Chapter 1 The Divine Comedy's Construction of Its Audience in Paradiso 2, lines 1–18

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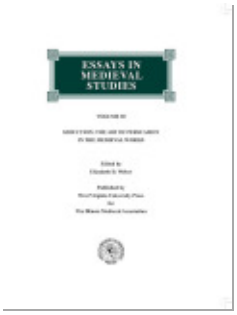

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Chapter 1

The *Divine Comedy*'s Construction of Its Audience in *Paradiso* 2, lines 1–18

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Prologue: An Unorthodox Orientation to Salvation

Before I address the question of the apostrophe to the reader in *Paradiso* 2, it may prove helpful to give some orientation to my approach by briefly discussing the relationship between *Paradiso* 19's and 20's responses to the problem of reconciling divine justice with the orthodox Catholic creed "extra Ecclesiam nulla salus" [no salvation outside the Church].[1] In *Paradiso* 19, the Eagle of Divine Justice asks the pilgrim's question for him:

> "ché tu dicevi 'Un uom nasce a la riva
> de l'Indo, e quivi non è chi ragioni
> di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva,
> e tutti suoi voleri e atti buoni
> sono, quanto ragione umana vede,
> sanza peccato in vita o in sermoni.
> Muore non battezzato e sanza fede:
> ov' è questa giustizia che 'l condanna?
> ov' è la colpa sua se ei non crede?'"[2]
>
> ["for you would say: 'A man is born on the banks of the Indus, and no one is there to speak of Christ or read or write of him, and all his desires and acts are good, as far as human reason can see, without sin in life or in word. He dies unbaptized and without our faith: where is this justice that condemns him? where is his fault if he does not believe?'"]

The Eagle's initial and direct response to this question affirms (in a subjunctive and counterfactual conditional):

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> "Certo a colui che meco s'assottiglia,
> se la Scrittura sovra voi non fosse,
> da dubitar sarebbe a maraviglia." (*Paradiso* 19, lines 82–84)
>
> ["Certainly for the one who matches wits with me, if the Scriptures were not over you, there would be wondrous cause for doubt."]

Nevertheless, the Eagle goes on to insist:

> "A questo regno
> non salì mai chi non credette 'n Cristo,
> né pria né poi ch' el si chiavasse al legno." (*Paradiso* 19, lines 103–5)
>
> ["To this kingdom no one has ever risen who did not believe in Christ, either before or after he was nailed to the wood."]

These passages pose an interpretive dilemma for us concerning the ways in which they might be read as a response to the doctrine of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. The two options seem to be as follows: either (a) the Eagle is suggesting that the temporal institution of the Church provides the *only* efficacious means of stimulating human striving for salvation, or (b) the Eagle's comment requires us to understand *Ecclesia* as something other than the temporal institution of the Church.

The reasons by which we are forced to reject the first of these two interpretive possibilities are obvious. In the first place, I can think of no work of Dante's that any serious reader (let alone Dante himself) has ever cast as claiming or as illustrating the claim that the efficacy of the Church as a political institution legitimizes either its function in the political arena or its role in the spiritual development of its flock. Quite to the contrary, nobody seriously doubts the sincerity of the *Divine Comedy*'s many explicit criticisms (most pointed, perhaps, in *Purgatorio* 16) of the temporal Church for the harm it does to human strivings when it debases itself by being too involved in mundane matters. But beyond these general reasons to reject the first interpretive possibility, in the very next canto, the pilgrim discovers that two of the souls that compose parts of the Eagle's eyebrow are the Roman emperor Trajan, who, through a miracle, was resurrected after his death so that he could convert to Christianity, and the Trojan warrior Ripheus, who is known to us only because of the briefest of mentions in Virgil's *Aeneid*. In short, Dante's positioning of these souls—along with Cato's puzzling appearance as the first soul encountered in *Purgatorio*—forces us to accept the conclusion that, in the *Divine Comedy*, participation in the Church as a political and therefore also as a historical institution is in no way necessary for salvation.

But what, then, are we to make of the other interpretive option? It is one thing to say that Dante's Eagle poses a challenge for us in how we understand the

salvific significance of human participation in the Church, but it is quite another to try to pinpoint what it is that we are supposed to derive from this provocation. Orthodox Catholic doctrine certainly allows the possibility of salvation through implicit baptism (especially in the case of pre-Christian pagans), some kinds of sacrificial acts (e.g., baptism through blood), and other means as well. But it is facile simply to insist that Cato, Ripheus, and Trajan are saved by an implicit faith while Virgil, Aristotle, and Saladin are damned for its absence. Or, in other words, the interpretive claim that Cato, Ripheus, and Trajan are saved by their implicit faith cannot be justified simply by rejecting the other horn of the interpretive dilemma posed above. Rather, justifying this second interpretive approach also requires an account of what faith means within the framework of the *Divine Comedy*.

In this brief essay, it is not my intention to offer a direct account of the way in which the *Divine Comedy* compels us to understand the salvific significance of faith. Nevertheless, I would like to hypothesize that what we may be able to see in *Paradiso* 19 and 20 is that when the *Divine Comedy* entertains the doctrine of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, it stresses the notion that possessing knowledge or correct beliefs about the reality of particular objects of cognition is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for salvation. Rather, in the *Divine Comedy*, *salus* is made possible only by a peculiar kind of orientation to *salus* itself. In a Kantian idiom, I would put it this way: reconciling *Paradiso* 19 and 20 would require the recognition that the narrative and dramatic logic of the *Divine Comedy* is bound by the recognition that the condition for the possibility of *salus* is only that a human being be capable of representing to oneself the reality of *salus* and that, in the act of representing *salus* as an end, she also orients herself toward it as the goal of her practical activities.

I think this interpretation can be directly defended, particularly by attending to discussions in the *Convivio* and *Monarchia* concerning the proper aims and relationships between Church and empire and the ways in which Dante claims these institutions are *independently* responsible for orienting human beings to two distinct beatitudes that govern and order all human action. In fact, I have discussed these matters in other contexts,[3] so I will excuse myself from this task in the context of this essay. Nevertheless, I hope that this brief orientation will turn out to have provided a useful framework within which to consider my discussion of the address to the reader in *Paradiso* 2.

The Construction of the Audience

One last caveat is in order. Before proceeding with my discussion of the *Divine Comedy*'s address to its readers, I would ask that my own readers imagine themselves as having already witnessed Dante's passage through Hell and Purgatory so that they are now, at this moment, by virtue of that prior experience, prepared to give consideration to the opening of *Paradiso* 2. The advantage of my request should be obvious: the address in *Paradiso* 2 presupposes that everyone who reads

it has, in common with every other reader, the shared history of having read the prior two *cantiche* of the *Divine Comedy* itself. I should hasten to add that I do not believe that the address assumes anything more than this about whether the reader should also have read *La vita nuova* or *Convivio* or the *Tenzone*, nor even that its readers might be familiar with its allusion to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7, lines 100–158.[4] Of course, there have always been debates about the significance of palinodes and biblical and literary allusions in the *Divine Comedy*, but I do not think it is terribly important that we give much consideration to these questions at this juncture. The important thing to note is that, whatever else in our personal histories distinguishes us as individual readers of the address, the address assumes that we have in common the shared experience of a pilgrimage that takes place through having already witnessed Dante's representations of Hell and Purgatory. It is tempting, in fact, to go so far as to say that the address calls our attention to our shared historical preparation for receiving and being transformed by the *Divine Comedy*'s ministry to us.

To show how this might be the case, I will now turn to the address itself.[5] The address to the reader at the beginning of *Paradiso* 2 is one of the *Divine Comedy*'s more overt insofar as it presents a formal apostrophe, and, at eighteen lines, it is also the longest of the poem's addresses to the reader. But it is also unique in that it seems to address two distinct sets of readers. First there is an address to readers, who are cautioned to turn back:

> O voi[6] 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. (*Paradiso* 2, lines 1–9)
>
> [O you who in little barks, desirous of listening, have followed after my ship that sails onward singing: turn back to see your shores again, do not put out on the deep sea, for perhaps, losing me, you would be lost; the waters that I enter have never before been crossed; Minerva inspires and Apollo leads me, and nine Muses point out to me the Bears.]

This is followed by an address to

> Voi altri pochi, che drizzaste il collo
> per tempo al pan de li angeli,[7] 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;
    que' glorïosi che passaro al Colco
non s'ammiraron come voi farete,
quando Iasón vider fatto bifolco. (*Paradiso* 2, lines 10–18)

[You other few, who stretched out your necks early on for the bread of angels, which one lives on here though never sated by it: you can well set your course over the salt deep, staying within my wake before the water returns level again; those glorious ones who sailed to Colchos did not so marvel as you will do, when they saw Jason become a plowman.]

This brings me to the title of this essay. On first blush, it appears that these eighteen lines of *Paradiso* 2 address two distinct audiences. And yet, insofar as the address offers all of its readers the opportunity to make the choice of whether they are among the *altri pochi* or not, it also seems to construct its audience as a single readership—a readership that, at this moment, neither more nor less than anywhere else in the *Divine Comedy*, is, in a certain sense, being compelled to choose a way to find meaning (existentially speaking) in the act of reading the *Divine Comedy*. Both are plausible interpretations: these lines either address two audiences or impose a choice on *every* reader such that there is only one audience. Despite the title of this essay, neither of these possibilities can be correct. Both possibilities must be wrong because the address presupposes something else, even if we read it as compelling every reader to choose how she or he is being addressed. Namely, while the address can be read as constructing either a single audience or two different audiences, it presupposes that all of its readers will have in common not only the hermeneutical framework of the two prior *cantiche* of the *Divine Comedy* but also the experience of being faced with an interpretive choice in light of both that common prior experience and whatever else in their personal histories differentiates them from one another as individual readers.

Hence, even if the prior *cantiche* serve as the finite history that in large part provides a determinate hermeneutical framework within which the address itself must be interpreted, it is also nevertheless clear that the address comments on the fact that neither the prior *cantiche* nor even the address itself fully determines the possible meanings that readers will glean from the address. In fact, despite all the trouble he has gone to in the prior two *cantiche* to establish his *auctoritas* as being worthy of our faith in him as our guide, Dante seems, at the outset of the *Paradiso*, to have abandoned the carefully controlled dialectic between author and reader in order to insist on the authoritative independence of his readers.[8] According to the logic of this particular address, the most faithful reading of the *Divine Comedy* is

irreducibly personal, and the most faithful reader is also the most independent and least in need of guidance in how to read.

As evidence for this claim, notice the order in which we are addressed—first there is a warning to those of us who sit in our little barks ("voi che siete . . ."). But we have not found out yet that there are any others who are about to be addressed. And, especially in light of the structure of the *Divine Comedy*'s prior apostrophes, there is not even a hint in the first nine lines that the *voi che* of the first line does not apply to every single reader of the *Divine Comedy*. So, insofar as we all come to these lines together, were we prepared to obey Dante's order, we should simply stop at the end of line 9, never to find out that there are any other kinds of readers, for whom the rest of the *Paradiso* is intended.

So what does this tell us about the privileged reader of the *Divine Comedy*, the reader who early on stretched out her or his neck for the bread of angels? Does it not suggest that such a reader is not merely independent, one for whom the meaning of the *Divine Comedy* is not taken to stand independently of her own activity of reading it, but also intrepid, perhaps a reader who is more than a bit willing to transgress clearly marked boundaries, even at the risk of her own personal annihilation?

To complicate matters further, are we not also entitled to insist that Dante's strategy requires a ruse; for who among us, whether or not one is willing to risk her own personal annihilation, could imagine that she or he is among the many poor readers for whom there might in fact be any such risk in carrying forward in the *Paradiso*? Does not the offer of this choice conceal behind a veil the truth that all—or at least most—of the readers of the address will insist either that they have been craving the bread of angels all along (even before they began reading *Inferno*) or that, even if they are not consciously interested in such sustenance, at least they are not convinced that any harm will come to them by continuing onward? This acknowledgment of the possibility that the address conceals something from the view of at least some of the readers whom it purports to address compels us to allow that there are at least three possible audiences for the address: those few (rather than many) who are competent but not intrepid, those other few who are both competent and intrepid, and the many who are intrepid but are unaware of their incompetence.

But what would it mean to say that the majority of those who do not turn back might drown? This is not a silly question, especially if we accept the conclusion that the number of readers who are either intrepid and competent enough to be saved or competent and pious enough to turn back will actually be a minority of readers. If Dante is suggesting that the majority of his readers might end up harmed by reading the *Paradiso*, we certainly ought to ask what this means. How could harm come to any of us—the competent and incompetent alike? What is it about the *Paradiso* that could possibly harm poor readers? What could turn poor readers—readers so poor that they do not even take good advice when it is offered—into

even worse people—lost people, drowned people? What is the source of the risk that at least some of the readers of the *Divine Comedy*, rather than being saved by their own craving for a meaning "del quale vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo," might be seduced either by the *magnanimo* who is leading them on their voyage or, like Ulysses, by their own hubris? And, crucially, where is the *qui* in which one lives without satiation by craving this meaning? Does the *qui* locate some kind of otherworldly reality that is the supposed referent for Dante's *Paradiso*, or is the *qui* a metaphor for some kind of human activity that might be made possible through the utterly temporal activity of interpreting Dante's *Paradiso*? In either case, how can orienting oneself toward such a place or condition pose a risk that one might fall instead into a condition that is very much its opposite?

It is not my intention in this brief essay to offer direct responses to these questions. My more modest aim here is simply to pose these questions in such a way that they establish a space in which to offer the observation that everything about this peculiar address to the reader seems to turn piety on its head such that what we would normally call the pious reader, the charitable reader, the reader who is giving the text its due, is the wrong sort of reader altogether. The right kind of reader is the reader who resists the seduction of this text, who resists the illusion of a harmonious whole, who relishes the text's carefully crafted ambiguities more than its consistencies. But it is not enough simply to be independent; one must also somehow be competent, and other than the vexing metaphor that associates competence with having, early on, stretched out one's neck for the bread of angels, we have not received a great number of clues from this address about what that kind of competence might require. Suffice it for now to say that the address does suggest that there is a crucial difference between the sort of reader who has already been prepared for a comprehension that might be stimulated and encouraged by interpreting the *Divine Comedy* and the sort of reader who absolves herself or himself of the responsibility for this interpretive activity. That distinction, though, is not to be found by identifying and assessing the consciously avowed beliefs of these readers about the supposed allegorical referents of the poem—which is to say that it is not the beliefs themselves that produce an orientation to *salus*; rather, the distinction between two kinds of readers has everything to do with the ways in which human beings might orient themselves both through and against the grain of their personal beliefs in what might be called a sacramental relationship to the text.

But, in closing, I would also like to link these questions back to the framework I provided at the outset of this essay. I would like to think I have lent some credibility to my unorthodox reading of Dante's treatment of the meaning of faith and its relationship to the possibility of personal salvation in the context of the *Divine Comedy*'s focus on the doctrine of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. For if I am at all right about the kinds of interpretive demands that the address to the reader in *Paradiso* 2 makes on its readers, then I think I might also be right in insisting that the *Divine Comedy* is not the poetic illustration of a *summa theologiae*—that is,

that the *Divine Comedy* is not an allegory of theology in the way in which either *allegory* or *theology* are generally understood. It is better read as an anti-summa, as a challenge to the notion that the aims of theology (or philosophy) can be completed in any orthodoxical or scientific project, whether dependent on natural reason alone or supplemented by God's revelation of his incarnation in and through the history of the world. Or if the *Divine Comedy* is an allegorical summa of sorts, then it is a summa that reminds us of the necessity for further supplementation beyond knowledge or revelation in its ordinary sense. Rather, as we have seen, "faith" in the *Divine Comedy* marks out a relationship of oneself to oneself that cannot be resolved or completed in any kind of knowledge, conviction, belief, and the like—it is a faith that creates a truth rather than one that presupposes a truth that is independent of our realization of it. In other words, for the faithful readers of the *Divine Comedy*, the faith that secures salvation is instead an always incomplete activity of orienting ourselves together in the shared but eminently practical (and therefore historically and politically situated) activity of interpreting the *Divine Comedy*. Or if such a reading could be completed, then, at most, its completion might occur when an individual reader's practical activity of judgment and discernment, in the finitude of the moment, is oriented to some good that can be accomplished then and only then as the only possible decision available to a free and self-reflective human being. This, in short, is what I think the address to the reader in *Paradiso* 2 calls on its audience to recognize. Those who are not able to entertain this unorthodox possibility ought indeed turn back and prepare themselves once again for this realization.

Notes

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1 Although *Paradiso* does not explicitly cite the doctrine in these precise terms, there can be no question that Dante's Eagle is, on the one hand, reiterating the doctrinal position espoused by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) while, on the other hand, orienting the pilgrim to an interpretation of the doctrine that undermines Boniface VIII's appeal to it in the bull *Unam sanctam* (1302) as the fundamental ground for the supremacy of papal authority in both spiritual and temporal matters.

2 *Paradiso* 2, lines 70–78. Italian references to *La Divina Commedia* follow the Edizione Nazionale sponsored by the Società Dantesca Italiana, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan, Italy, 1966–1967); this edition can be found online at both the Dartmouth and Princeton Dante Project websites. Translations are those of Robert M. Durling (Oxford, 1997–2010). Subsequent references to the *Divine*

Comedy will cite the *cantica*, canto, and line numbers in the main text of the essay.

3 "Dante's Understanding of the Two Ends of Human Desire and the Relationship between Philosophy and Theology," *Journal of Religion* 91 (2011), 158–87; and "Providence, Temporal Authority, and the Illustrious Vernacular in Dante's Political Philosophy," in *Time, Space, and Structure*, ed. Nancy van Deusen and Leonard Michael Koff, Presenting the Past 5 (Leiden, forthcoming).

4 For a discussion of this allusion, see Ernst Robert Curtius, "The Ship of the Argonauts," in *Essays on European Literature*, trans. M. Kowal (Princeton, 1973 [1950]), pp. 465–96; Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's "Commedia"* (Princeton, 1969); Michelangelo Picone, "Dante argonauta: la ricerzione dei miti ovidiani nella *Commedia*," in *Ovidius redivivus: von Ovid zu Dante*, ed. Michelangelo Picone and B. Zimmermann (Stuttgart, 1994), pp. 173–202; Michelangelo Picone, "Canto II," in *Lectura Dantis Turicensis: Paradiso*, ed. Georges Güntert and Michelangelo Picone (Florence, 2002), pp. 35–52; and Paola Allegretti, "Argo: 'Dietro al mio legno che cantando varca' (Par. II 3)," *Studi Danteschi* 69 (2004), 185–209.

5 Scholarship that is specifically pertinent to my discussion of the address in *Paradiso* 2 includes Robin Kirkpatrick, Dante's *Paradiso and the Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge, UK, 1978), pp. 108–29; Vincenzo Placella, "Il pubblico del *Convivio* e quello del *Paradiso*," in *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Raffaele Sirri*, ed. M. Palumbo and V. Placella (Naples, 1995), pp. 365–73; and Massimo Verdicchio, *The Poetics of Dante's Paradiso* (Toronto, 2010), pp. 12–22. Concerning the *Divine Comedy*'s addresses to the reader more generally, see Hermann Gmelin, "Die Anrede an den Leser in der *Göttlichen Komödie*," *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch* 30 (1951), 130–40; Erich Auerbach, "Dante's Addresses to the Reader," *Romance Philology* 7 (1954), 268–78; Leo Spitzer, "The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*," *Italica* 32 (1955), 143–66; William Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (Chicago, 1996), pp. 37–81; and Giuseppe Ledda, *La guerra della lingua* (Ravenna, 2002), pp. 117–58.

6 The ambiguity of this *voi che* requires further comment—it is not clear whether the *voi che* in this sentence implies that all of the readers of the line are in *picciolетta barca* or whether it, because of the restrictive clause, implies another *voi* below (the *altri pochi*). The ambiguity is crucial to a point I make below about how we come to the address when we encounter it. At this point the following should be noted: *voi che* in this line is ambiguous—it could extend to all readers of the *Divine Comedy*, or it could imply that there are at least two different kinds of readers.

7 On the metaphor of the bread of angels, see Daniel J. Ransom, "'Panis Angelorum': A Palinode in the *Paradiso*," *Dante Studies* 95 (1977), 81–94; William

J. O'Brien, "'The Bread of Angels' in *Paradiso* II: A Liturgical Note,' *Dante Studies* 97 (1979), 97–106; and Laurence Hooper, "Dante's *Convivio*, Book 1: Metaphor, Exile, Epoch," *MLN* 127 (2012), S86–S104.

8 Scholarship pertinent to my discussion of the dynamic relationship between author and reader in the significance of the *Divine Comedy* includes Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante: Poet of the Desert* (Princeton, 1979), esp. pp. 275–318; Christine O'Connell Bauer, *Dante's Hermeneutics of Salvation* (Toronto, 2007); Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge, UK, 2008), pp. 301–405; and Albert Russell Ascoli, *Favola Fui: Petrarch Writes His Readers* (Binghamton, NY, 2010).