

## Article

# The Liturgy of Knowledge in the Heaven of the Sun

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I discuss Dante's conception of theology and rational thinking through a reading of the cantos of the Heaven of the Sun. I address the hermeneutical challenge of understanding the meaning of the peace which Dante identifies as the main feature of divine science, and I do so by employing liturgical hermeneutics, a methodological approach characteristic of the celebration of Mass. This hermeneutical approach looks simultaneously at the constative content of a text and its performative dimension and emphasises the importance of not concealing but taking into account the unavoidable personal dimension of any hermeneutical or intellectual activity. In this way, I challenge the conclusion that the reconciliation of the Wise Spirits is merely and only a textual reality and therefore a beautiful, poetic lie, and I instead show how Dante's poetic depiction has serious implications for our use and understanding of rational thought. His representation does not rest on the application of the principle of non-contradiction as the ultimate foundation of reality and rational thinking: in Dante's *Paradiso*, this abstract principle is replaced by a living reality, and the inner life of the Trinity is shown as being the true foundation for any possible knowledge and reality.

**Keywords:** liturgical hermeneutics; peace; experience; performance; rationality; knowledge; symbols; principle of non-contradiction; Trinity

## 1. «...non quomodo mundus dat»: A Problematic Peace

There are many occasions throughout the *Commedia* in which Dante addresses the earthly 'scole' with harsh words, either directly or through one of his characters. For this reason, the reader might be tempted to believe that, in the never-straightforward interplay between human rationality and divine Revelation, the poet is ultimately advising us to discard the claims and the methods of the former and to accept the word of God—uncritically but peacefully—as the ultimate, unquestioned truth. However, the presence of an entire sphere in his *Paradiso* in which human rationality is exalted and even sanctified invites us to reconsider the problem more carefully. The cantos of the Heaven of the Sun prove to be pivotal for this discussion: the way in which Dante chooses to represent the academic world, seen from a heavenly perspective, offers powerful insights in response to some of the main questions addressed by the present volume.

When compared to the intellectual environment of the time, the peaceful reunification of the Wise Spirits encountered in the Heaven of the Sun appears as a hermeneutical challenge. Nevertheless, by carefully addressing this problem, Dante's approach to rational knowledge—and thus to the practice of academic disciplines such as theology and philosophy—can be understood in greater depth. The intellectual environment of the time was anything but 'peaceful' (see [Gilson 1980](#), pp. 325–485; [Evans 1993](#), pp. 10–16): ideas and beliefs surrounding the practice of rational knowledge were not homogeneous or unanimous. Heated discussions were carried out regarding the difficult relationship between theology and philosophy, between a rationalist approach to knowledge and a mystical or spiritual one, and regarding the different roles played by rational thinking and inspiration in carrying out intellectual work (see [Barański 2013b](#), pp. 255–56). Additionally, there was much debate when the various magistri of the different schools were confronted with the problem of defining theology itself, in order to design an appropriate



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academic curriculum for the study of this discipline (see [Evans 1980](#)). Was theology the study of Scriptures—and therefore a synonym for exegetical activity—or was it theoretical speculation? And, when considered as a practice of rational thinking, in which ways was it different from philosophy? The exponents of each school gave different answers to these questions, and the uncertainty and lack of a unitary approach gave rise to numerous controversies.<sup>1</sup> It is against this problematic background that Dante's poetic representation of the Wise Spirits as peacefully reconciled needs to be read and interpreted.

The theme of peace has been discussed by [Barański \(2013a, pp. 36–40\)](#), who has shown how this is a very original element, peculiar to Dante's conception of theology. The centrality of this theme is also corroborated by what we read in the *Convivio*, in which Dante defines theology as 'scienza divina'<sup>2</sup> and goes on to say that this scienza 'piena è di tutta pace: la quale non soffera lite alcuna d'opinioni o di sofistici argomenti, per la eccellentissima certezza del suo subietto, lo quale è Dio. E di questa dice esso alli suoi discepoli: 'la pace mia do a voi, la pace mia lascio a voi', dando e lasciando loro la sua dottrina, che è questa scienza di cu'io parlo.'<sup>3</sup> In this small passage of the treatise, we find some key terms condensed ('teologia', 'dottrina', and 'scienza') whose correct definition should clarify the main features of 'Dante's theology', and yet these same terms also prove to be the most ambiguous and problematic ones (see again [Barański 2013a](#)). I suggest that a possible, more comprehensive answer is not to be found in other definitions taken from the *Convivio* or another one of Dante's treatises, but precisely in the poetic representation of the *Commedia*, and, in this case, in the peaceful dance of the Wise Spirits of the Heaven of the Sun. In the passage quoted above, Dante states that the proper subject of theological science is the living God: in this sense, the possibility to find a single, specific, and limited definition able to exhaustively define such a discipline should probably be excluded. Seen from this perspective, it could be argued that the realm of theology would be that in which 'significar per verba/non si poria' (*Par. I, 70*), to use Dante's own words. When dealing with this matter, words cannot fully define their meaning, but they can talk about it nonetheless; 'insufficient' words will be enough for those who know how to relate them not to other words, but to an experience and a reality: 'però l'esempio basti/cui esperienza grazia serba' (*Par. I, 72*).

Before moving towards a reading of the cantos of the Heaven of the Sun, I will point out the context from which Dante borrowed his own definition of theology, because it will prove to be particularly useful, both in terms of methodologies and in terms of having a broader idea of what he means when he talks about 'peace'. It is pivotal to note that Dante does not give any further definition to better characterise the 'peace' which he considers to be the essence of theology; he refers to a story instead. This, in itself, already amounts to a hermeneutical choice: the meaning of this specific word depends, at least in part, upon the context in which it is placed. More precisely, the story or context Dante refers to is that of the Last Supper, as it is narrated in the Gospel of John. The full verse quoted by Dante, in particular, reads: 'pacem relinquo vobis, pacem meam do vobis; non quomodo mundus dat, ego do vobis. Non turbetur cor vestrum, neque formidet' (John 14:27). 'Not the way the world gives, I give to you': this is probably the best definition—if one is still looking for one—that one can find of that 'peace', and which, again, looks more like a story around this word than a definition with a clear-cut meaning to it. The text says that this is a peace that does not fit into the ways in which 'the world' generally frames, understands, and gives it because of *he* who is giving it, and who does so in a new, unusual way. But the fact that this is a different kind of peace does not make it less real. Still, according to the story that we are told in that passage of the Gospel, it is something that Jesus is bestowing onto the apostles; it is something that they are experiencing in that very moment and that, most importantly, is inextricably tied to the person of Christ. The first characteristic of this peace, which can be inferred from the text and which already shows how it differs from a "worldly" peace, is that it does not consist nor directly depend upon a resolution of external, chaotic circumstances: Christ warns the apostles not to worry and not to be

fearful, and the way in which the story continues is in fact anything but a peaceful series of events; Jesus himself will face betrayal, violence, and death.

From this perspective, it could be argued that not only is the picture that Dante consigns to us in the Heaven of the Sun fully compliant with the definition of the *Convivio*—in which theology is ‘peace’—, but also that Dante’s conception and representation of theology is ultimately rooted in Scripture. However, to root Dante’s theology and poetry in another text, even in the Gospel itself, gives rise to further problems. In her sharp interpretation of *Paradiso*, as well as through a reading of the Heaven of the Sun, Teodolinda Barolini (1992, in particular chapter 9, pp. 194–217) points to the inner contradiction of a human, time-bound, and fragmented means such as language—poetic or not, written or spoken—that claims to bring about eternity and unity. This is another way to reiterate the idea that a single, rational definition will hardly convey something that indeed overcomes it. One could say that the word ‘eternity’ is, in itself, a contradiction: its very limited, time-bound existence has already erased the possibility to touch eternity, which is instead, by its own nature, limitless and timeless. From this perspective, Barolini argues that the very act of telling a story, and by the same token, Dante’s act of depicting *Paradiso* too, can only perform and embody its own finitude and individuality, therefore only reasserting more powerfully the fragmented texture of reality, even if the story it tells is a story of eternity and peaceful communion. From this perspective, to hold that ‘theology is peace’ is to state a logically sound and yet bodiless definition. ‘Peace’ would be an abstract notion which can certainly be supplemented by other textual definitions—even found in Scripture itself—but which, ultimately, does not match with the state of things in the real world. The contentious intellectual environment of the time, in fact, simply proves it: to embrace a specific approach to theology means to discard all the others, causing an unavoidable and real fragmentation—an act mirrored by the choice made in these cantos by Aquinas and Bonaventure to tell the story of either St Francis or St Dominic. Hence, Barolini concluded that what the readers see on the scene of the poem is just and only a virtual reality, the fruit of Dante’s unmatched poetic prowess, capable of misleading their perception and deceiving them—even with the ‘good intention’ of directing them towards the good, the end goal of human desire. We are dealing, it seems, with words without flesh. The peace seen on the scene—Barolini argues—is only seen in the poem and not in the real world, and it is therefore an illusion, a poetic ‘bella menzogna’ (*Conv.* II, i, 3), or even the fruit of a Ulyssean act of hybris, which claims to bring the readers beyond a limit that cannot ever be crossed and therefore experienced.<sup>4</sup> Language, as said before, is indeed unavoidably, inherently time-bound and limited: its embodied essence makes the act of conveying eternity and unity impossible, because by its very existence, language erases eternity and universality altogether. However harmonious the dance of the Wise Spirits in heaven is, however specular the stories of St Francis and St Dominic are, the reality is that the two saints are two distinct persons with two distinct stories and are not ‘one’, as Dante would want the readers to believe, in the same way in which the intellectual environment of the time was full of difficulties and contradictions and not peaceful at all, regardless of any definition of theology as ‘peace’. All these concepts—eternity, peace, and the like—only exist as virtual realities, their bodies being as thin as the paper on which they are written. A way out of this impasse seems therefore impossible to find: the meaning of that peace gets lost in a ‘selva oscura’ of definitions and textual cross-references, and even when it is so masterfully depicted in the scene of the poem, it must be concluded that, despite the many textual definitions one could find for it, it actually does not exist in the real world, but only in the form of a beautiful, textual lie. Reality, it seems, speaks a different word from that of Dante’s poem.

Yet, I am here going to argue that the peace Dante is representing on the scene is not a poetic illusion, an aesthetic form of escapism, nor a univocal, logically sound definition. The peace that Dante depicted in the Heaven of the Sun and mentioned in his *Convivio* is a solid reality: it establishes and enlivens rational definitions and, at the same time, overcomes them. It is not by finding one single, right definition that the reader will solve the riddle:

any one of such definitions, taken alone and *against* the others, as if it were bringing about the ultimate solution, can only perform, embody, and bring about fragmentation, not peace. And the solution does not lie in an erasure of the specificity of such definitions either, because that would amount to a denial of the actual, concrete reality. In order to better understand the intellectual operation performed by Dante through his representation of the Heaven of the Sun and therefore to have a clearer idea of his relationship with the academic, scientific world of his time, we need to investigate the way in which he frames his use of language. Thus, in this essay, I will not search for the possible textual sources coming from the intellectual context of the time that might have shaped Dante's understanding of theology and philosophy: I will conduct a hermeneutical study, rather than a purely philological one. My focus will be on Dante's way of framing language—one of the most important problems for a poet—and my point will be that his way to frame language, and, as a consequence, to engage with all the different academic schools of his time does not come from one of those schools, but from the liturgy. I argue that Dante's first 'scola', in which he learns how to frame and use language, and therefore to engage with theological and philosophical matters and languages, is the beating heart of the life of the Church: the celebration of Mass. In the context of the liturgy, as I shall show, the rational content of the text and its embodiment or performance are integrated and kept together: here, words are considered as being as real as bodies, and each and every person taking part in the ritual is asked to play a personal, active role. The celebration of Mass is not, obviously, a moment of theological or philosophical activity, and yet it is an environment in which liturgical hermeneutics, a method according to which one can interpret language and ideas, is practiced, absorbed, and learnt. In recent years, other scholars have highlighted the many ways in which liturgy is present in the poem, fashioning it on different levels (Martinez 2013, 2020; Montemaggi 2016; Phillips-Robins 2021), and Matthew Treherne (2020) in particular has suggested considering liturgy not only as a container of gestures, words, and symbols uncritically used by Dante in the scene to recreate a certain atmosphere, but rather as something capable of shaping a worldview. But also, and most importantly, it is Dante himself who gives this hermeneutical indication. Although I believe that he prepares his readers all the way along from the very beginning of the journey of the *Commedia*, there is a point at which this becomes crystal clear: the first 15 lines of *Paradiso* II.<sup>5</sup> I shall now briefly outline the main features of my hermeneutical approach; then, I will employ the same dynamics employed during the celebration of Mass to read the cantos of the Heaven of the Sun. In this way, I hope to show how our understanding of Dante's treatment of scientific, 'academic' knowledge can be deepened, perhaps challenging some of the assumptions involved in the modern conception of the act of knowledge.

## 2. «Pan de li angeli»: Words, Bodies, Tastes

The care shown by Dante in his choice of words, as well as in building a relationship with his readers is known (see, among others, Auerbach 1991; Spitzer 1976; and Ledda 2002). Thus, if he gave a hermeneutical indication for successfully reading and understanding this last cantica of his poem, this must be taken seriously:

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,  
 desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti  
 dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,  
 tornate a riveder li vostri liti:  
 non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,  
 perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.  
 L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse;  
 Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,  
 e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse.  
 Voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo

per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale  
 vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,  
 metter potete ben per l'alto sale  
 vostro navigio, servando mio solco  
 dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale (*Par.* II, 1–15)

Only those few who have stretched their neck towards the bread of the angels can follow him throughout *Paradiso*, the end goal of Dante's poetic endeavour and therefore that which provides the right perspective on the previous steps of the entire journey (see [Treherne 2020](#), in particular pp. 190–92). Thus, if the readers are required to have some knowledge of the 'pan de li angeli' in order to have a deeper understanding of what is happening in the Heaven of the Sun, then we must necessarily risk an interpretation of that 'bread'. Here, I will give a necessarily concise outline of my understanding of it—which will resonate with that of other scholars—and I will show its relevance in establishing the importance of liturgical hermeneutics for the interpretation of the *Commedia*.

The expression 'pan de li angeli' belongs to the symbolic heritage of Christianity, and commentators have long pointed to the fact that, by using it, Dante refers to Revelation, as well as to the knowledge and contemplation of God—a fact on which they all agree unanimously, although each emphasising a different aspect of it. The most important characteristic of this expression is that it is a vital intersection of textual references (belonging to the written, scriptural tradition) and liturgical references (belonging to the category of performance, of the embodied, lived experience of the Church). The formula 'bread of the angels' can in fact be connected to the stories narrated in Scriptures,<sup>6</sup> to the historical person of Jesus Christ,<sup>7</sup> and to the Eucharist present in the moment of the celebration:<sup>8</sup> the same expression can be referred to past stories and to the present experience of the ritual, to textual references or words, and to physical, bodily realities. This fact is already an indication of a very specific way to frame language: it is considered both in terms of its inner, logical coherence and in terms of its adherence to the external, concrete reality. This hermeneutical dynamic is precisely what we see at play in the celebration of Mass, now as then.<sup>9</sup> During the celebration of the liturgy, the faithful can recognise the meaning of the words announced by the proclamation of Scriptures not by means of further textual definitions and characterisations, but first and foremost as something present. Even the book of the Gospel was heavily emphasised in its physical presence, together with its content: during the procession at the beginning of Mass, for instance, it was carried closed by the subdeacon, preceded by two candle bearers and a thurifer; once the altar was reached, the bishop (or the main priest) recited the *Confiteor* and finally opened and kissed the book.<sup>10</sup> In this tableau, every single element has an impressive, but not rigid or fixed, meaningful charge, whose explanatory key is Christ himself.<sup>11</sup>

The 'pan de li angeli' proclaimed at Mass is known as Jesus Christ, whose centrality is clear: *his person* is both a meaning and a presence, a word and a reality, and a name and a body. Christ, the fullness of the meaning of the words of Scriptures, is also the fullness of the presence of the Eucharistic bread. The bread of the Eucharist is known as Christ by means of the proclaimed words; the proclaimed words refer to Christ, who is present and known thanks to the Eucharist, embodying his self-giving act of love. The liturgical environment is the place in which the Word is Flesh, and therefore the place in which language is understood as the fruit of the interplay between textual definitions and embodied performances, between abstract notions and concrete realities, and between words and bodies. Moreover, since the language of liturgy is referred to and rooted in Christ, it is received by the Christian faithful as simultaneously *true* and *real*. The importance of this point, from a hermeneutical and even epistemological point of view, is that it outlines a possible dynamic of knowledge and interpretation. More specifically, this dynamic implies that the object to be known must be simultaneously approached by one's intellectus and affectus: the meanings of the words need to be rooted and embodied in a reality readily available to one's own experience; the experience needs to be rationally readable by



means of those words. In this respect, it might be worth pointing to the fact that the early commentators of the *Commedia*, when discussing the meaning of the formula ‘pan de li angeli’, in some cases tend to stress its rational character, in other cases its sapiential one.<sup>12</sup>

Another pivotal dimension of liturgical hermeneutics is that it is fundamentally *personal*: it can only exist in the form of a dialogue between two subjects; more than a solitary enquiry, it has the features of a relationship. The truth that has to be known by the person is not, again, an ultimate notion or definition to possess in one’s own mind: it is someone to be encountered and to know from within a relationship. One of the scriptural sources referring to the ‘bread of the angels’ can be particularly helpful in understanding this key point:

Pro quibus angelorum esca nutritivi populum tuum  
et paratum panem de caelo praestitisti illis sine labore,  
*omne delectamentum in se habentem*  
et *ad omnem gustum aptum*.  
Substantia enim tua dulcedinem tuam in filios ostendebat;  
et deserviens sumentis voluntati,  
*ad quod quisque volebat, convertebatur.* (Wisdom 16:20–21—emphasis mine)

The way in which the manna—the food of the angels or the bread from heaven—is described here shows that it was meant to fulfil the very specific and personal desire of each one of the children of Israel.<sup>13</sup> This becomes particularly relevant when we acknowledge the fact that it is part of a dynamic of knowledge: in this way, the children of Israel can *know* God as a loving Father both from the words through which he is proclaimed to them, all of them as a community, and also from within the experience of the satisfaction of their personal desire—from within a personal relationship with him—and a personal relationship is always and by necessity something specific and singular. In other words, we can say that by means of liturgical hermeneutics, the one, unchanging, eternal truth announced to the community can be known by each person through its happening, in time, as the *event* of love, as the act of a loving Father who fulfils each person’s unique, specific desire. One, single bread can take on many different flavours, according to the tastes of those who eat it; the one, unchanging love of God can be fully known when it is not only a notion, but when it is also enjoyed as that which can perfectly fulfil the desire of the single, specific person. This idea of one single reality manifested in and through diversity is enacted during the celebration of Mass in a very specific way. The proclamation of the Gospel and the consecration of the Eucharistic bread—the two core moments of Mass—emphasise in a powerful way the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ, proclaiming his name and offering his body. However, everything else involved in the ritual—the people, objects, words, and gestures—is revealed and understood as being Christ too, although in a different way. The ultimate role of every person—clergy or layperson—of every uttered word or performed gesture, and even of every object involved in the celebration of the ritual is to manifest Christ, by means of the relationship that the ritual establishes between him and each of these elements.<sup>14</sup> Reality, in the liturgical environment, is understood as made in and through Christ, and it is therefore perceived as a manifestation of him. In other words, during Mass the person of Jesus Christ is the point in which individuality and universality are subsumed: he is himself, the historical person known as Jesus of Nazareth, but also the root of every existing thing. As Catherine Pickstock (1998, p. 261) put it, in discussing the Transubstantiation, ‘Christ, being God, falls no more under the category of individuality than that of categorical generality’. During the celebration of the ritual, there is not only the possibility to receive the Revelation of God’s true identity, but also of all the aspects of the reality involved in the ritual, which come to be known in relation to and in a relationship with God.

Hence, a hermeneutical approach born from this environment, liturgical hermeneutics, can look at the object that has to be known as an embodied reality that is also identifiable

by means of rational words. But also, it will take into account the fact that, whenever an intellectual act is performed, it is performed by a specific person, who will necessarily engage in the act of knowledge from his or her own personal starting point, embodied in a limited portion of time and space by means of his or her very own defined body. In other words, this hermeneutical approach does not conceal or erase finitude and limitations, but fully acknowledges them: in so doing, it frees such limitations from any claim of absoluteness, and acknowledges them as the way to access truth. This way of knowing promoted by liturgy is that of a relationship, which naturally unfolds in and through time and space. The act of knowledge is thus framed as communication between two subjects who reveal themselves to one another, one act at a time, in the story of their dialogue made of both words and gestures (see [Pickstock 1998](#); [Florenskij 2006](#)).

In light of what I have here discussed, it should be clearer that the warning made by Dante at the beginning of *Paradiso* has some compelling implications. If the expression ‘pan de li angeli’ is at once textual (having its origin in Scripture) and physical (the liturgy praises the Eucharistic bread as the bread of the angels), Dante is asking the readers to make sure that they not only have the notion of this bread in their rational minds—which is still very important. The act of ‘stretching the neck’ towards this bread, as [O’Brien \(1979, p. 106, note 15\)](#) has pointed out, seems to refer precisely to the act of the worshippers beholding, adoring, and even receiving the Eucharist: it seems, therefore, that through his warning, Dante is emphasising the necessity for his readers to also have the experience of ‘tasting’ this bread. And, as discussed above, this experience is characterised by the enjoyment of a delightful taste that can satisfy one’s own desire. A taste that will necessarily be very personal for each reader and more or less similar to that experienced by others, but real and relatable nonetheless. The stress on the personal aspect of liturgical hermeneutics, I believe, is one of the key points that makes Dante so bold in his claims and so unique among his contemporaries.

I shall now go back to the Heaven of the Sun and to the hermeneutically problematic reunification of the Wise Spirits depicted by Dante: I will show how the way in which he crafted this scene follows the liturgical principles I have just outlined, and I will discuss the implications that this poetic choice has on our understanding of Dante’s approach to the academic, scientific practice of knowledge.

### 3. «*In ipso enim vivimus*»: In the Heart of the Trinity

I have explained above that the main place in which liturgical hermeneutics is found at play, both nowadays and in Dante’s time, is the celebration of Mass, and I have pointed to Dante’s reference to the ‘pan de li angeli’ as the main reason for my hermeneutical choice. Also, when clarifying Dante’s views on the essence of theology, I have pointed to the fact that he refers to the same reality, taken in its textual counterpart: a chapter in the Gospel of John telling the events of the Last Supper. For these reasons, I have proposed the idea that the core of the life of the Church could be considered as Dante’s first ‘scola’. Above, I have briefly outlined the environment of the celebration of Mass, and I described it as a very specific environment, in which everything makes sense because everything is interrelated. The celebration of the liturgy is a semiotic network of relationships in which, ultimately, all the elements involved—words, objects, and gestures, but also, most importantly, people—receive their identity from their relationship with Christ within the community (see [Pickstock 1998](#), in particular, pp. 169–219): this is why it becomes an environment able to reframe language. However, Mass, which is celebrated within the church’s walls, can still be seen as a sort of ‘shielded’ context, or even as a ‘made up’ one; something that provides the experience of a reality which only exists within the boundaries of those walls, and does not involve in any way contact with the outside, ‘real’ world. If that were the case, it would reflect and confirm again Barolini’s reading of the poem, and of *Paradiso* most importantly, as a reality which only exists within certain boundaries—in our case, the boundaries of the beautiful, written text—and nowhere else. The way in which Dante describes his entry into the Heaven of the Sun, however, challenges precisely this

assumption: it shows that the context in which liturgical hermeneutics—the one treasured within the Church—can be practiced is nothing less than the whole of reality and not just the celebration of Mass. It is from this perspective that Dante is able to see and offer the readers the real possibility of the peace paradoxically experienced by the contentious exponents of the different academic schools.

The cantos of the Heaven of the Sun are characterised by repeated references to the Trinitarian God: Dante builds the entire episode in such a way that it seems to happen *within* the Trinity. The opening of canto X, describing the vision of the whole of creation as being part of the loving embrace between the Father and the Son, whose mutual love is a third person, the Holy Spirit, poetically stages our entry into this mystery:

Guardando nel suo Figlio con l'Amore  
che l'uno e l'altro eternalmente spira,  
lo primo e ineffabile Valore  
quanto per mente e per loco si gira  
con tant'ordine fé, ch'esser non puote  
sanza gustar di lui chi ciò rimira.  
Leva dunque, lettore, a l'alte rote  
meco la vista, dritto a quella parte  
dove l'un moto e l'altro si percuote;  
e lì comincia a vagheggiar ne l'arte  
di quel maestro che dentro a sé l'ama,  
tanto che mai da lei l'occhio non parte. [. . .]  
Or ti riman, lettor, sovra 'l tuo banco,  
dietro pensando a ciò che si preliba,  
s'esser vuoi lieto assai prima che stanco.  
Messo t'ho innanzi: omai per te ti ciba;  
ché a sé torce tutta la mia cura  
quella materia ond'io son fatto scribe. (*Par. X*, 1–12 and 22–27)

It is interesting that Dante openly links his poetic act of representing the mystery of the Trinity to that of offering a fulfilling meal: the connection with the 'pan de li angeli' and with all that it entails could not be clearer. To enter an environment shaped by the name and the presence of the Trinitarian God and to invite others to follow is precisely what happens at the beginning of Mass too. In these pivotal 'threshold moments', marked by specific actions and prayers,<sup>15</sup> the faithful are invited to acknowledge themselves as part of an ongoing story (that of salvation); they acknowledge themselves in a specific portion of time and space (the present moment of the celebration) that is entirely characterised by the presence of God and by the acknowledgement of his identity as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The beginning of Mass coincides with the recognition that every action performed within the celebration and every element involved in it already exist within God and create the possibility for a dialogue with him: the environment outlined by the ritual, celebrated within the specific space of the church and in that specific moment of time, is acknowledged *as* God (see [Pickstock 1998](#), pp. 228–33). Every action performed, even the utterance of words, is seen as an act of dialogic communication: of God towards the faithful and of the faithful in response to God. I argue that what Dante is doing here is pushing the boundaries of that environment and widening them: as we can see from the lines quoted above, by means of his poetic representation, Dante is showing that it is not only just the spatiotemporal unit of the celebration of Mass that can be recognised as existing within God. In the image he offers to the contemplation and interpretation of the reader ('Messo t'ho innanzi'), he shows that indeed the whole of reality is contained in God's loving embrace, in a way that actually resonates with St Pauls' words:



Deus, qui fecit mundum et omnia, quae in eo sunt, hic, caeli et terrae cum sit Dominus, non in manufactis templis inhabitat nec manibus humanis colitur indigens aliquo, cum ipse det omnibus vitam et inspirationem et omnia; fecitque ex uno omne genus hominum inhabitare super universam faciem terrae, definiens statuta tempora et terminos habitationis eorum, quaerere Deum, si forte attrectent eum et inveniant, quamvis non longe sit ab unoquoque nostrum. In ipso enim vivimus et movemur et sumus, sicut et quidam vestrum poetarum dixerunt: “Ipsius enim et genus sumus”.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, if the whole of creation is within God’s embrace, it means that the world of academia is part of that embrace too. The boundary outlined by the loving embrace of God the Trinity is the context within which Dante sees the ‘quarta famiglia/de l’alto Padre’ (*Par. X*, 49–50), the community of theologians and philosophers of his time; the inner life of the Trinity is the context which frames the words and the gestures of those dwelling in it.

#### 4. «. . .dolce amor m’invita»: Performing Knowledge

When I mention Dante’s choice in the *Convivio* to define the peace which characterises theology by putting it in the context of a story, I have obviously stressed the importance of the context in any hermeneutical activity. I have thus shown how this same attention to context is very much present in the episode of the Heaven of the Sun. However, this still does not resolve the problem of the rational discrepancies existing between the people that Dante represents here as reconciled. We now need to switch to the other focus of liturgical hermeneutics, which is the perspective of the personal experience of the individual from within that context.

In these cantos, Dante does not engage in an open discussion regarding the different approaches to the practice of rational thinking—be it theology or philosophy. He does, however, acknowledge differences and specificities, as Barolini has brilliantly shown by focusing on the narration of the life stories of St Francis and St Dominic told by Aquinas and Bonaventure. The two great thinkers of Dante’s time are also the two souls who will introduce to Dante the other Wise Spirits dwelling in this heavenly sphere, and the way in which they do it is particularly significant. Most of these men are in fact identified by their names and/or by the main outcome of their intellectual endeavour. Here are five examples:

quel Pietro fu che con la poverella  
offerse a Santa Chiesa suo tesoro (*Par. X*, 107–108)

l’anima santa che ‘l mondo fallace  
fa manifesto a chi di lei ben ode (*Par. X*, 125–26)

essa è la luce etterna di Sigieri,  
che, leggendo nel Vico de li Strami,  
silogizzò invidiosi veri (*Par. X*, 136–38)

[. . .] Pietro Spano,  
lo qual giù luce in dodici libelli (*Par. XII*, 134–35)

[. . .] quel Donato  
ch’a la prim’ arte degnò porre mano (*Par. XII*, 137–38)

Here, Dante is able to represent the intellectual activity of these souls as something embodied in the context in which they lived: their practice of scientia is an aspect entirely embedded in the stories of their lives. Rational knowledge, with all its possible outcomes, is here presented as a process, sharing the same main characteristics of liturgy: it is framed as a *personal*, *relational*, and *performative* action with an important *communal* valence, to the extent that it is seen as an essential aspect of these men’s identities. In other words,

Dante is framing rationality and rational thinking as an act that belongs to a person and not as an abstract, self-performing activity. In writing the *Sententiarum libri quattuor*, for instance, Peter Lombard offered *all of himself*—and not just his thinking—to the Church, in the same way in which the poor old woman of the Gospel episode gave everything she possessed as an offering for the temple of Jerusalem;<sup>17</sup> meanwhile, Boethius is described as being able to unveil the passing nature of the created world, stressing the performative power of his knowledge of reality. Peter of Spain is said to shine in the twelve books of his *Summulae logicales*, underscoring precisely the fact that his intellectual activity is a means by which his identity is shown and it is shown sub specie aeternitatis: in Dante's *Paradiso*—as well as in the whole poem—personal, specific identities are anything but erased; they are fully acknowledged, preserved, and made manifest. The reading given by Giuseppe Mazzotta (2003) regarding the representation of Siger of Brabant's philosophical activity is particularly insightful: the scholar emphasises the idea of philosophy as a journey, a journey that Siger conducted following a specific 'road'—literally symbolised by the 'Vico de li Strami'—which geographically, historically, and spiritually locates him in time and space within his social context. Siger's philosophical journey of knowledge about and interaction with Revelation, not without dramatic undertones—'n pensieri/gravi a morir li parve venir tardo' (*Par.* X, 134–35)—is that which ultimately, according to Dante's representation, granted him salvation, therefore leading him to enjoy the vision of God in heaven.

At the end of both rounds of presentations, the souls are described as engaging in joyful movements, expressing praise and love for God. The performance at the end of canto X draws explicitly on liturgical imagery, whereas the one at the beginning of canto XIII is compared to the movements of the stars—which are still not something too foreign to liturgy and are profoundly connected to the passing of time and to astronomical movements.<sup>18</sup> The way in which Dante characterises the first of these two performances makes more explicit and brings to consummation the ideas introduced through the presentations of the theologians and philosophers by means of their intellectual activities:

Indi, come orologio che ne chiami  
 ne l'ora che la sposa di Dio surge  
 a mattinar lo sposo perché l'ami,  
 che l'una parte e l'altra tira e urge,  
 tin tin sonando con sì dolce nota,  
 che 'l ben disposto spirto d'amor turge;  
 così vid'io la gloriosa rota  
 muoversi e render voce a voce in tempra  
 e in dolcezza ch'esser non pò nota  
 se non colà dove gioir s'insempra. (*Par.* X, 139–48)

The encompassing image to which the souls are compared is that of a clock, and more specifically to its mechanism and the sound it produces. Embedded into this image there are two other intertwined images: that of the members of a religious order praying the Divine Office and that of loving spouses. The image of conjugal love to refer to and describe the activity of the Church—carried out by religious orders specifically, but also generally by the Church as a whole as 'the bride of Christ'—was very widely used and was highly significant.<sup>19</sup> St Bernard of Clairvaux is probably the most authoritative voice in this respect.<sup>20</sup> Here I do not have the space to explore all the implications that Dante's use of spousal imagery has in these cantos, so I will just briefly point to the fact that the lives of St Francis and St Dominic, at the centre of these cantos, are described as the stories of two happy, loving marriages between Francis and Lady Poverty and between Dominic and Faith. This is particularly important for my present discussion: in the quoted passage, Dante describes the love uniting the Wise Spirits in the praise of God as spousal love, and the same kind of love is the one we see unfolded through the narration of the stories of St Francis and St Dominic. The way in which Dante characterises this spousal love through the

narration of the lives of the two saints has fundamental implications for our understanding of Dante's framing of the practice of scientia. My suggestion is that the lives of Francis and Dominic, while mirroring each other, are also meant to mirror the lives of the Spirits dwelling in this heavenly sphere. A marriage—from a sacramental, liturgical point of view—is an exclusive relationship of mutual love between two unique persons: we have here another mark of specificity and distinction, which can help us see how radical difference can, paradoxically, be the source of radical union. Erich Auerbach (1962) has pointed out the fact that, according to Dante, the two saints were entrusted the same mission, that of 're-marrying' the Church back to Christ, and therefore, their lives, which are subject to this mission they are called to fulfil, are unified in that shared common goal (see *Par.* XI, 28–35). Dante, however, chose to describe these missions as marriages themselves and as particularly happy and loving ones: this is not just a poetic expedient without implications. Dominic and Faith 'si dotar di mutua salute' (*Par.* XII, 63) and Francis 'per tal donna, giovinetto, in guerra/del padre corse, a cui, come a la morte,/la porta del piacer nessun diserra' (*Par.* XI, 58–60); also, we read that 'La lor concordia [of Francis and Lady Poverty] e i lor lieti sembianti,/amore e meraviglia e dolce sguardo/facieno esser cagion di pensier santi' (*Par.* XI, 76–78). What St Francis and St Dominic actually share, in Dante's description, is not just and only the aim of re-marrying the Church back to Christ: more importantly, they share the very experience of 'being married'. Those specific, exclusive relationships are depicted by Dante as, respectively, St Francis' and St Dominic's very own experience of the 'pan de li angeli': the same, one, unchanging God was encountered and known by the two saints in two different, specific ways, which were able to fulfil their different, specific 'tastes' and empower their different, unique identities.<sup>21</sup> Francis is not Dominic, and 'Lady Poverty' and 'Faith' are not God himself either. This dynamic recalls the one at play during Mass: different elements of the same environment, while remaining themselves, also become a manifestation of God. The specific, personal experiences embodied by the two saints in their loving relationships speak of the same God, share the same features, and reach the same goal. In using the same spousal imagery to describe the peaceful dance of the Wise Spirits, I argue that Dante is framing their practice of scientia and of rational thinking not only as a general action, but more specifically, as their experience of the 'pan de li angeli', as a way of life made of acts which unfold the possibility to enjoy, love, and know that 'bread'. In the moment of his entry into the Heaven of the Sun, Dante indeed says that whoever is concerned with the observation of the 'tant'ordine' of the cosmos—an activity which does involve the practice of one's own rational thinking ('esser non puote/sanza gustar di lui')—cannot but have a taste of God. The different, even conflicting rational approaches to knowledge developed by these men, with all the single rational definitions that they were able to express, are like many marriages: they are like the acts of communication between two loving spouses in the mutual exchange of their persons, or between God and the Church, his bride, in the celebration of the liturgy. As I have discussed, it is precisely by putting the emphasis on the lived-out experience of the person, and therefore on radical difference, that—paradoxically—Dante is able to bring about unity, in the same way in which we have seen with the stories of St Francis and St Dominic and in the same way in which it happens during a liturgical performance. In the liturgical environment, in fact, every participant is appointed to play a specific, single role and nothing else,<sup>22</sup> and precisely by means of that specific role each person can take part and share in the same ritual: radical unity—or, more precisely, communion—is experienced by the participants because they all take part in the experience of the same God, even though that experience takes on different forms, according to the task performed by each participant. In these cantos, Dante is showing how the same dynamic also applies outside of the liturgical environment, and the specific role that each person is called to play is defined by the person's most authentic identity, by his or her recognition of the 'pan de li angeli' and loyalty to his or her own experience of it.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Vine and Branches

Does the emphasis on the unique experience of the person and its validity pave the way for utmost relativism or even for a complete abdication from the possibility of knowing any shared truth? Not in Dante's case: clearly, for him, the Truth not only exists, but has a very precise name. Barański (2013b) has discussed how, even when it seems that Dante is embracing heterodoxy, he is actually never unorthodox in his claims, however daring they might sound at times. As I have suggested above, the Church and its inner life—that celebrated in the sacraments—can truly be acknowledged as Dante's 'scola', even more so than the 'scuole de li religiosi'<sup>24</sup> that he did attend and that were still fundamental to his education. Dante's representation of the Heaven of the Sun, with its liturgical features, can have very important implications for our understanding of the practice of knowledge tout court and of concepts such as 'truth' and 'scientificity'.

Thanks to the use of liturgical categories, and therefore linking the practice of *scientia* to the personal lives of the theologians and philosophers encountered in this heaven, Dante is reframing the way to consider the act of knowledge altogether. The different, rational definitions and approaches to knowledge elaborated by each of these men are considered, first and foremost, as *performances* of knowledge embodied in a specific portion of time and space. Their different 'theologies' and 'philosophies' are not just and only different 'systems of thought' which should be expected to individually and ultimately define and circumscribe the object of their observation. Rather, these different approaches are framed by Dante as lived-out relationships: the relationships between each of these men and a different aspect of reality, in and through which they were able to know *and* love God. The context within which Dante places these different theologies and philosophies is precisely that of real life and not that of abstract thought—hence the importance of narrativity and storytelling: in the Heaven of the Sun, in fact, he does not interact with abstract systems of thought; he encounters theologians and philosophers. These men, with their personal, specific, and different ways to approach Truth, are shown as 'trasumanati': while still being themselves, and fully so, they also become *symbols* of the reality they have pursued during their lives through the practice of *scientia*. In and through their philosophical and theological performances, they make manifest a reality which, at the same time, transcends them—as it happens to all the elements of the liturgical environment. If their theologies and philosophies are the unfolding of the story of their relationship with the Truth, then their rational definitions—their languages—too become symbols of that Truth; they are a communion of 'veri',<sup>25</sup> in which none of them taken individually can ever claim to be 'la Verità', the full Truth. Their sincere and heartfelt quest for knowledge is their personal 'love story' with the Truth—hence the importance of the spousal imagery which characterises these cantos so heavily. As Dante's Aquinas will clarify, he is invited by 'dolce amor' (Par. XIII, 36) to solve some of Dante's intellectual questions, and he will plainly state that the practice of *scientia* is also a matter of discernment. It is as much a rational problem as it is an affective one: '...perch'elli 'ncontra che più volte piega / l'opinion corrente in falsa parte, / e poi l'affetto l'intelletto lega' (Par. XIII, 118–20). In the act of scientific observation, the choice to take into account the person that observes, with his or her own experience, does not mean that the observation is less scientific: this is actually a choice more compliant with the reality of the act itself, because it does not conceal any of the elements involved, including the fact that, unavoidably, the intellectual enquiry is carried out from a very specific viewpoint. We do not encounter 'science' in the real world, but scientists and their theories will perforce bring the mark of their limitations, in one way or another. This is a fact that, far from being a curse, can disclose itself as an opportunity, as Dante so beautifully shows in the poem.

The fact that the people who now dwell in the Heaven of the Sun peacefully reconciled could have come to conclusions which, from a solely rational point of view, happened to be somewhat in contradiction with one another is not an affirmation of utter arbitrariness: when these rational definitions are truly rooted in the same reality, in the same love for the same Truth, when they are different branches of the same vine,<sup>26</sup> they actually become

the manifestation, in the realm of knowledge, of the inexhaustibility of the inner life of the Trinity, in which the principle of non-contradiction is shattered by the reality that one is three and three is one.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the peaceful dance of the Wise Spirits at the end of canto X can be seen as the human, visible, and incarnated counterpart of the image at the beginning of the same canto, describing precisely the inner life of the Trinity, whose key is Christ, the ‘pan de li angeli’. The peace or *communion* of the Wise Spirits is an embodiment of the inner life of the Trinity and of many of its multifaceted aspects that can only be made visible in and through the lives of these men who left a visible, rational—or intelligible—symbolic trace of such realities.

At this point, Dante’s meaning should hopefully be clearer when he says that theology ‘piena è di tutta pace’. That peace is a peace given ‘not as the world gives’ it, meaning that it is not rooted in the univocal, abstract principle of non-contradiction, but in the real, antinomic inner life of the Trinitarian God,<sup>28</sup> manifested in and through the person of Christ. That peace does not rest on compromise and homogenisation; it is not conceded by an impersonal power, a power that is outside of the subjects involved and that would erase their specific identities; this it is not a peace born from the victory of one, single, ‘right’ rational definition over the others. It is a peace that can only surface and unveil its face as the true realisation of everyone’s most authentic freedom, which is the freedom of Love.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On the difficulty of defining theology and its difference or identification with the concept of doctrine, and therefore on Dante’s approach to the matter, (see Barański 2013a).
- <sup>2</sup> *Convivio*, II, xiii, 8: ‘al quinto cielo risponde la scienza divina, che è Teologia appellata’.
- <sup>3</sup> *Convivio*, II, xiv, 19.
- <sup>4</sup> The focus on ‘experience’ is pivotal, as I shall discuss more extensively below. Here, following Barolini’s argument, I just want to point to the connection between Ulysses’ speech, who lures his fellows into not renouncing to finally gain the *experience* of the world beyond human limits (see *Inf.* XXVI, 116–17) by following him, and Dante’s above-mentioned reference to the reader’s already familiar experience of the realities beyond human limits (see *Par.* I, 70–72) as the *conditio sine qua non* for the possibility to understand his *Paradiso* (see also *Par.* II, 1–15).
- <sup>5</sup> On the key, hermeneutical importance of *Paradiso* II, (see also: Moevs 2016). Singleton too referred to these lines of the poem as ‘the most remarkable address to the reader in the whole *Commedia*’ (Alighieri 1975, p. 37).
- <sup>6</sup> In particular to the episode of the manna given by God to the Israelites in the desert, told in Exodus 16, and referred to in Wisdom 16: 20–21. It is also found in Psalm 77(78): 24.
- <sup>7</sup> In the Gospel of John (6: 30–36 e 51), Jesus himself builds the connection between the bread of the angel and his person.
- <sup>8</sup> The expression ‘panem angelorum’, for instance, is used in the Offertory of the Wednesday of the Easter Octave, referring precisely to the Eucharist. William O’Brien (1979) pointed to the striking ‘coincidence’ between the day in which Dante’s journey reaches heaven (precisely the Wednesday after Easter) and the reference to the ‘bread of the angels’ present in the liturgy of that same day, therefore building a strong and interesting argument in which he interprets the formula ‘pan de li angeli’ as being the Eucharist.
- <sup>9</sup> For a detailed description and explanation of the celebration of Mass at the time, see the Book IV of Durand’s *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (Davril and Thibodeau 1995). From now on, when referring to the treatise, I will give references in the following format: *Rationale*, book, chapter, section (if applicable).
- <sup>10</sup> *Rationale* IV, vi, 2.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for instance, what Durand writes in the *Rationale* regarding the fact that only the bishop, acting *in persona Christi*, can open the book of the Gospel offered to him at the end of the procession: ‘Rectius igitur facit Episcopus, cum ipsemet aperit librum Evangeliorum, licet et Christus per ministros suos patefecerit mysteria Scripturarum’ (*Rationale* IV, ix, 2).
- <sup>12</sup> Just to mention two examples: Benvenuto da Imola identifies it as divine *scientia*, whereas Francesco da Buti connects it to divine *sapientia* (commentaries consulted on <https://dante.dartmouth.edu> accessed on 9 September 2023). A fundamental discussion on



the difference between *scientia* and *sapientia*, defined as ‘rational’ knowledge and ‘intellectual’ knowledge is found in Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, xii, xv, 25.

- 13 On the interpretation of the passages related to the taste of the manna, literally and spiritually, see *De sacramento altaris* (Baldwin of Canterbury 1963, in particular pp. 561–69). I am not suggesting here that Baldwin (1125–1190) is a direct textual source for Dante, but the bishop’s exegesis proves that these ideas were indeed discussed among theologians in the Middle Age.
- 14 In Book IV of the *Rationale*, for instance, Durand explains the meaning of every specific action performed, always relating them to the words of Scripture and, ultimately, to Jesus Christ. To mention just very few examples: *Rationale* IV, xi, on how and why the priest is to stand at the altar; *Rationale* IV, xvii, on how and why the reader and the people have to show reverence after reading the Epistle; *Rationale* IV, xviii, on how and why the priest has to sit down after the reading of the Epistle; *Rationale* IV, xxviii, on how and why the priest has to wash his hands; *Rationale* IV, xxxii, on how and why the priest has to bow and kiss the altar; *Rationale* IV, lviii, on how and why the priest has to kiss the shoulder of the Pope. The whole of Book III of the *Rationale* is instead devoted to the description of religious vestments, their use and symbolic meaning, whereas Book II describes the role and symbolic meaning of each of the members of the clergy.
- 15 See *Rationale* IV, i–vi.
- 16 Acts 17:24–28.
- 17 See Luke 21:1–4.
- 18 See *Rationale* VIII, in particular i–vii (Davril and Thibodeau 2000).
- 19 For the significance of the bridal imagery in these cantos, and its connection with the Song of Songs, (see Nasti 2010).
- 20 Bernardus Claravallensis Abbas, *Sermones in Cantica Canticorum*, [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z\\_1090-1153\\_Bernardus\\_Claraevallensis\\_Abbas\\_Sermones\\_in\\_Cantica\\_Canticorum\\_LT.pdf.html](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_1090-1153_Bernardus_Claraevallensis_Abbas_Sermones_in_Cantica_Canticorum_LT.pdf.html) accessed on 15 September 2023.
- 21 In this sense, the reference to Francis opening ‘la porta del piacer’ to Lady Poverty is particularly significant, especially if we consider that, in the poem, Beatrice refers to herself as Dante’s ‘sommo piacer’ (*Purg.* XXXI, 53), and the same epithet, ‘sommo piacere’, is used again only to address God himself at the end of the poem (*Par.* XXXIII, 33).
- 22 The whole book II of Durand’s *Rationale*, as I mentioned before, is devoted to the description of the main roles within the liturgical environment with their precise tasks and significance, such as “the reader”, “the singer”, “the subdeacon”, and many more. But, of course, book IV is also interesting in this sense, with the description of Mass and the duties of each of those ministers during the celebration.
- 23 It might be interesting to briefly mention that Beatrice—Dante’s own ‘pan de li angeli’—when meeting him in Purgatory, rebukes him for having betrayed her—underscoring the affective dimension involved in one’s relationship with the ‘pan de li angeli’—and shows him the fallacy of the ‘scuola che hai seguitata’ (*Purg.* XXXIII, 85–87), of the different ‘school’ he attended in his journey of knowledge after detaching himself from her.
- 24 *Convivio* II, xii, 7.
- 25 It is important to stress the fact that here ‘veri’ is used by Dante as a noun, and not as an adjective (‘invidiosi veri’, *Par.* X, 138): the truths inferred by Siger are acknowledged as substantial and real, as well as the works of all the other Spirits of this heavenly sphere, and therefore can be interpreted as proper symbols.
- 26 Still in the context of the Last Supper—which I have referred to as Dante’s ‘scola’—Jesus says to his disciples: ‘Manete in me, et ego in vobis. Sicut palmes non potest ferre fructum a semetipso, nisi manserit in vite, sic nec vos, nisi in me manseritis. Ego sum vitis, vos palmities. Qui manet in me, et ego in eo, hic fert fructum multum, quia sine me nihil potestis facere’ (John 15: 4–5).
- 27 Mazzotta (2003, pp. 159–60) too has discussed the theme of ‘coincidence of opposite’ as rationally possible from within the inner life of the Trinity.
- 28 For a study on the truth as antinomic, its connection with the inner life of the Trinity and the implications on the act of knowledge, (see Burzo 2023).

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