sounds send a message that is received by the reader though it may not be obvious to the rational mind. The unconscious has other modes of signification below or beyond that of semantics. The recurrence of the voiced, labio-velar semi-vowel /w/ (when, watch, window, white, while, swung, sway, water, wet) is evocative of the sexual drive. Since the sound has double articulation, its production implies a glide from the lips to the back of the mouth. It also implies contact between the lips, vibration of the vocal chords, and an opening up to the musicality of the vowel sounds that follow it. In the same direction it is interesting to notice the over-abundance of the sound combination /ou/ (window, shoulders, mellow, golden, shadow, glows, blown, yellow, roses, fold) with the presence of another glide between two back vowels (we consider here the probable articulation of a native of Northern England since Lawrence came from Nottinghamshire). It is to be noticed too that the sound /u/ is represented in 6 out of 10 instances by the graphic sign “w”. This fact introduces the significance of the visual element to establish a connection between the sets of sounds analysed. The sensations of contact, vibration and opening up to the depths semiotically conveyed in this way are reinforced by profuse repetition of the phonic units in the second stanza: *shoulders, roses, window, golden, shadow, fold, glows, mellow, roses*. Quoting Hachén<sup>13</sup>, “...*el inconsciente (...) se manifiesta con la primera marca que se dibuja sobre el blanco de la hoja*”.

To return to the comparison of the poem and the painting, it is evident that both make prominent use of light. Bonnard can be considered a post-impressionist and as such he recognized the revolutionary impact of that movement and explored new aesthetic ideas connected with the use of light and colour.

He retained the impressionists’ broken-colour technique to capture the light and atmosphere of the fleeting moment, but unlike these painters he exaggerated and distorted natural colour to express mood. In Bonnard’s paintings, white and bright colours become sources of light. In “Nude Crouching in the Tub”, the white and yellow on the floor constitute focal points because of the high vibration of these colours (let’s remember here that white is the result of the combination of all the colours of the spectrum). The crouching figure is perceived as being one together with this background: there are no clear linear contours and the colours are the same in both cases except for blue and red that are used for the shadows. It is also interesting to notice here that even the shaded areas partake of light. Shadows are traditionally marked with the use of cool colours like blue. Here, though, a glowing red is used for this purpose. Light floods the scene denying corporeal solidity as well as making the border line between figure and background fuzzy. The whole picture shimmers with sunlight. Bonnard’s explorations in the representation of matter are surprisingly similar to the postulates of Einstein’s theory of relativity (1905). Was the painter aware of his contemporary’s investigations? Relativity theory has taught us that the division between mass and energy, traditional in Newtonian physics cannot be sustained. We can no longer speak of individual, compact, solid objects but of patterns of energy. Objects are not static but dynamic patterns that interact with their environment constituting a “dynamic web of inseparable energy patterns”<sup>14</sup> functioning in a four-dimensional, space-time continuum. The idea of empty space disappears in this conception of the universe as a vast web of related patterns of energy. In these relations, the observer takes up a fundamental role:

*The human observer constitutes the final link in the chain of observational processes, and the properties of any atomic object can be understood only in terms of the object's interaction with the observe (...)*

*In modern physics, the universe is thus experienced as a dynamic, inseparable whole which always includes the observer in an essential way. In this experience, the traditional concepts of space and time, of isolated objects, and of cause and effect, lose their meaning<sup>15</sup>.*

According to Watkins<sup>16</sup>, by studying Japanese prints, Bonnard discovered “that patterns of colour could generate energy”. This is what he does in the painting under scrutiny. The draperies on the dressing table in the upper right-hand corner of the canvas compete for attention with the human figure and both elements are connected in an overall pattern through the use of colour (the yellow and ochre in the figure also contain red and blue for the shadows as already pointed out). The connections established between the nude, the draperies and the background produce an effect of one-ness from which the observer is not excluded. His presence is felt through at least two means. Firstly, the composition highlights the point of view by placing it not at the same level as the figure but above it. Secondly, the painter's feelings for the figure filter the scene and find expression in his treatment of the nude. Light here stands for life, warmth and feeling. Space in the painting is traversed by experience and hence by time. By projecting the contents of his mind on the canvas, the painter is depicting a phenomenological world in which outside objects are permeated by emotion and placed in a domain that, like the mind, operates both in time and space.

D. H. Lawrence, it should be remembe-

red, was not only a writer but also a practising painter. As such he could not fail to recognize the importance of the French Impressionists' contribution. This fact is seen in Lawrence's significant use of sensory perception in his writings and in his symbolic use of light and darkness for the purpose of expressing the deepest recesses of the mind. In the poem we are analysing there is a text exhaustive<sup>17</sup> semantic chain referring to light which includes nouns, verbs and adjectives (*sunbeams, Gloire de Dijon roses, sunlight; glistening, glows, glisten; white, mellow, golden, yellow*). Incidentally, all these words could be used to describe Bonnard's painting, including *Gloire de Dijon roses* since the expression is chosen because of the yellow of the flowers. Another outstanding resemblance is to be found in the mode of representation of light and shadow. In the poem we read, *sunbeams catch her glistening white on the shoulders*, and in Bonnard's painting we observe white dabs on the head, left shoulder, arm and knee of the female figure. *While down her sides the mellow golden shadow glows*, we can observe the same effect on the front of the left arm of Bonnard's figure. The importance of light in the poem is reinforced by repetition of key terms: *golden, glows, mellow, window, glisten*. There are two elements belonging to the context of the situation described in the poem which also imply light, namely, *window* and *morning*. The theme of light in the poem has its denouement on line 6 of the second stanza: “Concentrates her golden shadow”. On a first reading, the subject matter of the poem seems simple enough. As in Bonnard's painting, the addresser is observing a woman having a bath and rejoices in the scene. But as we analyse the poem in detail we discover ambiguities that complicate this initial interpretation. The description of the female figure starts on the third line of the first stanza (*She spreads the bath-cloth...*)<sup>18</sup>. This is the

first case of a series of main clauses with **she** as a subject and placed in initial position. The others are: *She stoops...*, *She drips...* Line 3 of the second stanza reverses this regularity by introducing a transposition of the NP-VP pattern in: *Concentrates her golden shadow*. This phrase appears as foregrounded since it is structurally deviant against the norm imposed by the context of the poem. If we analyse these verbal phrases as forms of representation<sup>19</sup> we see that while those in the background represent material processes (*spreads, stoops, drips*), the one foregrounded poses a problem. Is *concentrates* a material or a mental process? The semantic content of the term refers us to both a way of experiencing and a physical process. As to the first, there is no doubt that the frame of mind of the addresser is of concentration on the figure described. His senses are intent on what the woman does, on the sounds she makes and on how she looks. As to the physical process, it has to do with focusing. Under “focus”, the Webster dictionary reads: “a point at which rays converge or from which they diverge or appear to diverge”. Since the poem is so intimately related to the theme of light, this reading seems perfectly natural too. Going back to line 6, second stanza, we notice the subject *the shadow*. Semantically speaking, is it animate or inanimate? Again, as with the kind of process, it is very difficult to decide since it doesn’t have a life of its own but it shares in the life of the *she* who casts it. Should we interpret *the shadow* as an actor and then the source of a process or as a phenomenon in a mental process clause? The difficulty in answering this question makes for the undecidability of the ideas expressed, for uncertainty and open-endedness. Line 6 is deviant syntactically and semantically. At the same time, the *golden shadow* is also anomalous pictorially speaking since as we have seen shadows are traditionally marked by cool shades of colour.

Another device to be considered in lines 6 and 7 is the metaphor by which the writer compares the female figure to the Gloire de Dijon roses. In the rest of the poem the comparison has been explicit through the use of similes: *like full-blown yellow Gloire de Dijon roses, as mellow as the glory roses*. In the line here analysed, the tenor and the vehicle fuse into one: *concentrates her golden shadow fold on fold*. This semantic combination, applied to the shadow, creates a new being which is both human-non-human, animate-inanimate. The whole poem can be read as dealing with the question of the borderline between the inside and the outside and the difficulty of defining a frontier which is always receding. The observer of the scene is present in the verbs: *linger, watch, listen*, so that the reader should have no doubt that this scene is filtered through a definite point of view which will inevitably tinge the final picture. His gaze lingers on her body and the image created seems to be as much outside, by the window, as inside him, incorporated by his senses. This effect is reinforced by the dual use of similes and metaphors in the poem. The window is a good image for the dilemma of the border. Not surprisingly a window is found in the poem. If the window is full of sunlight, her shadow is golden and glows as mellow roses, can we really determine the difference between light and shadow or between the figure and her shadow? We see how borders disappear and opposites fuse. In fact, if on reading the poem we try to build a picture in our mind, we see that the elements, all practically of the same colour, blend to the point we cannot discern which is which. This phenomenon of sameness is reflected in the use of repetition of certain lexemes and phonemes. The recurrence of this device creates extremely prominent and intricate patterns of relations in the poem. The world that Lawrence depicts is as phenomenological as Bonnard’s. Both artists are

equally concerned with the complex issues of perception and representation in a world permeated by the concept of the universe as a web of relations between the individual and his/her surroundings.

The issue of time as inherent to the linguistic sign is also present in the poem. The metonymic series of material processes bears witness to progression in time and to the question of duration in the decoding process. However, and following the precepts of the Imagist poets, Lawrence aspires to represent the instant. He attempts this by the conciseness of the poem and the use of semantic concentration in metaphor. Lawrence was praised by the Imagist Ezra Pound for his modern use of images, but language can never achieve the miraculous immediacy of art. It is as if it had been left to Bonnard to realize Lawrence's dream as a writer, a dream shared by Hélène Cixous who expressed it in beautiful poetic prose much after D. H. Lawrence's death:

*I would like to write like a painter.  
I would like to write like painting.*

*The way I would like to live. Maybe  
the way I manage to live, sometimes.  
Or rather the way it is sometimes given  
to me to live, in the present absolute....Ah! if I were Monet. I would fill  
your house with mimosas, with wisteria,  
with poppies. With palm-trees.  
With straw. Only their fragrance would  
be missing.*

*I write. But I need the painter to  
give a face to my words. First of all, I  
write; then you must paint what I've  
said to you<sup>20</sup>.*

#### Gloire de Dijon Roses

1. When she rises in the morning,
  2. I linger to watch her;
  3. She spreads the bath-cloth underneath the window
  4. And the sunbeams catch her
  5. Glistening white on the shoulders,
  6. While down her sides the mellow
  7. Golden shadow glows as
  8. She stoops to the sponge, and her swung breasts
  9. Sway like full-blown yellow
  10. Gloire de Dijon roses.
1. She drips herself with water, and her shoulders
  2. Glisten as silver, they crumple up
  3. Like wet and falling roses, and I listen
  4. For the sluicing of their rain-dishevelled petals.
  5. In the window full of sunlight
  6. Concentrates her golden shadow
  7. Fold on fold, until it glows as
  8. Mellow as the glory roses.

D. H. Lawrence

## EPILOGUE

Given the richness and complexity of the subject here studied, this work can only offer a very partial and restricted view of both the painting and the poem under scrutiny. I am afraid the reader, like myself, will be left with more hunger than satiety after going through these brief pages.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> KRISTEVA, Julia. *Language the Unknown*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 63.
- <sup>2</sup> SAUSSURE, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). New York, Bally and Sechehaze, Philosophical Library, 1959, p. 13.
- <sup>3</sup> BARTHES, Roland. "Myth Today" in SONTAG Susan (Ed). *Barthes, Selected Writings*. New York, Fontana Paperbacks, 1983, p. 106.
- <sup>4</sup> SAUSSURE. Op. cit., p. 94.
- <sup>5</sup> METZ, Christian. "El Cine, Lengua o Lenguaje?" en *Comunicaciones* N° 4, Bs As., La semiología Ed., 1974. From this point on I will translate the term "lengua" in Metz as "language" and "lenguaje" as "mode of expression".
- <sup>6</sup> In ORTEGA Y GASSET, José. *La Deshumanización del Arte y otros ensayos de Estética*. Barcelona, Planeta - Agostini, 1985, p. 163.
- <sup>7</sup> This oil on canvas was painted in 1918 and is to be found in a private collection in Paris. We therefore direct the reader to a reproduction published in Nicholas Watkins' *Interpreting Bonnard. Colour and Light*. New York, Steward Tabori and Chang, 1997.
- <sup>8</sup> BARTHES, Roland. *S/Z*. London, Cape, 1975.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted by Pound in his essay "A Retrospect" in SCULLY James (Ed) *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*. London, Collins, 1971.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted by MITCHELL, W.J.T. *Iconology*. Chicago, U. of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 20.
- <sup>11</sup> METZ. Op. cit.
- <sup>12</sup> ALDINGTON, Richar.: *Portrait of a Genius, But...*, Heinemann, London, 1950, p. 117.
- <sup>13</sup> HACHÉN, Rodolfo. "La Escritura en la Encrucijada de la Negación y la Corrección", *Revista de Letras* N° 7. Rosario, Facultad de Humanidades y Arte, U. N. R., 2000.
- <sup>14</sup> CAPRA, Fritjof. *The Tao of Physics*, London, Bantan New Age Books, 1980, p. 69.
- <sup>15</sup> CAPRA. Op. cit. p. 57 and 70.
- <sup>16</sup> WATKINS, Nicholas. *Interpreting Bonnard*. New York, Steward, Tabori and Chang, 1997, p. 38.
- <sup>17</sup> HALLIDAY and HASAN. *Language, Context and Text*. Oxford, OUP, 1991.
- <sup>18</sup> This observation is marked by Ann Cluysenaar in her analysis of Lawrence's poem in *Introduction to Literary Stylistics*.

London, Batsford, 1976.

<sup>19</sup> HALLIDAY M.A.K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. U. K, Edward Arnold, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> CIXOUS, H. "The last painting or the Portrait of ..." in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*. U.S.A, Harvard U. P, 1991.

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