SCOTTISH NATIONALISM AND THE COLONIAL VISION OF SCOTLAND

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Gaelic culture

Hugh MacDiarmid

Scotland

Scottish nationalism

This essay examines the recent use of postcolonial theory in relation to Scottish literature in order to scrutinize a tendency to designate Scotland as an English colony. It suggests that the basis for this analysis lies in the supposed cultural effects of the British union rather than in its materialist history, which raises questions about the suitability of a colonial model. In tracing the contours of such an analysis, this essay identifies strong similarities between the explanations offered by modern literary criticism and those proposed by early twentieth-century nationalists in their effort to elaborate Scotland as a culturally discrete political entity. On the basis of these similarities, this paper concludes that the attempt to identify Scotland as a colony serves to reproduce the essentialist models of nationality which the early nationalist readings of Scotland contained.

In a recent issue of *Interventions*, Ellen-Raïssa Jackson and Willy Maley argue for a comparative approach to Scottish and Irish writing on the basis of a common history of English colonization (Jackson and Maley 2002). While a comparative approach is amply justified by the profound similarities between Scottish and Irish modernists, the Irish precedents for Scottish linguistic

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experimentation, and the different attitudes towards linguistic hybridity that Jackson and Maley persuasively identify, the suggestion that these comparisons have their basis in a colonial history seems more contentious. The authors conclude their essay by suggesting that, despite cultural differences between Scotland and Ireland, the common fact of English 'cultural hegemony' makes a comparison between these countries a pressing concern. This claim is expressed in explicitly colonial terms when they argue that 'in this particular comparative context there are very good historical and political reasons for a deferred or interrupted dialogue between two cultures intimately estranged by precisely what ties them together – colonialism' (ibid.: 76–7) This argument is problematic, tending to perceive 'colonialism' as an easily defined systemic practice rather than as *ad hoc* and heterogeneous processes of settlement and economic extraction. There is no attempt by Jackson and Maley to explain what these processes looked like in Scotland or how they may resemble the corresponding forms of economic exploitation in Britain's more readily identified colonies. Moreover, their essay offers little that indicates how Scottish cultural patterns can be traced back to this supposed history of colonization. The only evidence that Jackson and Maley provide in support of the notion that Scotland was colonized is a quotation from Hugh MacDiarmid to the effect that a homogeneous British nationalism was a necessary condition for British imperialism; a claim that does not do the work that they demand of it (ibid.: 69). The type of national incorporation which MacDiarmid identifies is not obviously the same as the racially coded expansion upon which British imperialism was based, a feature which is much more evident in the racialization of the Irish than in discourses of a British union between England and Scotland. If a similar racial language was applied to the Scottish Highlands, the union of Scotland and England was resolutely not founded upon this principle (Chapman 1978; Davidson 2000). Despite this, Jackson and Maley treat the idea that Scotland was an English colony as axiomatic throughout their essay.

In response to this assertion, the present essay will argue that the belief that England colonized Scotland is unhelpful for a proper conception of either colonization or Scottish history. In briefly sketching the anti-materialist and anti-historical nature of such claims, this essay will suggest that the origins of a colonial model of Scottish history are found in the emergence of a political Scottish nationalism in the 1920s, which successfully reconceived Scotland as irreducibly discrete from England along conventionally nationalist lines. In doing so, this essay will also suggest that Jackson and Maley's elaboration of the idea that Scotland was an English colony relies upon two key rhetorical manoeuvres: a suppression of the material conditions of Scottish development in favour of a concentration upon the cultural aspects of Scottish modernization, and a conflation of the suppression of Gaelic culture in the Scottish Highlands with the standardization of Scottish

anglophone culture. These two features can be seen to be central to the many attempts to apply a colonial analysis to Scotland, but, crucially, they can also be seen to be hallmarks of an early Scottish nationalist politics which, in the context of apparent cultural similarities between Scotland and England, needed to construct modes in which a fundamental cultural division between these countries could be identified.

The assertion that Scotland was an English colony is not favourably supported by historical evidence which suggests that Scots retained considerable control over the process of modernization affecting Scotland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although colonization has proven surprisingly difficult to define, one of its constant features is the transfer of control over social organization from the indigenous population to the colonial power. While the union of the parliaments in 1707 may appear to be evidence of this tendency, with a single English-dominated parliament deciding legislation for Britain as a whole, the persistence of autonomous Scottish legal and religious institutions meant that Scots retained considerable control over the way that Scotland was governed. After the union of 1707, and increasingly after 1746 when the threat of Catholic revolt had been suppressed, the level of autonomy in Scotland was comparatively high relative to many of the minor nations of Europe (Paterson 1994). The retention of powerful civic institutions insulated Scotland from the influence of a unionist parliament whose involvement in the routine government of the British population remained extremely limited by contemporary standards. The role of the Church of Scotland in local administration at the level of the parish, and as a sort of proxy parliament in the form of the General Assembly, far outweighed the role of the parliament in London. Crucially, the distinctiveness of Scottish ecclesiastical and legal professions also diminished competition from English clergy and lawyers, ensuring a continuing security for these Scottish professions. Similarly, Scotland produced a relatively large professional class in occupations such as engineering and medicine whose members often found employment abroad. While Oxford and Cambridge produced only 500 medical doctors between the years 1750 and 1850, Scottish universities produced 10,000, many of whom went to work in England as well as in the British colonies (Colley 1992: 123; Davidson 2000: 94). At an administrative level, Scots also continued to find positions at the highest level of government, both in Britain's colonies and, significantly, within Britain itself. For instance, from 1785 to 1786, 1807 to 1813, and 1847 to 1856, as well as for a six-month period in 1823, the Governor General of India was a Scot. More importantly in respect of the claim that Scotland was colonized by England, Scots have been elected to represent English and Welsh constituencies in the British parliament from the eighteenth century onwards, including sixty MPs between 1760 and 1790 (Colley

1992: 49). This situation has continued to the present day, where Britain currently has a prime minister born and educated in Scotland, as well as a Chancellor of the Exchequer, a Northern Ireland Secretary, a Secretary of State for Transport, a Lord Chancellor, a Leader of the House of Commons and a Scottish Secretary who are all Scots (The Labour Party 2002).

In sharp distinction to the usual pattern of colonization, then, Scots have found it relatively easy to enter into the elite classes in fairly large numbers. Obviously, many Scots did not benefit in such ways, but the marker of exclusion was class rather than nationality. The impulse to read it otherwise derives from a nationalist desire to represent both Scotland and England as internally coherent antagonists so as to emphasize their cultural distinctiveness more completely. Jackson and Maley's vision of Scotland's colonization is representative of this tendency and, as such, proves fairly resistant to a materialist analysis of Anglo-Scottish relations. A single reference to 'England's absentee landlordism' in the final paragraph turns out to be a 'linguistic' metaphor rather than a 'political' diagnosis, avoiding any real account of who owned Scottish land or in what sense they were English. This is consistent with their concentration on England's supposed '*cultural* hegemony'; a concentration which treats England as an undifferentiated totality and which sidesteps a materialist analysis by implying an equivalence between English forms of culture and the material advantages of political union. There are obvious problems with this reading of Scottish history. First, its notion of culture is an extraordinarily narrow one, excluding both the Scottish culture of university education, which produced the doctors and engineers who dominated these professions in England, and that of political participation, which led to the large number of Scottish MPs in English constituencies. Second, the desire to read cultural standardization on its own as evidence of Scotland's colonization cannot easily accommodate the presence of similar standardizing processes within England itself. The growth of standard English has been particularly emblematic for advocates of a colonial view of Anglo-Scottish relations, seeming to signal the degree to which Scottish cultural particularity was eroded by a centralizing national (i.e., British) language variety. However, as centuries-old complaints about the loss of local cultural variety in England prove, the development of a national standard has been a process that has also widely affected much of England. The structures of 'cultural hegemony' that this indicates are not clearly explained by a colonial model. Cultural standardization within Britain as a whole is more plausibly explained by the increasing need for repeatable skills within an emerging system of capitalism. As a feature of modernization, the structures of authority that are at play are more persuasively explained using the language of class than of colonialism.

The comparative analysis between Scotland and Ireland that Jackson and Maley propose focuses upon Scotland's supposed marginality within the

British political economy and disguises the similarities between Scotland and England. Revealingly, this comparison appears to have its origins in a consciously nationalist analysis of Scotland that dates from the early years of the twentieth century. These nationalist narratives have had a strong afterlife in Scottish literary studies because the concept of Scottish literature is deeply marked by the belief in an essential division between English and Scottish culture. The emergence of Scottish literature as a discursively coherent category was roughly contemporaneous with the emergence of a political Scottish nationalism. Partly as a result of this, the study of an explicitly nationalist twentieth-century Scottish writing, and the retrospective constitution of writing by Scots into a coherent national tradition, have played a strong part in encouraging nationalist interpretations of Scottish history within Scottish literary studies. This is emblematically demonstrated by Jackson and Maley's assertion of the 'Celtic connections' between Scotland and Ireland which, as a narrative of Scottish history, can be traced directly to the writing of the Scottish Literary Renaissance movement and of the early nationalist organizations in the 1920s and 1930s.

Since the nineteenth century, Scottish literature has closely mirrored a shifting semantics for the concept of a national literature. Prior to the 1880s the definition of national literatures was principally linguistic, whereby, for example, German literature was understood to be the literature in the German language rather than by members of the German people. Accordingly, the term 'Scottish literature' was routinely used as a synonym for literature in Scots, a Scottish dialect-form of Anglo-Saxon. Editions of Douglas's *Aeneid* from the middle of the sixteenth century frequently described themselves as a translation of Virgil into the 'Scottish', rather than the Scots, tongue (Virgilius 1553, 1710, 1839). Likewise, it was only during the 1880s that surveys and anthologies of 'Scottish poets' or 'Scottish literature' first began to be published (Edwards 1880–97; Murdoch *c.* 1890; Walker 1893). There is further evidence to suggest that the routine use of the term 'Scottish literature' to refer to a distinct national tradition dated from the early years of the twentieth century. If the introduction to J. H. Millar's *Literary History of Scotland* describes itself as 'a record of Scottish literature', his bibliography includes no work which employs the term 'Scottish literature' in its title (1903: vii). Similarly, a *Glasgow Herald* review of Gregory Smith's *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (Gregory Smith 1919) argued that it attempted 'to give for the first time a general impression of the habits and process of Scottish literature' (*Glasgow Herald* 1919). When T. S. Eliot reviewed the same work, his titular question, 'Was there a Scottish literature?', indicates that real doubts existed over whether Scotland possessed a literature in its own right (1919). At around the same time as these conceptual developments, in 1913, the first university department of

Scottish literature was founded: Glasgow University's 'Department of Scottish History and Literature'. Although the texts that this department taught differed little from the texts by Scottish authors taught in Edinburgh University's 'Department of Rhetoric and English Literature', the organization of these texts around the concept of Scottish literature represented a genuine reconceptualization of what these texts could be felt to constitute. Discursively, at least, the study of these texts within this new context allowed them to signify the presence of a continual and discrete national tradition of literature as well as whatever particular content they may possess.

This process of semantic change around the term Scottish literature was the, often ignored, cultural context for the Scottish Renaissance movement, characterized by the work of writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, whom Jackson and Maley discuss. In using these writers as evidence of Scotland's response to 'colonialism', their analysis skims over the extent to which the participation of these writers in the evolving semantics of Scottish literature involved a nationalist-inspired reconfiguration of Scotland's political settlement in ways that permitted a colonial reading of Scottish history that had previously been impossible. The emergence of a nationalist politics in Scotland from the 1880s, a process which escalated dramatically after 1918, can be seen to have enacted a rewriting of Scotland similar to the discursive shift involved in the emergence of Scottish literature as a serviceable category. The 1880s witnessed significant changes in Scotland's political administration, notably through the formation of the Scottish Office in 1885, which performed the dual role of centralizing political administration within Scotland and, simultaneously, formalizing Scotland's political separateness from the rest of the United Kingdom. The fact that the first identifiably nationalist organization, the Scottish Home Rule Association (SHRA), was formed in the following year gives some measure of the discursive impact that such a move achieved.

The developments of these two movements – the political and the literary – can be seen to revolve in dialectical relation to one another. The assertion of a coherent tradition of Scottish literature required the conception of a politically discrete Scottish nation for its realization but, in attempting to fill the political term 'Scottish' with an aesthetic content, it also stood as the repetitive iteration of Scotland's national unity and cultural distinctiveness, a process that made Scotland's independence more easily imagined. Unsurprisingly, then, both movements made comparable attempts to redefine Scottishness against a perceived English dominance. In the present context it is interesting to note that the attempts of both these movements produced arguments that sought to elaborate a colonial interpretation of Scotland and to link Scotland to Ireland as culturally proximate victims of English domination. It may have been this double articulation of these ideas that led to the conflation of Scotland's material development with its supposed cultural

subordination to England. The first nationalist organization to explicitly identify a colonial relationship between Scotland and England was the Scots National League (SNL). Founded in 1920, this organization has been identified as 'the most important' of the interwar nationalist organizations 'with regard to the development of Scottish nationalist philosophy' in the post-war era (Finlay 1994: 29). This movement's origins were in the Highland Land League and the turn-of-the-century Gaelic cultural organizations, associations that led to a ready identification with the Irish independence movement and to the championing of Gaelic culture within Scotland itself. These affiliations led to the SNL's elaboration of a colonial interpretation of Anglo-Scottish relations in an attempt to explain the neglect of Celtic culture within Scotland (ibid.: 35–7). However, these claims lacked a firm historical basis and led the SNL to extrapolate the suppression of the Gaelic language in the Scottish Highlands to the whole of Scotland.

If the SNL's vision of Scotland as a colony looked to an idealized Celtic prehistory, the major literary version was subtly different although it contained many similar elements. In many accounts of the Scottish Renaissance, its main achievement is regarded as the 'rediscovery of linguistic resources' through the renewed use of Scots as a poetic medium (Crawford and Imlah 2000: xxiii–xxiv). However, the use of Scots during this period was not purely revivalist and, in the work of its chief exponent Hugh MacDiarmid, combined neologisms with an obscure archaic vocabulary to produce a new synthetic language-variety. This is clearly a version of the linguistic hybridity that Jackson and Maley identify, and MacDiarmid himself was keen to dispel any limited interpretation of the Scottish Renaissance as purely a linguistic revival, arguing that a more thorough reconfiguration of Scotland was the movement's main objective (MacDiarmid 1997 [1929]: 160–69). Nevertheless, no matter how modernist his version of linguistic diversity was, being deeply rooted in Spenglerian notions of cultural decline (Grieve 1927: 6; MacDiarmid 1995 [1926]: 95–103, 1931: 598), MacDiarmid's advocacy of linguistic experimentation was frequently expressed in markedly revivalist terms. Tellingly, this was often the product of an explicit comparison between Ireland and Scotland which closely mirrored the Celtic revivalism of the SNL's propaganda. For instance, in his canonical essay 'English ascendancy and British literature' MacDiarmid argued:

> Ireland after a protracted struggle has won a considerable measure of autonomy; Scotland and Wales may succeed in doing the same; but what is of importance to my point in the meantime is that, in breaking free (or fairly free) politically, Ireland not only experienced the Literary Revival associated with the names of Yeats, 'A.E.', Synge and the others, but has during the past half century recovered almost entirely her ancient Gaelic literature. (MacDiarmid 1931: 594)

This quotation clearly demonstrates why critics have been keen to identify MacDiarmid's nationalist polemic as an early expression of a cultural postcolonialism: his suggestion that the recovery of an indigenous culture is at least as necessary as political autonomy closely resembles the calls for cultural decolonization that have become so familiar to postcolonial studies. As expressed here, however, the revival of Gaelic as the 'ancient' expression of Irish culture suggests a problematic retreat towards traditionalism, of the sort critiqued by Fanon in 'On national culture' (1967: 176–9). As such, its expression places it at odds with the portrait of hybrid modernist idioms with which MacDiarmid is usually associated (Jackson and Maley 2002: 70). The identification with Irish Gaelic-revivalism was a feature of MacDiarmid's critical writing that owed a good deal to his friendship with the SNL's Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar, who believed in the 'racial cohesiveness' of the Irish and Scottish nations (Finlay 1994: 31). Accordingly, MacDiarmid's complaint about the dominance of English constantly employs the languages of origins and essence. English has, he claims, 'lost its native rhythms and joined itself to strange gods', becoming incapable of addressing 'certain important moral and psychological directions and incapable of dealing with certain types of experience'. By contrast, 'in Gaelic literature, the ancient technique, even the tone, is practically unchanged; the comparison is with the changed English present and the unchanged Gaelic present' (MacDiarmid 1931: 596, 600–1).

Clearly, then, in this essay MacDiarmid displayed a particularly naive belief in the possibility of recovering a pristine Gaelic culture, and in the immutability of that culture, in ways that seem inimical to the sort of cultural hybridity which characterizes much postcolonial theory and which Jackson and Maley use to support a postcolonial reading of Scotland. Nevertheless, his position remains distinct from the SNL's vision of Scottish colonization because, whereas they depicted Scotland as a Celtic nation uniformly affected by the suppression of Gaelic, MacDiarmid differentiates between a Gaelic and non-Gaelic Scotland, although he sees both 'Gaelic and dialect literatures' as similarly marginalized by a history of 'sorry [English] imperialism' (1931: 594–5). This equation between Gaelic and Scots culture can be seen as an important component in the wider acceptance of a colonial model for Scottish history. Although there is now a popular association with Gaelic elements of Scottish culture, at the start of the twentieth century it was by no means certain that Lowland Scots would identify with Gaelic culture or themselves as Celtic. As an illustration of this it is worth noting that conservative nationalists like Andrew Dewar Gibb of the Scottish Party and the journalist G. M. Thomson were hostile to an apparent emphasis on Gaelic culture within Scottish nationalism, an emphasis they associated with a radical politics and with an Irish community towards which they were openly hostile (Finlay 1994: 94; Gibb 1930; Thomson 1927). Such views accorded to a Whig interpretation of Scottish history which saw Gaelic culture as the

degenerate alternative to Anglo-Saxon progress. By painting the fate of Lowland and Highland cultures as the same, MacDiarmid did not go so far as the SNL in requiring Lowland Scots to claim Gaelic culture as their own. Instead, the logic of his argument was that the fate of Lowland Scots' own native culture, a culture of dialect alternatives to English, was marginalized in comparable ways to Gaelic culture by an overpowering and historically doomed English cultural standard. The history of an active suppression of Gaelic culture therefore becomes the model for the supposed suppression of Scots culture, and an alliance of Scots and Gaelic becomes the most profitable route for diminishing the influence of English culture on Scottish life (MacDiarmid 1931: 600).

MacDiarmid's contribution to the invention of an integrated and discrete Scottish literature included the incorporation of both Gaelic and dialect elements into the national corpus. Yet bringing together these two elements necessarily involved wiping away an evident history of Lowland hostility towards Gaelic culture in order to pose English cultural dominance as a unifying metanarrative for Scottish history. As pointed out by the historian Neil Davidson, this collapsing of the difference between Highland and Lowland cultural history has been a frequent strategy for elaborating a colonial model for Scotland. This involves transforming a Highland/British opposition into a Scottish/English one. As Davidson argues, such a transformation reinterprets the historical relations between the Lowlands, the Highlands and the British state in order to present the actions of Scots themselves as part of the English dominance of Scotland. For example, interpreting events such as the Highland Clearances as part of a history of English colonization ignores the extent to which they were 'carried out at the behest of Scottish landowners, organised by their Scottish factors and, where necessary, enforced by Scottish police or Scottish regiments' (Davidson 2000: 102–5). Such revisionism is necessary because, in the absence of clear material evidence of Lowland colonization by England, a colonial model of Scottish history depends upon a generalization of certain exceptional instances of Highland oppression as the normal experience of Scotland as a whole. It needs acknowledging, also, that this act of appropriation of a Celtic history by Lowland Scotland closely resembles the incorporation of Scotland into a singular British entity. These two events cannot easily be distinguished using a language of power or hierarchy since Lowland Scotland has clearly maintained a position of cultural, political and economic dominance over the Highlands. The main way in which they can be distinguished, then, is to appeal to an essentialist nationalism which judges the apparently exogenous modernization of the Highlands by Lowland Scotland as an endogenous history of national development. This move neatly mirrors the effects of a colonial analysis of Anglo-Scottish relations which must insist that the modernization of Scotland was the exogenous act of an irreducibly distinct English other.

Attempts to employ postcolonial theory in relation to Scotland have sought to interpret the incorporation of Highland culture by Lowland Scotland as the product of Scotland's colonization. In a 1998 analysis of Scottish multiculturalism, for instance, the critic Berthold Schoene highlights the extent to which the construction of a homogeneous Scottish cultural identity involves a Lowland co-option of Highland culture which smoothes over the evident cultural divisions that exist within Scotland itself. In Schoene's view, the eagerness of Lowland Scotland to adopt an English cultural standard in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw Lowland Anglo-Scots colonizing the Highlands at England's behest. However, because this resulted in the loss of the cultural particularity upon which a modern nationalism could be based, the emergence of a political Scottish nationalism saw Lowland Scotland turn to the symbols of the Highlands to provide cultural markers that could distinguish Scotland from England along cultural lines. Thus:

> The widespread tendency to obfuscate cultural differences between Highlanders and Lowlanders and conjure up a sense of national unity in essentially holistic terms . . . is ultimately rooted in the Lowlanders' postcolonial identity crisis. Hence, Scotland's much cherished 'traditional' self-image may turn out to be no indigenous, 'home-made' creation, nor a natural emanation from an opaque collective unconscious, but rather an oppressive imperial allocation coeval with colonial strife and tensions, first and foremost between England and Scotland, but also within Scotland itself. (Schoene-Harwood 1998: 60)

Schoene helpfully warns against the constitution of a singular Scottishness for fear of reproducing the very incorporating tendencies which this is intended to avoid: setting up an illusory Scottish national coherence proves no adequate defence against a homogenizing Englishness. However, Schoene's argument still problematically relies upon a model of Scottish colonization that situates the originary moment of Scotland's cultural disintegration in England's imperialist expansion into Lowland Scotland and implies that, if Lowland Scotland had *not* been required to adopt English cultural standards, the Highlands would have remained unmolested. In arguing that the 'colonization' of Highland Scotland is carried out by 'anglicised Lowlanders', Schoene positions Englishness (if not the English themselves) as the force behind the Clearances and diminishes the Scottishness of the Lowland participants (ibid.: 59). Ironically, this effectively produces a polarization of Scottishness and Englishness in ways which suggest that Gaelic culture truly forms the genuine patterns of Scottish culture – especially as Schoene provides little information about what an un-anglicized Lowland culture would look like. This analysis is further supported by the explicit claim that the Clearances were 'instigated by England, eager to expand its sphere of influence even to the most remote regions of the British Isles' and the suggestion that

the modernization of the Highlands was a 'colonial enterprise' which 'operated at the command of the English imperial centre'. Characteristically, his essay lacks a clear explanation of how this 'command' was exercised. England's dominance over Scotland is understood almost exclusively in cultural terms – as the exportation of English culture, exemplified by linguistic standardization.

Beyond its service to a nationalist political agenda, it remains unclear what is gained by defining Scotland as an English colony. The use of postcolonial theory may assist in examining the sort of cultural formations that result from contact between local forms of Scottish culture and state-endorsed cultural standards. However, colonization is not the only circumstance in which such contact has taken place, and postcolonial theory does not require that Scotland was a colony for its application. Indeed, while critics of Scottish literature have increasingly used postcolonial theory to articulate Scottish writers' wider significance, the identification of Scotland as a colony can be seen to work against this aim by reprioritizing Scottishness as that literature's central concern. For instance, Jackson and Maley complain of the parochial reference points for MacDiarmid's poetry compared with the internationalism of Joyce's reputation, arguing that 'critical assessments of MacDiarmid' which highlight 'the nationalist concerns that underpin his enthusiasm for language that is multiple, hybrid and varied' lead him to remain 'firmly fixed within a Scottish political framework' (2002: 70) Yet, the aim of elaborating MacDiarmid's significance for contexts outwith Scotland hardly seems served by locating his linguistic experimentation within a colonial history and reinterpreting his work as the product of a contest between Scottish cultural self-assertion and an aggressive English standardization. Rather, the nationalization of standardization as an English phenomenon, and of hybridity as its Scottish alternative, seems precisely calculated to limit the interpretative paradigms for MacDiarmid's work, by tying it ever more firmly to the national corpus.

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