"IL GRAN RIFIUTO": THE MEDITERRANEAN EXILE OF UGO FOSCOLO AND CONSTANTINE CAVAFY

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Abstract

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a yearning for an impossible return. Born on the Greek island of Zante (Zakynthos) in the Mediterranean, the Italian poet Ugo Foscolo finds himself in a state between land and sea, between languages and cultures. Foscolo's attachment to the sea is both epic and unheroic. This paradox in Foscolo's sea-oriented nostalgia is a preview of his fate as an exile. In his poems, Foscolo laments the impossible *nostos* to his native island by invoking the epic hero Ulysses (Odysseus). With its aura of myth, the sea becomes a symbol of Foscolo's nostalgia. At the same time his fate as an exile is not defined by an epic homecoming but sealed by the irretrievability of home. A century later, the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy also finds himself in a similar state of paradox. While he is attached to his native city Alexandria, Cavafy's Alexandria is also detached from the present, as the poet descends into history to recreate a mythical city in his imagination. By drawing comparisons between Foscolo's and Cavafy's poems about home and displacement, exile and return, I argue that both poets' uprootedness hinge on their wavering between land and sea, as their identity is pinned on the refusal of return, generating a sense of "transcendental homelessness" in the words of Georg Lukács and a "contrapuntal" awareness as defined by Edward Said. As an imaginary city out of time, Cavafy's Alexandria reflects the poet's own out-of-placedness as a Greek in Egypt. In comparison, Foscolo's exile also reshapes his memory of home, making an anachronistic turn that Said identifies in Cavafy's poetry and considers part of exile. In the end, these two poets of the Mediterranean follow the same path of "never return" as their great exilic predecessor Dante once did.

Keywords: exile, nostalgia, Cavafy, Alexandria, Foscolo

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Io, sovrano di nulla, neppure di me stesso
– Eugenio Montale, "Leggendo Kavafis"[2]

In an essay from 1968, the Italian poet Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) recalls his early years in Genoa in a mixed mood of "nostalgia and lament."[3] Having left his native city for the inland, the Mediterranean has thus set the scene for Montale's nostalgia as an exile – a quasi-mythical identity that he holds dear as a poet. In his essay titled "Genova nei ricordi di un esule" ("Genoa in the memories of an exile") Montale describes his departure from Genoa as a command of fate, almost as if his life were twisted into an epic: "[…] l'ho lasciata perché la bussola del caso ha girato in quella direzione." ("[…] I left it because the compass of fate has turned in that direction.")[4] For Montale's poetic persona, exile seems less of a burden than a source of inspiration, and in fact it is the impossibility of return that triggered the yearning for his Mediterranean hometown, perpetuating this destiny-driven exile. In this sense, leaving the sea is both boundary-crossing and reorientation. In fact, since Homer's *Odyssey,* the Mediterranean has been a natural backdrop for exiled poets and their nostalgia. Looking back at the Greek epic hero's winding journey home, the nineteenth-century Italian poet Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827) laments the impossible *nostos* to his native island in the Mediterranean. Not unlike Montale's destiny-driven departure from Genoa, Foscolo's fate as an exile is not defined by an epic homecoming but sealed by the irretrievability of home. A century later, the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933) also finds himself in a similar state of paradox. His attachment to Alexandria – his native city on the Egyptian shore of the Mediterranean – is undermined by a sense of detachment from the present, as he descends into history to recreate a mythical city in his imagination. In the end, the exile of both Foscolo and Cavafy hinges on their wavering between land and sea, between languages and cultures, between the past and the present – an in-between state that mirrors their negation of return.

2 "I, emperor of nothing, not even of myself" ("Reading Cavafy") Eugenio Montale, *The Collected Poems of Eugenio Montale 1925-1977*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: Norton & Co., 2012), 564-565.

3 "Con questi ricordi, che sono insieme una nostalgia e un rimpianto" Eugenio Montale, "Genova nei ricordi di un esule," in *Il secondo mestiere: Prose 1920-1979. vol. 2* (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), 2878. All translations from Italian to English are mine unless otherwise stated.

4 Montale, "Genova nei ricordi di un esule," 2875.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym traces the word nostalgia to its "pseudo-Greek" or "nostalgically Greek" roots: it was used first in the seventeenth century to describe the symptoms associated with missing one's home.[5] While ancient nostalgia, explains Boym, was "part of a mystical ritual," modern nostalgia has become "a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return."[6] The story of Odysseus's homecoming (*nostos*) is thus further mythologized, turning into a modern token for the irretrievable mythological time. As the origin for modern nostalgia, the Greek hero's return to Ithaca after the Trojan war – as recounted most notably in the *Odyssey* – is the blueprint for nostalgic writers who seek a mythical return. In her studies of nostalgia, Boym reveals that in various versions of the myth Odyssey's homecoming is "far from circular" as presented by the Homeric epic; instead it is "riddled with contradictions and zigzags, false homecomings, misrecognitions."[7] From this perspective, Odysseus's anti-homecoming or his refusal to return is comparable to the experience of a modern exile, for whom the *nostos* is constantly mediated, delayed, and even negated. Even Penelope's weaving and unweaving of the shroud symbolically mirrors Odysseus's denial of return, acting as its tragic counterpart. The wife's domestic duties both complement and contrast the husband's wild adventures. But even the hero's eventual return does not warrant a true happy ending in the modern interpretations, in which the concept of *nostos* comes across more as a tragedy than a resolution of this paradox. "In their purest form," says Hans Blumenberg, "odysseys are an expression of the arbitrariness of the powers that denied Odysseus a homecoming, senselessly driving him about and finally leading him to shipwreck."[8] In this sense, Odysseus's journey across the sea is an act of border-crossing and thus also a transgression. Odysseus's struggle is, as Martin Jay argues, "against the mythic domination of fate," and his anti-homecoming in a way also exemplifies the conviction of the Frankfurt School that "[n]egation rather than the premature search for resolutions was the real refuge of truth."[9] In their studies of the Enlightenment, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer consider Odysseus's wanderings in the Homeric epic as "a nostalgic styliza-

5 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic), 3.
6 Svetlana Boym, 8.
7 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 8.
8 Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 8.
9 Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 264; 263.

tion of what can no longer be celebrated."[10] They would agree with Boym's understanding of modern nostalgia that hinges on a sense of irretrievable loss. At the same time, Odysseus's journey across the sea is both disastrous and defiant, epic and tragic.

In Foscolo's sonnet "A Zacinto," the paradox of Odysseus's mythical homecoming is juxtaposed with the poet's own longing for home and its irretrievability:

> Né più mai toccherò le sacre sponde
> ove il mio corpo fanciulletto giacque,
> Zacinto mia, che te specchi nell'onde
> del greco mar da cui vergine nacque
> Venere, e fea quelle isole feconde
> col suo primo sorriso, onde non tacque
> le tue limpide nubi e le tue fronde
> l'inclito verso di colui che l'acque
> cantò fatali, ed il diverso esiglio
> per cui bello di fama e di sventura
> baciò la sua petrosa Itaca Ulisse.
> Tu non altro che il canto avrai del figlio,
> o materna mia terra; a noi prescrisse
> il fato illacrimata sepoltura.[11]

> Never will I touch the sacred shores
> where my youthful body lay
> My Zante, yourself mirrored in the waves
> of the Greek sea from which the virgin was born
> Venus, and made those islands flourish
> with her first smile, from which he did not hide
> your clear clouds and your foliage
> the glorious verse of the one who sang of the waters
> of fatal seas, and of the different exile,
> for which, Ulysses of great fame and misfortune,
> kissed his rocky Ithaca.
> You will receive nothing other than the song of your son,
> Oh motherland: prescribed to us
> The fate of an ungrieved grave.

In the opening verse, the poet declares that "Né più mai toccherò le sacre sponde" ("Never will I ever touch the sacred shores").[12] In this sonnet ded-

10 35.
11 Ugo Foscolo, *Poesie* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1888), 170.
12 Foscolo, *Poesie*, 170.

icated to his native island Zante (Zakynthos), Foscolo laments the impossibility of his homecoming using a voice in the future tense ("toccherò") propelled by three negatives in a row ("né, più, mai"), solidifying his fate of never return. Throughout the sonnet, the poet oscillates between first-, second-, and third-person voice, between historical past and future tense to blur the boundary between fiction and reality. With its aura of myth, the Mediterranean – having once witnessed *nostos* of an epic hero – becomes a canvas for the poet's very own exile. By invoking Ulysses (Odysseus), the poet creates a personal myth marked by destiny-driven displacement and irresolvable in-betweenness. His connections with the Mediterranean at birth have inevitably made him a nostalgic in the ancient and mythical sense of the word: "The Greek myths were always stories of home for Foscolo."[13] Zante would be his refuge, not simply because it is his birthplace, but more importantly it is also connected to the idea of a mythological return. An imaginary return to his native island, as Foscolo once revealed in a letter to a friend, provides him a sense of comfort and hope:

> At the first opportunity I shall take ship to our islands like a fugitive Ulysses. There I shall settle my own and my family's business affairs such as they are…. In my maternal Zante I shall find more peace and wield a freer pen and I will use the years of youth to finish some dozen tragedies, most of them already planned.[14]

During the time of turmoil, Foscolo considered Zante as a haven. His nostalgia is not always incurable and his home – from a distance – always seems reachable in his mind. Yet his homecoming would never be materialized in his lifetime.

Without ever returning to Zante, Foscolo's physical departure from his native island in his youth acts as the *peripeteia* of his tragedy, and his fate as an exile seems to have already been sealed. Born in the Mediterranean to a Greek mother and a Venetian father, Foscolo is destined to waver between states from an early age. He was immersed in both Greek and Latin traditions growing up, with French and English to be added to this mix later on. In this sonnet "A Zacinto," the poet oscillates between Greek and Latin references, which reflects his continuous negotiation between languages and cultures throughout his life. His long exile begins with his departure from Zante and ends with his death in London, punctuated by various departures and never a true return. It resembles the non-circular *nostos* of Odysseus

13 E.R. Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo: An Italian in Regency England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 106.

14 Cited in Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo: An Italian in Regency England*, 107.

that Boym describes in her book – only the final destination is not an Ionian island but a modern city. The irretrievability of Zante – together with its mythical aura – turns the Mediterranean island(s) into a subject of longing in Foscolo's writings. As Glauco Cambon points out, "[e]xile prompted him to correlate different cultures to his own Mediterranean heritage."[15] In this sense, Foscolo's pursuit in translation, both private and public, represents his complex and interwoven cultural identity. During the last phase of his life, Foscolo had to adjust to yet a different language and culture, while on the other side of the continent. Before moving to London, Foscolo practiced his English by translating Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century novel *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*.[16] This choice has an unmistakable autobiographical echo: Sterne's fictional hero began his journey from Calais – the northern French city by the English Channel – and traveled southwards to Naples; whereas Foscolo was penning his Italian translation of an English story in Calais, his exile drove him in the opposite direction. Eventually, Foscolo arrived in England in 1816 by way of Switzerland. After having witnessed the Austrians taking over the control of Milan, he made a decision that was both rational and final – as he knew already, this would be a journey with no return.[17] Foscolo's fleeing from Italy to England was as much politically as it was personally motivated. As he was born in Zante and hence "a citizen of a British protectorate," Foscolo was protected from the Austrians.[18] Being in England – an island more remote and very much different from his native one – unexpected ties him even closer to his Mediterranean roots. Near the end of his life, Foscolo continued to translate Homer's *Iliad*, and in comparison, to the time when he was working on the Sterne novel, although his intentions were similar, the circumstances were very much different two decades later. Trapped in the midst of abysmal living conditions and deteriorating health, Foscolo sought refuge and cure from the Greek epic and myth of home, as he had done before. Although Foscolo's translation of the *Iliad* would remain fragmentary and unfinished, his literary endeavors mimicked the trajectory of his life, his own Mediterranean exile until the end.

When Foscolo was rendering Greek voices into Italian, reality and fiction further converged through the act of translation. By bringing together his past with his *hic et nunc*, he also reconnected with part of his own cul-

15 Glauco Cambon, *Ugo Foscolo: Poet of Exile* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 24.

16 Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo: An Italian in Regency England*, 9.

17 See Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo: An Italian in Regency England*, 12-13.

18 Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo: An Italian in Regency England*, 108.

tural roots in Greek myths. If leaving Zante turned Foscolo into a perpetual wanderer, then his longing for the impossible return must have perpetuated his literary productions. In the eyes of Boym, Foscolo would be a modern nostalgic – "[…] never a native but a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal."[19] Sharing the same Mediterranean roots, Foscolo's sea-oriented nostalgia is modeled after that of Odysseus. But it also differs from the hero's mythical *nostos*: with no return in sight, Foscolo's exile is both epic and unheroic. In his "Reflections on Exile" Edward Said acknowledges the irremediable emotional toll of the exile's impossible return, describing it as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home."[20] In this light, Foscolo's sonnet "A Zacinto" also twists a Mediterranean *nostos* into a tragedy, with the lingering image of Odysseus kissing the stony shore of Ithaca to contrast the bitter fate of the poet. A century later, on the other side of the Mediterranean, the Greek poet Cavafy also provides his own interpretation in the poem "Ithaca":

> As you set out on the way to Ithaca
> hope that the road is a long one,
> filled with adventures, filled with discoveries.
> The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
> Poseidon in his anger: do not fear them,
> you won't find such things on your way
> so long as your thoughts remain lofty, and a choice
> emotion touches your spirit and your body.
> The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
> savage Poseidon; you won't encounter them
> unless you stow them away inside your soul,
> unless your soul sets them up before you.
>
> Hope that the road is a long one.
> Many may the summer morning be
> when – with what pleasure, with what joy –
> you first put in to harbors new to your eyes;
> may you stop at Phoenician trading posts
> and there acquire the finest wares:
> mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
> and heady perfumes of every kind:
> as many heady perfumes as you can.

19 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 12.

20 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173.

Many Egyptian cities may you visit
that you may learn, and go on learning, from their sages.

Always in your mind keep Ithaca.
To arrive there is your destiny.
But do not hurry your trip in any way.
Better that it last for any years;
that you drop anchor at the island an old man,
rich with all you've gotten on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.

Ithaca gave you the beautiful journey;
without her you wouldn't have set upon the road.
But now she has nothing left to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca didn't deceive you.
As wise as you will have become, with so much experience,
you will understand, by then, these Ithacas; what they mean.[21]

Written in 1911, this long poem in free verse is built on the myth of Odysseus's *nostos*, or rather, the hero's mythical home. While Foscolo blurs the line between myth and reality by mapping his own exile onto that of Ulysses (Odysseus), Cavafy addresses the epic hero yet without naming him directly. At the same time, Cavafy achieves a similar effect of ambiguity in this poem by bridging the distance between the past and the present. While Foscolo begins his sonnet in successive negation, highlighting the nature of irretrievability of the poet's native island, Cavafy depicts the hero's home not as the point of return but as a promise for adventure at the beginning of the poem: "As you set out on the way to Ithaca / hope that the road is a long one, / filled with adventures, filled with discoveries."[22] These opening verses direct our attention to the future, but then the characters that follow – Laestrygonians, Cyclopes, Poseidon – seem to pull our gaze backwards to the Homeric epic. In the same stanza, the poet repeats these names, as if creating a circular movement that drives the hero's journey forward to the adventures and discoveries while at the same time leads him backwards to his native island.

The second stanza of "Ithaca" is both a repetition and an expansion of the second verse "hope that the road is a long one" from the opening stanza. It is also where the poet's life and the epic hero's story converge, as he

21 Constantine Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, trans. Daniel Adam Mendelsohn (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 13-14.
22 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 14.

sends Odysseus further south to the Egyptian shore of the Mediterranean: "Many Egyptian cities may you visit / that you may learn, and go on learning, from their sages."[23] The motifs lose their familiarity slowly in each of their repetitions, and the road back to the familiar seems less and less possible. Similar to Odysseus's alternative anti-homecoming illustrated by Boym, this long journey back to Ithaca via Phoenicia and Egypt is, in essence, a refusal to return and almost a defiance of destiny, as laid out here in the third stanza of Cavafy's poem: "Always in your mind keep Ithaca. / To arrive there is your destiny. / But do not hurry your trip in any way."[24] Although the poet instructs the hero not to rush his return, the poem acts on the contrary and seems to have picked up the pace, as each stanza gets shorter and shorter. The last two stanzas, with three verses each, almost recall the tercets in a sonnet, but the contrast with the first three stanzas is striking. If, as the poet suggests, the hero should keep the giants and savage god of the sea out of his soul, then on the contrary he should always keep Ithaca inside his soul.

In Foscolo's sonnet "A Zacinto," Zante is the symbol for a point or departure and Ithaca a point of return. The tragedy remains in the poet's realization that his fate as a perpetual exile is irreversible, just as Odysseus's homecoming is preordained. In Cavafy's "Ithaca," the eternity of Ithaca contrasts the reversibility of the hero's journey there – even if it remains only as a possibility. Odysseus's continuously delayed homecoming resembles the experience of a modern exile, whose understanding of the world rests upon the irretrievability of home. In the fourth stanza, the poet also turns Ithaca into a point of departure not unlike Foscolo's Zante: "Ithaca gave you the beautiful journey; / without her you wouldn't have set upon the road."[25] He reveals his interpretation of Odysseus's homecoming: Ithaca is the beginning of the journey rather than the end of it, so Odysseus's homecoming can be seen as a reversal of return or a negation of it. As a result, as depicted in the final verses of the poem, Ithaca is not simply a place but an experience pregnant with possibilities: "As wise as you will have become, with so much experience, / you will understand, by then, these Ithacas; what they mean."[26] As the poet explains, the meaning of Ithaca is only revealed belatedly. At the same time, the plurality of "Ithaca" implies that the journey is continuous and the exile perpetual. In this sense, the poet does not believe in settling at a particular place or time

23 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 14.
24 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 14.
25 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 14.
26 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 14.

but rather in the in-between state that keeps negating his return. In his own twist of the Homeric epic, Cavafy shows his understanding of exile that would be described as a state of "transcendental homelessness" by Georg Lukács, which is cited by both Boym and Said to describe the nostalgic and the exilic mindset.[27] Although in different registers, Foscolo's "A Zacinto" and Cavafy's "Ithaca" are joined by their exilic vision that is not directed homewards or backwards but rather towards the future. This is captured by Alfred Tennyson in his poem "Ulysses" – "To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought"[28] – a re-interpretation of the line "per seguir virtute e canoscenza" (*Inf.* XXVI, 120) from the Dantesque Ulysses that inspired both Foscolo and Cavafy. At the end of "Ithaca," Cavafy reveals the hero's eventual return to his native island, but this seemingly happy ending is wrapped in the unforgiving moral of this story. In a bittersweet way the poem concludes, and Ithaca remains not simply where the hero's life comes to an end but also where his new life begins.

In fact, Cavafy already drew his inspiration directly from the Dantesque and the Tennysonian Ulysses in an earlier poem entitled "Second *Odyssey*" (1894):

> A second Odyssey and a great one, too,
> greater than the first perhaps. But alas,
> without a Homer, without hexameters.
>
> Small was his ancestral house,
> small was his ancestral town,
> and all his Ithaca was small.[29]

In this poem, the epic hero also suffers from the lack of adventure at home and longs for his next departure, which has been depicted previously by both Dante and Tennyson. Cavafy then turns to Odysseus's family that once brought the hero home:

> Telemachus's affection, the faithfulness
> of Penelope, the years of his father's unswerving love,
> the blessed repose of the house
> entered like rays of joy

27 See Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 24; Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 181.

28 Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses," Poetry Foundation, accessed March 14, 2023, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses.

29 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 275.

into the heart of the seafarer.
And like rays they sank.[30]

The light that once led Odysseus homeward is also reminiscent of the light that drew him upward from Hades.[31] Here, Cavafy's description is almost a paraphrase – if not an expansion – of Ulysses's monologue in Dante's *Inferno*:

né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta
del vecchio padre, né 'l debito amore
lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,
vincer potero dentro a me l'ardore
ch'i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto
e de li vizi umani e del valore;

Nor fondness for my son, nor reverence
For my old father, nor the due affection
Which joyous should have made Penelope,
Could overcome within me the desire
I had to be experienced of the world,
And of the vice and virtue of mankind;[32]

Perhaps when Foscolo was penning "A Zacinto" with the reference to Ulysses, Dante's triple negation ("né…né…né…") in this tercet also came to mind, which he then turned into the successive negation "né più mai" at the beginning of his sonnet. While Foscolo contrasts his own fate with that of Ulysses in an elegiac tone, it is in fact the Dantesque adventure that he desires. He might have even modeled his own Mediterranean exile after Ulysses's unending journey across the open sea ("l'alto mare aperto" *Inf.* XXVI 100) that Dante once depicted. In comparison, Cavafy reflects on the hero's second *Odyssey* not without a hint of skepticism. Unlike the hopeful tone at the end of Tennyson's "Ulysses" – "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." – Cavafy resorts to a tragic ending: "And his heart, adventuress, / exulted coldly, empty of love."[33] In the poem "Second *Odyssey*," Cavafy reverses the hero's fate and turns him into a solitary wanderer and a perpetual exile, echoing the sense of void in the image of an unmourned grave ("illacrimata sepoltura") at the end of Foscolo's sonnet "A Zacinto."

30 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 275.
31 See Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 7.
32 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 128.
33 Cavafy. *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 276.

Nearly two decades after the completion of the poem "Second *Odyssey*," Cavafy returns once again to the myth of Odysseus in the poem on Ithaca, perhaps considering it as a sequel to his earlier poem on the hero's final return, when the heart once empty will be filled again by the weight of exile.

Like the epic hero's return to Ithaca, the myth of Odysseus also takes its own journey of interpretation and translation only to be brought back to Greek again by a Hellenic poet on the other side of the Mediterranean. Although Dante has never read Homer's *Odyssey*, it is still no surprise that he chose the Greek epic hero's *nostos* as the subject of his literary imagination after having been banished from his native city in 1302. More than a sequel to Homer's *Odyssey*, the Ulysses episode in Dante's *Inferno* conveys the poet's own longings and ambitions during exile. Dante is also an undoubted model to all the wandering poets to come. Florence, in this sense, is not only Dante's irretrievable home but also the start of a literary giant's epic journey. As the symbol of Italy's literary heritage, the Tuscan city can even be seen as "a bona fide second Troy" and a focal point for Foscolo's sense of cultural belonging and longing for return.[34] As a follower of Dante, Foscolo is significantly influenced by his exilic predecessor. Other than his famous hendecasyllabic poem "Dei sepolcri" ("The Sepulchers"), one of Foscolo's sonnets is also dedicated to Dante's native city but without naming the Florentine poet directly. Wrapped in an aura of myth, Foscolo's Florence is reminiscent of both Ithaca and Zante – only Greek becomes Latin, and the Mediterranean turns into the Arno:

> E tu ne' carmi avrai perenne vita,
> Sponda ch'Arno saluta in suo cammino,
> Partendo la città che del latino
> Nome accogliea finor l'ombra fuggita.
> Già dal tuo ponte all'onda impaurita
> Il papale furore e il ghibellino
> Mescean gran sangue, ove oggi al pellegrino
> Del fero Vate la magion si addita.[35]
>
> And in songs you will live forever,
> The Arno greets on its way the river shore,
> Parting the city that holds the fleeing
> Shadow of its Latin name until now.
> From your bridge at the frightening wave

34 Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 8.

35 Foscolo, *Poesie*, 161.

> Once poured the papal and the Ghibelline fury
> A great deal of blood, where to the pilgrim today
> One points at a fierce poet's abode.

In this sonnet, Foscolo likens medieval Florence to his native island Zante by using words such as "sponda" and "onda" to recall "A Zacinto," thus creating an illusion of the Mediterranean shore in the inland city of Florence. Written around the same time, both "A Zacinto" and "A Firenze" join myth with reality. By relocating his sea-oriented nostalgia from Zante to Florence, Foscolo sets up the epic stage for another exilic hero – Dante. A few years later in "Dei sepolcri," Foscolo would pay tribute to Dante obliquely without naming the Florentine poet, similar to how he had done earlier in the sonnet "A Firenze":

> E tu prima, Firenze, udivi il carme
> Che allegrò l'ira al Ghibellin fuggiasco,
> E tu i cari parenti e l'idïoma
> Desti a quel dolce di Calliope labbro
> Che Amore in Grecia nudo e nudo in Roma
> D'un velo candidissimo adornando,
> Rendea nel grembo a Venere Celeste
>
> ("Dei sepolcri" 173-179)

> […] and you, Florence, were the first
> to hear the song that alone gladdened the fugitive
> Ghibelline's anger, and you gave both parents
> and language to the sweet lyrist of love
> who threw the whitest veil over the nakedness
> of Eros to return him to celestial
> Venus on high.[36]

As an exile more closely connected to Foscolo, Dante shows with his experience that only death will bring an end to his wandering, thus leaving the world with his eternal art to be applauded and followed. In the same vein, Foscolo admits in his sonnet "Il proprio ritratto" that "[m]orte sol mi darà fama e riposo," claiming that only death will bring him fame and rest.[37] Yet death is not always triumphant in the eyes of Foscolo, as most intimately expressed in his sonnet "In morte del fratello Giovanni" ("On the Death of Brother Giovanni") written in 1803, after his brother's suicide:

36 Cambon, *Ugo Foscolo: Poet of Exile,* 337.
37 Foscolo, *Poesie*, 163.

Un dì, s'io non andrò sempre fuggendo
Di gente in gente; mi vedrai seduto
Sulla tua pietra, o fratel mio, gemendo
Il fior de' tuoi gentili anni caduto.
La madre or sol, suo dì tardo traendo,
Parla di me col tuo cenere muto;
Ma io deluse a voi le palme tendo;
E sol da lunge i miei tetti saluto,
Sento gli avversi numi, e le secrete
Cure che al viver tuo furon tempesta,
E prego anch'io nel tuo porto quïete.
Questo di tanta speme oggi mi resta!
Straniere genti, almen l'ossa rendete
Allora al petto della madre mesta.[38]

One day, if I shall stop wandering forever
from land to land, you will see me seated
at your grave, oh my brother, grieving
the fallen flower of your tender years.
Now only our mother, dragging herself through old age,
talks to me with your mute ash;
but to you I stretch out my disheartened hands,
and I greet my home only from afar.
I feel the opposite destiny, and the secret
worries that had been a tempest to your life,
and I, too, pray for the peace in your harbor.
This of much hope still remains for me!
Oh foreign lands, at least return my bones
then to the breasts of my mournful mother.

Foscolo's poetry often juxtaposes the literary world with his personal experience. Here, Foscolo joins the distant past with the present, intensifying the melancholic mood with references to the Latin elegists Catullus and Tibullus.[39] In 1798 Foscolo published the epistolary novel *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (*The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*) with the suicidal ending of its titular hero. Five years later, Foscolo wrote this sonnet on the premature passing of his brother, but this elegy is as much for Giovanni as for Ugo himself. The poet once again admits that he is destined to be distant from home and always wandering ("sempre fuggendo"). In an attempt

38 Foscolo, *Poesie*, 167.

39 The references are seen in the lines "Parla di me col tuo cenere muto" and "Allor al petto della madre mesta." See Cesare Segre and Carlo Ossola, eds. *Antologia della poesia italiana: Ottocento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2008), 76-77.

to come to terms with the tragic ending of his own exile, Foscolo prays only for his bones to be returned from the foreign shore. In the concluding verse, the image of mother's breasts is perhaps not simply referring to the mother who speaks to the poet earlier in the sonnet but more fittingly to the motherland – "o materna mia terra" – that the poet invokes in his sonnet "A Zacinto." This cry for an earthly return is also a prophecy: the last phase of Foscolo's exile brought him to London, where he died in 1827. Nearly half a century later, his ashes were returned to Florence at last and enshrined at the Basilica di Santa Croce – the Italian pantheon eternalized by none other than Foscolo himself in "Dei sepolcri." Dedicated to his fellow poet Ippolito Pindemonte, "Dei sepolcri" draws references to Homeric and Dantesque myths. In addition, Foscolo returns to a similar realm of intimacy in this long poem, describing a maternal and earthly return at the end of one's life, perhaps not without a hint of personal longing:

> […] se pia la terra
> Che lo raccolse infante e lo nutriva,
> Nel suo grembo materno ultimo asilo
> Porgendo, sacre le reliquie renda
> Dall'insultar de' nembi e dal profano
> Piede del vulgo, e serbi un sasso il nome,
> E di fiori odorata arbore amica
> Le ceneri di molli ombre consoli.
>
> ("Dei sepolcri" 33-40)

> […] if only that piece of land
> which welcomed him at birth and nursed him on
> afford him the last shelter in its motherly
> womb, thereby protecting his remains
> from the assaults of the weather and the trampling
> populace; if but a stone do keep his name
> and a friendly tree redolent with flowers
> do but console his ashes with soft shadow.[40]

Even though "Dei sepolcri" is a celebration of fame and glory, behind its patriotic message there is a private sentiment close to "In morte del fratello Giovanni," namely the personal bond with one's homeland that the poet truly cherishes and a maternal reunion for which he prays. This is perhaps the only consolation to an exile's lifelong wandering. This long poem in 295 verses concludes in the Homeric aura:

40 Cambon, *Ugo Foscolo: Poet of Exile,* 334.

Proteggete i miei padri. Un dì vedrete
Mendico un cieco errar sotto le vostre
Antichissime ombre, e brancolando
Penetrar negli avelli, e abbracciar l'urne,
E interrogarle. […]
E tu onore di pianti, Ettore, avrai
Ove fia santo e lagrimato il sangue
Per la patria versato, e finchè il Sole
Risplenderà su le sciagure umane.

("Dei sepolcri" 279-283; 292-295)

Protect my ancestors. One day you will see
a blind beggar roam among your ancient shades,
and grope his way into the burial chambers,
and embrace the urns and interrogate them.
[…] The sacred bard,
soothing the hurt of those souls with his song,
will make Greek princes immortal through all
the lands that father Ocean embraces.
And you, Hector, will be honored by tears
wherever blood shed for one's homeland is
holy and revered, and as long as the sun
keeps shining on the disasters of mankind.[41]

As Foscolo connects his long poem to the ancient Greek myth, he also alludes to his own exile, modeled after the wandering of Homer. Different from the earlier sonnet "A Zacinto," it is Hector – not Odysseus – who was sung here at the end. The hero of the Trojan War is, after all, the more suitable one to carry the final message in this poem about commemorating the legacy of the dead. In the resounding future tense of the last verb "risplenderà," the poet leads our gaze out of the underworld and into the distance with a hint of optimism. At the same time, Foscolo also harks back to his own cultural roots in the Mediterranean: they are not simply the mythical ancestors as presented for the Italian audience of his day but also intimately connected to the poet's personal history. It was in Florence that Foscolo began his experiment of translating Homer's *Iliad* in 1807, shortly after he wrote "Dei sepolcri." This project would follow him into the next and final phase of exile, and indeed as he promised, he would make the voice of Hector shine.

In both "Dei sepolcri" and "A Firenze," Foscolo tries to bridge the gap between myth and reality by turning Florence into an epic backdrop reminiscent of the Mediterranean in Homer's *Odyssey*. On the one hand, this

41 Cambon, *Ugo Foscolo: Poet of Exile,* 340.

juxtaposition of time and space reflects Foscolo's sense of in-betweenness, as he continues to navigate between land and sea, between languages and cultures during his exile. On the other hand, according to Said, an exile's "plurality of vision" also gives rise to an awareness that is "contrapuntal."[42] Similar to Foscolo's in-between poetics, Cavafy also weaves history and myth into the portrayal of his native city Alexandria.

Different from Foscolo's fate of never return, Cavafy's life was punctuated by two early periods abroad before his final return in 1885. As a result, Cavafy's displacement is more inwardly oriented – a mentality rather than a physical state. As a Greek city on the Egyptian shore of the Mediterranean, Alexandria is also an exilic city by nature, which is reflected in its ancient epithet – *Alexandria ad Egyptum* – a city next to but never quite part of Egypt.[43] Like an exile, Alexandria is situated between land and sea, between East and West. In the eyes of Greek expats like Cavafy, the city is also between the past and the present. Naturally, these contrapuntal characteristics of Alexandria also become part of Cavafy's internal exile. In the poem "Fugitives," Cavafy maps out a journey through time in Alexandria. More specifically, as Edmund Keeley points out, the poem addresses "the expatriation and nostalgia" of "those exiles from the Hellenic world who are doomed to a new life in the mother country."[44] Therefore, Alexandria appears in two temporal and spatial dimensions, and the poet joins the city's Greek past with its Egyptian present seamlessly from the perspective of an exile like himself:

> Always Alexandria remains herself. Walk a little down
> the straight road that comes to an end at the Hippodrome,
> you'll see palaces and monuments that will amaze you.
> For all the harm it's suffered in its wars,
> for all that it's diminished, still a marvelous place.
> And then, with the excursions, and the books,
> and with various studies, the time does pass.
> In the evening we gather at the shore,
> the five of us (all with our fictitious
> names, of course) and some other Greeks
> of those few who have remained in the city.[45]

42 Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 186.

43 See Jane Lagoudis Pinchin, *Alexandria Still: Forster, Durrell, and Cavafy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 8.

44 Edmund Keeley, *Kavafy's Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 5.

45 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 325.

The Greek expats in Alexandria are all confronted with the paradox of their city: its seeming eternity is at odds with the fickleness of their fate. The decline of Alexandria makes it a twin of the small and poor Ithaca that Cavafy once depicted in the earlier poems "Ithaca" and "Second *Odyssey.*" Similarly, Cavafy is also stuck in the past, yearning for a return to Alexandria when it was still "the acme of what is Greek, / of every discipline, of every art the peak."[46] Feeling both out of place and out of time, Cavafy becomes an exile in his own native city. This is similar to what Said describes in his essay "Thoughts on Late Style," in which he re-examines the Adornian notion of "late style" and looks at lateness as a form of exile. For Said, "late style is *in*, but oddly *apart* from the present" (italics in the original).[47] Even if a physical return is possible, the exile's sense of belonging is still tied to a home in the past, and therefore the much longed-for return is also denied by time. It is no surprise that Said considers Cavafy's poetry as an exemplification of "late style," which, in turn, reflects the poet's own exilic mentality. To demonstrate this inner exile connected with the impossibility of return, in the poem "The Satrapy" Cavafy narrates the personal dilemma of a fictional character in the Achaemenid Empire:

> What a pity, given that you're made
> for deeds that are glorious and great,
> that this unjust fate of yours always
> leads you on, and denies you your success;
> that base habits get in your way,
> and pettiness, and indifference.[48]

Feeling disappointed and unfulfilled in Alexandria, the protagonist wants to leave the city with the temptation of the satrapies offered at King Artaxerxes's court. But when contemplating the long journey ahead to the foreign shore, he is reluctant to trade fame and glory for the loss of Alexandria and thus is pulled back by an urge to stay:

> But your soul seeks, weeps for other things:
> the praise of the People and the Sophists,
> that hard-won, priceless "Bravos";
> the Agora, the Theatre, and the victors' Crowns.
> How will Artaxerxes give you *them*,

46 "The Glory of the Ptolemies" in Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 18.
47 Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2007), xiv.
48 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 6.

> how will you find *them* in the satrapy;
> and what kind of life, without them, will you live.[49]

Like at the end of the poem "Ithaca," the true significance of the city is revealed belatedly. Here, the man is trapped between his longing for adventure and his nostalgia for Hellenism. Perhaps this is also Cavafy's own state of mind, as he is pulled by forces that compel him to leave Alexandria, but the city's Hellenic traces constantly remind him of his own cultural roots. In this sense, this twentieth-century city on the Egyptian shore of the Mediterranean would never grant Cavafy a true sense of belonging, and like the man in "The Satrapy" he is consigned to an "unjust fate" that turns him into an exile without any hope of return.[50] In addition, Cavafy identifies as a marginalized and even abandoned Greek, as an Alexandrian and Hellenic, which means, as Robert Liddell points out, "he felt more kinship with other outposts of the Greek world, than with Athens herself."[51] Like the protagonist in "The Satrapy," Cavafy was also mired in a personal crisis and haunted by a sense of loss – both contributed to his exilic state of mind.

Similar to Foscolo's hopeless voice in "A Zacinto," Cavafy's poems about Alexandria are always haunted by a sense of doom aggravated by a perpetual paradox. In "The City," a man finds himself in a fix not so different from that in "The Satrapy":

> You said: "I'll go to some other land, I'll go to some other sea,
> There's bound to be another city that's better by far.
> My every effort has been ill-fated from the start;
> my heart – like something dead – lies buried away;
> How long will my mind endure this slow decay?
> Wherever I look, wherever I cast my eyes,
> I see all round me the black rubble of my life
> where I've spent so many ruined and wasted years."[52]

The first part of this dialogue is dominated by a sense of despair, echoing Foscolo's voice in a sonnet addressed to himself ("Di se stesso"): "Co-

49 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 6.

50 "What a pity, given that you're made / for deeds that are glorious and great, / that this unjust fate of yours always / leads you on, and denies you your success" Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 6.

51 Robert Liddell, "Studies in Genius: Cavafy," trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, *The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy: Essays on His Life and Work* (Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983), 24.

52 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 5.

nosco il meglio ed al peggior m'appiglio" ("I know the better and to the worse I hold on).[53] In both poems resounds the same voice of an exile who is conscious of his own doom. The man in this unnamed city might as well be Cavafy himself, looking back and also ahead at his time in Alexandria without any sense of fulfillment or belonging. Then, just as in "The Satrapy," another voice intervenes, but instead of a series of forceful rhetorical questions persuading the man to stay, it wipes out the last trace of hope:

> You'll find no new places, you won't find other shores.
> This city will follow you. The streets in which you pace
> will be the same, you'll haunt the same familiar places,
> and inside those same houses you'll grow old.
> You'll always end up in this city. Don't bother to hope
> for a ship, a route, to take you somewhere else; they don't exist.
> Just as you've destroyed your life, here in this
> small corner, so you've wasted it through all the world.[54]

In his essay on the "late style," Said also finds this poem in the same vein as "The Satrapy," an exemplar of the poet's exilic mentality that wanders between oppositions without reconciliation. Cavafy's Alexandria turns out to be no different than Ithaca, a poor city with nothing left to fulfill the hero's longing for adventures. However, leaving the city can be even more disastrous: it is the ending already anticipated in the earlier poem "Second *Odyssey.*" Even though Cavafy is writing in Alexandria, his exilic sentiments are no less bitter than Foscolo's towards his native island Zante. Cavafy may have also identified with the sorrow and solitude in Foscolo's sonnet "In morte del fratello Giovanni": a lonely wanderer in front of a cold grave. A century after the death of Foscolo's brother, Cavafy captures a similar sentiment of abandonment in the poem "The God Abandons Antony":

> When suddenly, at midnight, there comes the sound
> of an invisible procession passing by
> with exquisite music playing, with voices raised –
> your good fortune, which now gives way; all your efforts'
> ill-starred outcome; the plans you made for life,
> which turned out wrong: don't mourn them uselessly.
> Like one who's long prepared, like someone brave,
> bid goodbye to her, to Alexandria, who is leaving.[55]

53 Foscolo, *Poesie*, 159.
54 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 5.
55 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 10.

Without naming Mark Antony in the poem, Cavafy blurs once again the boundary between the past and the present, turning the Roman general's defeat into a modern exile's farewell to Alexandria. At the same time, the roles for the one departing and the one being left behind are also indeterminate. Alexandria, personified, first appears as the one bidding farewell, until it is reversed in the final verse: "and bid farewell to her, to Alexandria, whom you are losing."[56] The sense of abandonment is mutual between Alexandria and Antony. In this sense, departure and loss become one and the same for the exile and his city.

If Foscolo's exile is perpetuated by his impossible return, then it is Cavafy's paradoxical state that makes him a perpetual inner exile. Interestingly, both poets also spent part of their lives in England. Foscolo's last phase of exile took place in London, and Cavafy's four-year sojourn during his childhood in Liverpool also left an indelible mark on his career as a poet – even his Greek has been noted "with a slight English accent."[57] The English writer E.M. Forster once described Cavafy as "a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe."[58] As Cavafy's contemporary, Forster acutely noticed the exilic traits shared by the Greek poet and his city. To someone who traversed the Mediterranean in search of inspiration on its Egyptian shore, Cavafy's poetics comes very close to what Forster's journey represents. Just like Cavafy's poetry, his life is also an exilic paradox: both a return *from* and a return *to* Greece.[59] Like those wanderers trapped in dilemmas, Cavafy cannot find a city more fitting than Alexandria – neither Greek enough nor quite Egyptian – to live as an exile. Alexandria in the twentieth century is only marginally Greek, a borderland or twilight zone, as the poet George Seferis once commented, Cavafy finds himself most at home in such a place, on "the margins of places, men, epochs… where there are many amalgams, fluctuations, transformations, transgressions."[60] This spatial and temporal in-betweenness of the "Cavafian milieu" mirrors the mindset of an exile – always oddly off-centered and never truly belong to the here and now.

56 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 10.
57 Pinchin, *Alexandria Still: Forster, Durrell, and Cavafy*, 35.
58 E.M. Forster, *Alexandria: A History and Guide* and *Pharos and Pharillon* (London: Andre Deutsch, 2004), 245.
59 Hala Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism an Archive* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 185.
60 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, xxxv. See also George Seferis, "Cavafy and Eliot – A Comparison" in *The Mind and Art of C.P. Cavafy*, 24.

In some way, Cavafy's perspective, with its slight angle and accent, also resembles that of a modern nostalgic, who "directs his gaze not only backward but sideways."[61] As a poet, as well as a critic and translator later in life, Foscolo also relies on the distance between him and his native island in the Mediterranean. It all comes back to the Greek hero Odysseus, whose journey to Ithaca represents a symbolic a point of departure and return for writers in exile. Thus, the Mediterranean acts as a natural backdrop for exiles and their nostalgia, giving Foscolo his first bitter taste of this "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home."[62] Cavafy's departure from Alexandria, although brief in comparison, must have also shaken his sense of settledness, tilting the angle of his worldview, if only slightly. In his poem "Che Fece… Il Gran Rifiuto" Cavafy looks back at Dante in a poem that exemplifies his own unique perspective as an exile. By quoting in its title a verse from Canto III of Dante's *Inferno*, Cavafy pays tribute to the Florentine exile while also giving his own take on the episode of "the great refusal"[63]:

> For certain people there comes a day
> when they are called upon to say the great Yes
> or the great No. It's clear at once who has
> the Yes within him at the ready, which he will say,
>
> as he advances in honor, in greater self-belief.
> He who refuses has no second thoughts. Asked
> again, he would repeat the No. And nonetheless
> that No – so right – defeats him all his life.[64]

Rather than praising the triumphant acceptance, Cavafy opts for the unwavering refusal as a poet and also as an exile. This is the same stance that

61 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 13.

62 Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 173.

63 The quotation in question appears in this tercet: "Poscia ch'io v'ebbi alcun riconosciuto, / vidi e conobbi l'ombra di colui / che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto." (*Inf.* III, 58-60) "When some among them I had recognised. / I looked, and I beheld the shade of him / Who made through cowardice the great refusal." (trans. Longfellow) Although no name is mentioned, many commentators agree that Dante was alluding to Pope Celestine V's abdication in 1294 shortly after his election. If accepting this interpretation, the great refusal here would refer to "the rejection of the Holy See," which led to the election of Pope Boniface VIII, with whom Dante did not eye to eye. See Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 505-506.

64 Cavafy, *C.P. Cavafy: Complete Poems*, 189.

the successive negation "né più mai" conveys at the beginning of Foscolo's "A Zacinto" from a century ago – a great and unyielding "No."

As an Alexandrian poet writing in Alexandria, Cavafy does not completely belong to his *hic et nunc*. Instead, he wanders off but always finds himself back in the same corners of Alexandria. With this state of neither-nor, Cavafy also declares his own *gran rifiuto* as an exile. As an imaginary city out of time, Cavafy's Alexandria helps define Cavafy's own out-of-placedness as a Greek in Egypt, whereas Foscolo's departure from the Mediterranean reshapes his own memory of home, making an anachronistic turn that is characteristic of poets in exile. In one of Cavafy's unfinished poems from 1927, the sexagenarian looks back at his city before the Arab conquest: "She still speaks Greek, officially; perhaps without much verve, yet, as is only fitting, / she speaks our language still."[65] In a mixed mood of nostalgia and melancholy, a modern exile longs for an impossible return and leaves the lasting steps for the future exiles to follow. Both Foscolo and Cavafy are the poets whom Montale deeply admired: he left various reflections on Foscolo and translated several of Cavafy's poems. Just two years before Cavafy wrote this poem titled "Of the Sixth or Seventh Century," Montale published his first poetry collection *Ossi di seppia* (*Cuttlefish Bones*) on the Ligurian shore of the Mediterranean. The poem that opens its titular section is a manifesto that turns negation into definition: "Codesto solo oggi possiamo dirti, / ciò che *non* siamo, ciò che *non* vogliamo" ("All I can tell you now is this: / what we are *not*, what we do *not* want").[66] Perhaps exiles are best described by what they are not: unsettled, unrooted, and never at home. After all, for those born Mediterranean as they are, all lands are foreign; only the sea will never abandon them.

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