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ETHICAL CRITICISM IN HELL: THE SYMPATHETIC
FALLACY OF *INFERNO* 32–33

In memory of Giuseppe Di Scipio, un ottimo dantista

Abstract. The *Inferno's* central conflict is between us readers and God. When fictional characters captivate us, we are normally free to enjoy their charms. Not so Dante's sinners. If we feel bad for these characters, it cannot be because they are sympathetic—after all, God put them in Hell—but because we are naive. But is this sympathy really naive? This article reconsiders the Ugolino episode as a paradigm for the *Inferno's* ethical contradictions. In a poem that reminds us that crimes often create the circumstances for victimization, perhaps sympathizing with the damned is the most ethical reading of all.

I

DANTE'S *COMMEDIA* HAS ALWAYS been a hard sell. Not because interest in its subject matter or estimation of its artistry has diminished. Rather, it has always been taken for granted that one cannot read Dante's poem without help. The intricacy of the language, the density of the philosophy, the abstruseness of the references—without assistance in understanding whom Dante is talking about, what he means to say about them, and how these statements may be mined from the poetry, the *Commedia* leaves one with a sense that something fundamental is being missed. How ironic then that the poem is also touted as a master class in clarity. Another truism, equal in influence to the truism of Dante's difficulty, is that the *Commedia* is perfectly understandable as a

work of high art, even to the uninitiated, by virtue of its affective power. One need not recognize every historical and intertextual nuance to be overwhelmed by the work's beauty and horrors, by the sheer charisma of its characters.¹

Irony of ironies, then, that the most misleading moments of Dante's poem involve its most charismatic characters in its most horrific setting. The sinners with whom we are not supposed to sympathize are often the ones readers find most sympathetic. Our susceptibility to their charms makes us susceptible to misreading. I refer to these ironies as the sympathetic fallacy of Dante's *Inferno*—the notion that the ability to affect audiences may be simultaneously the most and the least meritorious thing about this work of art, the conviction that what is most understandable to naive readers about Dante's poem is simultaneously the most misleading.

To put it simply: What is wrong with feeling compassion for sinners?

The problem has engaged readers of the *Commedia* since its inception. It is the same problem that has dogged the history of the novel, from its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century depictions of fallen women (*Moll Flanders* or *Madame Bovary* come to mind), to the twentieth century's criminal narrators (Humbert Humbert being perhaps the most paradigmatic example). Is it wrong to enjoy sympathizing with fictional people guilty of frailty, sin, or even outright criminality? The *Inferno* poses this question more relentlessly than any other text.

As Erich Auerbach has observed, every aspect of Dante's setting has "in itself an ethical significance," which determines the setting's modus operandi and architecture.² Sometimes, though, the individual characters operated upon by this architecture become "so intense as to outweigh [these] principles in determining Dante's—and our own—sympathies" (Auerbach, p. 106). In the ensuing pages I consider what this means for an ethical criticism of the *Inferno* by examining the legacy of the character who best exemplifies the challenges of such a critical approach. I explain why injunctions against committing the sympathetic fallacy undermine both the moral force of the poem and the aesthetic judgment of the poem's readers.

II

The central conflict of Dante's *Inferno* is between us—the readers—and God. When fictional characters seduce us, tempt us, and anguish us, we are normally free to respond with compassion, longing, or sorrow. Not

so in a world prejudged by an unimpeachable authority. Whatever merits each soul might have had in life, they were not enough to outweigh the sins that cast this person into Hell. The logic of Dante's setting accords no doubt to this, which is why we readers may regret how these souls suffered in life, but we are never to pity how they suffer in the afterlife. It is not our place to question God's judgment, even if only implicitly, by feeling bad about the eternal plight of the damned.

Hence the *Inferno's* most debated characters have always been its most charismatic ones, for whom audiences have swooned in compassion, longed in anticipation, and grieved in sorrow: Francesca da Rimini, condemned among the lustful for an affair with the man she thought she was really marrying; Ithaca's Ulysses, damned alongside other fraudulent counselors for continuing a voyage of discovery; Ugolino da Pisa, punished for treachery within a society where treachery is the norm. In other words, Dante's most charismatic characters test our patience for God's judgment, not just because they are charismatic speakers but because they succeed—because Dante's poetry succeeds—in framing their sins as the result as much of individual choice as of unavoidable circumstance.

I have highlighted Francesca, Ulysses, and Ugolino, rather than perhaps even more sympathetic figures, because these three are well known for making their sins seem like the byproduct of circumstance as much as choice.³ Francesca is infamous for depicting her lust as a form of "Love." Ulysses depicts a reckless expedition as a noble quest. Each character's charisma derives, in part, from a rhetorical strategy that reframes their sin as their virtue, in the process shifting the focus away from the sinner's individual agency and toward the circumstances that would make this virtue into a crime.

Not so Ugolino. He is in Hell for being a traitor. Readers' pity for him, historically, has had little to do with this, even if much of his canto is focused on the politics surrounding his crime. Unlike with Francesca and Ulysses, we do not pity Ugolino because circumstances led him to do it. If we pity him, it is because circumstances may have led him to do something else. Ugolino does not frame his sin as victimization; he reframes his victimization as sinful.

In real life, Ugolino della Gherardesca (ca. 1220–89) was a Pisan nobleman convicted of betraying his native city. He was locked in a tower along with his two grown sons and his sons' two sons, the five of them left to die of starvation. In the first canticle of Dante's *Commedia*, a Pisan nobleman, also named Ugolino, appears. He has been damned for

his treachery alongside the cleric who betrayed him in turn. Together, they are condemned to enact a kind of metaphor of their suffering—Ugolino chomps on the skull of his nemesis for all of eternity. As Dante and Virgil make their descent, they will pause to hear Ugolino tell the harrowing story of being locked up and left to die along with his four young sons. He will recount the moment one of these boys offered up his flesh in sacrifice to his father's hunger, and he will conclude his speech with a cryptic allusion to the circumstances of his own impending death: "Poscia, più che 'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno" (Then fasting had more power than grief).⁴

Ugolino's final words have intrigued critics for at least two centuries. Are they saying that the speaker succumbed to hunger, and that's it? Or is the speaker saying that his own hunger got the better of him, implying that he then committed an unspeakable—and henceforth unspoken—act? Many critics find the debate surrounding these interpretations frivolous.⁵ I do not. The speech's ambiguous ending strikes at the heart of Ugolino's characterization. If we suspect he devoured his sons' flesh, does that make us pity this poor soul for having felt compelled to break this most unspeakable of taboos? Or do we consider him monstrous for merely delaying the inevitable with the unthinkable? Either way, the question thrusts the injustice of his sons' deaths to the forefront of Ugolino's life in a way that makes our consideration of Ugolino's character indelible from his sons' innocence. Dante thematizes the entire Ugolino episode around the topics of starvation and cannibalism. This thematization places the unanswerable dilemma of Ugolino's final, harrowing moments at the forefront of the episode—a focus that cements the link between Ugolino's merited punishment and his sons' unmerited suffering.

In life, Ugolino's crime provoked a form of retributive justice which, by involving innocent members of Ugolino's family, was not proportional to the crime committed. Compare this to Francesca's and Ulysses's situations. Francesca's affair led her husband to murder her and her lover. One could argue that her husband's vengeance turned both of them into aggrieved victims.⁶ Ulysses's false counsel led to the deaths of those who accompanied him on his foolhardy enterprise. One could argue that those who followed him were complicit. In both cases, the sin leads to a secondary crime, turning a cuckolded husband into a murderer and subservient sailors into accomplices. In both cases, the crime corrupts the innocence of the victim, all the while entangling the original wrongdoing in a web of sinful choices.

In Ugolino's case, a crime leads to the victimization of the innocent. As with Francesca, Ugolino is betrayed by those whom he himself betrayed. Unlike Francesca's husband, though, Ugolino's betrayers exact their retribution on the blameworthy and blameless alike. Readers of the *Inferno* are given no reason to assume that Ugolino's sons were complicit in his treachery. In involving his children in their vengeance, Ugolino's jailers have meted out punishment that seems disproportional to the crime. This produces two forms of victimization for the sinner's backstory. Ugolino seems to have suffered both justly and unjustly. By the norms of thirteenth-century Tuscany, Ugolino arguably deserved his incarceration and starvation. It seems less feasible to argue, by these same norms, that Ugolino's crime merited involving his family in his punishment.⁷ By extension, it seems much less feasible to conclude that Ugolino deserved to witness the slow and steady starvation of his boys, since one cannot portion out this trauma without involving the blameless. Unlike with Francesca and Ulysses, the sin for which Ugolino is damned has only an indirect relationship to the suffering for which he is pitied.

For this reason I believe the Ugolino episode to be the most paradigmatic moment of the entire *Inferno*, because of the way it so succinctly dramatizes the conflict between reader and setting, between a reader poised to pity a father who has undergone such harrowing circumstances and a setting in which an unimpeachable justice precludes our compassion. Even if Ugolino deserves to be damned for his crimes, can we not still feel bad for him? One can pity a murderer for having been abused as a child, yet still consider his death-row sentence justified. May we not pity Ugolino's final days of life, and still find God's judgment for the afterlife perfectly valid?

If Dante's depiction manages to separate the sin from the injustice—what Ugolino did from what he endured—then readers have an easier time separating what Ugolino recounts in the afterlife and how he will suffer for all of eternity. When commentators argue that Ugolino does not deserve our pity, they are implicitly finalizing this separation. They are saying that our consideration of the character's suffering in Hell must not be inflected by the compassion I imagine most would naturally feel for someone whose death was so physically and psychologically agonizing. Such commentaries insist that we look upon Ugolino in Hell the way a judge demands a jury look upon a murderer on trial—separate your sympathy for a grievous backstory from the justice demanded of a heinous crime.

In order to make this demand convincing, it helps to demonstrate that the murderer is not sincerely affected by his grief so much as callously manipulating this backstory to win over gullible audiences. Thus, many commentators interpret Ugolino's speech as a rhetorical sleight of hand. They point out that, like Francesca and Ulysses, Ugolino never accepts blame. He highlights other people's crimes more than his own, all the while focusing on his own suffering more than his sons'. At times, Ugolino even seems to demand that Dante and Virgil pity him: "Ben se' crudel, se tu già non ti duoli / pensando ciò che 'l mio cor s'annunziava; / e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?" ("You are cruel indeed, thinking what my heart / foretold, if you remain untouched by grief, / and if you weep not, what can make you weep?") (33.40–42). Ugolino also seems to be manipulating his story by alluding to *Aeneid* 2.3—as Francesca did in her speech—and rewriting history: the real Ugolino was locked up with his two adult sons and two adolescent grandsons, not with four young boys. It means something very different if the person pleading "Padre mio, ché non m'aiuti?" ("O father, why won't you help me?") (33.69) is a grown man rather than a child.

And yet, to use literary allusions and historical inaccuracies as evidence for condemning a fictional personage is to judge a character in a poem by the standards of what we know about a dead man from the past. One is judging a work of art by the standards of a work of reference. I am not saying one should adopt a New Critical type of formalism, which eschews any extratextual information. After all, the entirety of the *Commedia* is predicated on readers contextualizing this work in light of literary and historical sources. A character like Ulysses makes sense within this poem because of what readers have inherited about him from other works and traditions. But this Ulysses makes sense in his new surroundings because readers allow this novel artwork to add to and revise a pre-existing tradition. We do not say Ulysses is deserving of Hell because what he says in this new version of the afterlife differs from what we know of him from other contexts. This, though, is exactly what we say about Ugolino.⁸ We praise Dante for transforming a minor historical figure into a major literary one, and then we call the fictional personality mendacious for altering the historical record. In other words, fudging facts is aesthetically meritorious (we praise the historical Dante for doing so) but it is ethically discrediting (we disparage the fictional personage for his very fictionality).⁹

There is a difference between an unreliable character and an untruthful one. The former is untruthful because of the standards of the text,

the latter unreliable because of the standards of extratextual information. *Dante's* Ugolino died along with his four young sons. *Dante's* Ugolino effortlessly cites from classical sources, implying that this character did so while alive—much like many of Western history's more educated literary characters. If a reference to Virgil is evidence of deception, then I guess no character in literature should be allowed to speak the way a poet writes—an injunction that defies the norms of most of world literary history.

If Ugolino is an unreliable—not untruthful—character, then it is in the sense created by Dante's unique context. He undercuts certain expectations inherent to the setting: the expectation that each sinner deserves their punishment, not just from the moral standards of a Christian notion of retributive justice but from the aesthetic standards of a fully justified depiction of human suffering. Dante's poem bases its ethical standards on an internal logic informed by extratextual evidence, not on the extratextual logic of Church dogma alone. Dante's setting does not demand we agree with its logic just because the poem was written for fellow Christian audiences but because the poem aligns its own logic with an ideal of Christian ethics.¹⁰

The setting establishes certain aesthetic standards which imply that Hell's punishments are just by the standards of an ethical work of art, in which the depiction of human suffering is not supposed to be gratuitous. Readers are not supposed to esteem the sinners' agonies; they are supposed to esteem God's justice. In this way does Dante's poem weave together the ethical and aesthetic facets of artistic spectatorship—the determination of a text's moral qualities (the ethical facet, whether or not it condones actions or attitudes that one finds reprehensible) and the text's enjoyableness (the aesthetic facet, whether or not the artwork provokes admiration and/or a deeply felt experience, even if this same work depicts actions and attitudes that one finds or should find reprehensible).¹¹

If readers find reprehensible the way that even a single soul is punished in the afterlife, then they have begun to find aspects of this afterlife's internal logic reprehensible, which makes part of God's judgment itself reprehensible. This casts aspersions on God's benevolence. If even a single moment from the *Inferno* throws into doubt God's goodness, then, by the standards of the text, the protagonist's allegiance to God and His messengers becomes itself potentially reprehensible—which is why commentators who argue against sympathetic readings depict a sinner's charisma as misleading. Francesca's way with words leads Dante's

pilgrim to swoon. This does not mean she should make us swoon too. She should make us think twice. Francesca's charms depict a protagonist's frailties, not a setting's. It is not that Hell has cast into eternal damnation someone perhaps unworthy of such a fate—not when *Purgatory* was an option. It is that we readers, if vulnerable to this sinner's words, are as unready for this journey as is Dante's pilgrim.¹²

Teodolinda Barolini has argued that the political crimes Ugolino committed in life parallel the rhetorical crimes he continues to commit in Hell: "Ugolino used and abused his family members in securing and consolidating power over Pisa. Thus, Dante shows the fictional Ugolino's willingness to use his children as oratorical pawns in his infernal narrative."¹³ Ugolino does not just want Dante's pilgrim to feel pity for him; he wants the pilgrim to feel so much pity that he will be inclined to tell the world, not only about his suffering but his enemies' backstabbing too. This makes Ugolino's rhetorical tricks doubly nefarious—they solicit pity as much as seek revenge. According to antisympathetic interpretations, Ugolino's rhetoric proves that, no matter what Ugolino endured in life, his afterlife's torment is nonetheless ethical. Even in Hell, he is unwilling to learn his lesson.

Never mind that the logic of this interpretation undercuts the logic of the *Inferno's* justice. So much of Hell is engineered to remind the unrepentant that they did this to themselves. Hence all sinners begin their eternal stay by confessing to Minos. Hence Francesca, Ulysses, and Ugolino are forced to suffer alongside their accomplices, thereby forever calling to mind the decisions that brought them to their unhappy fates. But if God's justice cannot convince any of humanity's everyday sinners to accept their blame, then by what rationale does God's justice operate? "Only in Hell," writes John Freccero, "do we find a clash between the worldly outlook of the characters and the mute otherworldly reality to which they are *unwillingly* subject."¹⁴ By the logic of ethical criticism, it must be this way if an artist's depiction of hellish torment is not to seem gratuitous. By the very logic of Hell, all sinners, no matter if their sin was committed in one brief moment of weakness or over a lifetime of sustained iniquity, deserve to be punished forever. In order to deserve eternal punishment, one cannot ever become repentant.¹⁵

Ugolino's situation complicates these kinds of interpretations. Since his crime is only indirectly to blame for his innocent sons' suffering, it is difficult to separate Ugolino's unwillingness to be repentant in Hell from any injustice he suffered in life. The injustice in question here is written into the very structure of Ugolino's damnation, which is why

the cannibalism question cannot be ignored. It is not just that Ugolino tells us that his sons offered their flesh to him. It is not just that he alludes to the lure of this offer in his cryptic final line. It is that his *contrapasso*—the logic of Hell’s punishment for him—alludes to this. When we meet Ugolino, he is chewing on the nape of the cleric who betrayed him. The moment he finishes speaking, he returns to this ironic feast. The architecture of Ugolino’s suffering is structured in such a way as to associate the sin for which Ugolino is damned with the taboo for which he is pitied. This renders it more difficult to separate the suffering for which any man would be pitied from the crime for which most men would be condemned.

In other words, Ugolino’s hellish punishment does not just call to mind the sin he committed against others—the way *contrapassi* are supposed to do. In thematizing starvation and cannibalism, Ugolino’s punishment also calls to mind the torment to which he was subjected by others. God’s justice is not just reminding him of what he did to get there but what he suffered along the way. The Ugolino episode is reminding readers not just of the reasons for which he is deserving of punishment but of the reasons for which he—anybody really—should be deserving of pity. “Le plus grand malheur qui puisse arriver à un père,” wrote Stendhal, “est celui d’Ugolin” (The greatest misfortune that can befall a father is that which befell Ugolino).¹⁶

III

We first catch a glimpse of the traitor in canto 32, chewing on the nape of his betrayer. The poem introduces the image of this *contrapasso* with two comparisons. The first is to someone who chews his bread out of hunger: “e come ’l pan per fame si manduca” (as a famished man will bite into his bread) (32.127). The second references Tydeus’s gnawing on the skull of his dying enemy, Menalippus. This second comparison accomplishes a variety of tasks. In referencing Statius’s *Thebaid*, Dante sets up the theme of poetic one-upmanship: the Tuscan comedian challenging Statius’s literary authority, as he has done with classical predecessors throughout the *Inferno*.

The reference also introduces the relationship between this class of sinners/sin and politics. In the ensuing canto, the image of Pisa as a new Thebes, destroying itself in a cycle of violence and betrayal, will be invoked explicitly via the episode’s many references to Tuscan infighting. The two comparisons bring together the extraordinary and the ordinary

in one linked parallel—the extraordinary circumstances of *the* paradigmatic civil conflict of the classical world, and the ordinary situation of one consuming his daily bread. Thus, the comparisons do not merely introduce the theme of cyclical violence and its relationship to local politics; they introduce the local political situation in terms reminiscent of the everyday and the unreal, as though the unbelievable had been rendered mundane by the ubiquity of Italian iniquity. The act of eating is introduced into Ugolino's story as both a mundane habit and an extraordinary necessity, even before the cannibalism question comes up.

At the end of his speech, Ugolino returns to his meal. This time it is likened to a dog gnawing on a bone: “riprese 'l teschio misero co' denti, / che furo a l'osso, come d'un can, forti” (33.77–78) (he seized / that wretched skull again between his teeth / and clenched them on the bone just like a dog) (76–78). The comparison calls to mind the dream Ugolino just recounted, in which he likens his political troubles to a hunter pursuing a wolf and its cubs. The comparison also qualifies Ugolino's earlier chewing. Now, the *contrapasso* is not likened to a man consuming his daily bread—an image both biblical and mundane in its resonances. Ugolino's chewing resembles a dog chomping down on a bone—an image of bestial hunger, reminiscent of Cerberus from the circle of the gluttonous.¹⁷

Recall that Dante and Virgil get past Cerberus by tossing earth at him, an ironic allusion to the honey cake that satiates the beast in the *Aeneid*. In moving from bread to bone, the comparisons trace a bleak trajectory, from a profitable act that provides a man with nourishment to a pointless chewing, providing neither nourishment nor relief, not from hunger nor from the “hatred” that marks Ugolino's feast. The bread of life, the daily bread that quells a man's hunger, like the eucharistic bread that binds the faithful to Christ's sacrifice, gets replaced with a parched bone befitting a savage animal. The very notion of sustenance as sacrifice, of the very possibility of self-sacrifice for the nourishment of the greater good, mutates into an image of a selfish, pointless process, as though Ugolino's speech sufficed to convince Dante's pilgrim that the image he first encountered could never be anything more spiritually or physically satisfying—down here at least—than a sad simulacrum of satisfaction itself.

It has always puzzled me why the sight of a sinner chomping on another's nape would bring to mind a man eating bread in the first place. Sinners do not have bodies that can be satisfied with food; there is no satisfaction in Hell anyway. Plus, this sinner will allude to a taboo

satisfaction that would not have satiated him so much as stretched out his psychological torture for a little while longer. On the other hand, Dante's pilgrim has made inappropriate comparisons before—he likened Francesca and Paolo to graceful starlings and Ulysses to the illumination of fireflies. Granted, the *Inferno* has already made a link between food and politics—see Ciacco among the gluttonous. And yet, it is never made explicit why Ugolino is placed in this circle; instead we get a cryptic story about politics, imprisonment, and cannibalism.¹⁸

Eating and betrayal come together in this canto because the poem's hero interprets them for us. The initial comparison between Ugolino's *contrapasso* and the consumption of bread seems inappropriate, but it does set up the Christological imagery to come. The reference to Statius introduces the political themes. The final comparison to a dog links the canto's political themes back to the sixth canto's political themes, all the while qualifying the initial image in terms more appropriate to Ugolino's backstory. The allusions and similes of the Ugolino episode render the figurative relevance of the cannibalism question explicit.¹⁹

Ugolino's *contrapasso* thus forms a kind of bookend that both prefigures and culminates, symbolically, the story of Ugolino's and his sons' harrowing demise. What is more, the cannibalism question from Ugolino's life does not just prefigure his mode of punishment in death; both prefigure the logic of Hell's functioning more broadly. Edoardo Sanguineti has made this argument convincingly. He interprets Ugolino's cannibalism as a sign of "hatred" which brings to life the very hatred—the "demonicity" as Sanguineti calls it—that drives all of Hell's "divine vengeance" (Sanguineti, p. 430). In the very next and last canto, we will encounter the famous image of Brutus, Cassius, and Judas within the maws of a three-headed Satan (another way the canto links Ugolino's bestial hunger to Cerberus's and the circle of gluttony, Cerberus being a three-headed dog). The cycle of violence and vengeance that defines both Ugolino's sin and his punishment for that sin dramatizes the temporal and moral nature of Hell overall—a realm of relentless demonicity unrelieved by its various incarnations.

IV

I have always found it difficult to reconcile these interpretations of cannibalism's symbolic relevance to Hell with Ugolino's backstory. After all, very little about the relationship Ugolino depicts between himself and his sons resembles a cycle of never-ending hatred. If hatred did

exist, little about Ugolino's story would be worth pitying. That a great deal is worth our pity is not only evidenced by the history of the canto's reception but by the pilgrim's words after he hears Ugolino's story:

Che se 'l conte Ugolino aveva voce
d'aver tradita te [Pisa] de le castella,
non dovei tu i figliuoi porre a tal croce. (33.85–87)

(Even if Count Ugolino bore the name
of traitor to your [Pisa's] castles, you still
should not have put his children to such torture.)

Thus, commentators who believe Ugolino should be looked upon unsympathetically are forced to sully the one thing about Ugolino's tale that pulls at the heartstrings: his paternal relationship to the story's innocent victims. In order to render this relationship more bitter than the children themselves render it—at least according to Ugolino's telling—commentators have interpreted the sons' sacrifice as a figurative one. These young men were not literally asking their father to consume their flesh; they were seeking, in a manner reminiscent of Christ's entreaty on the cross, their father's spiritual nourishment so as to transcend their physical torment: "Padre mio, ché non m'aiuti?" echoes Christ's final words: "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?"²⁰

That is to say, commentators have interpreted the sons' proffering of flesh as an overture or entreaty. This means that Ugolino's stony silence in response to his sons' cries—"Io non piangëa, sì dentro impetraï" (I was so turned to stone inside I did not weep) (33.49)—may then be interpreted as proof of his callousness and ineptitude, evidence that Ugolino is fundamentally incapable of understanding the true meaning of his sons' gesture because he is too concerned with his own suffering. In a highly influential reading, Freccero has described this ineptitude as a kind of grave misreading: Ugolino's "tragedy is a failure of interpretation, as well as an inability to accept the suffering of his children" ("BB," p. 157).

There is a syllogistic logic to this argument. We condemn Ugolino's responsibilities as a father based on his weaknesses as an interpreter—as if to say, if Ugolino responds to his sons with stony silence, that silence cannot be because he is overwhelmed with grief or overcome by impotence.²¹ It is because Ugolino is misunderstanding his sons' words. If that is the case, he can only be misunderstanding these words by conflating

figurative and literal meaning, which indicates that he is foregrounding the present reality of literal understanding over and above the hidden meaning of figurative interpretation. Unlike his sons, Ugolino remains concerned with the physical deprivation of his mortal life instead of moving on to the spiritual sustenance of the next one. As Robert Hollander puts it, "Powerless to give the children the bread they crave, [Ugolino] did have the ability to offer them the spiritual bread which satisfies a more significant hunger. Therein lies his failure as a father."²²

And therein lies the canto's lesson as an emblem of poststructuralist ethical criticism. If a failure of interpretation can be construed as a failure of understanding, then the inability to recognize symbolic meaning may be construed as the inability to empathize. Ugolino does not comprehend what his sons really desire, because he does not try to comprehend what they really mean. And thus are the extraordinary circumstances of Ugolino's imprisonment woven into a judgment of everyday attribution. If Ugolino cannot comprehend his sons in this extreme case, chances are it is because he never attempted to get past his own self-involvement in more mundane situations. Condemning someone's frailty is much easier when we make an extraordinary circumstance indicative of a lifetime habit.²³

According to this tradition of interpretation, cannibalism and treachery connect, thematically, by way of callousness. Ugolino's sin was to betray his city, to seek individual gain over communal profit. Via the *contrapasso* and its similes, the cannibalism theme dramatizes the uselessness of this enterprise. One attempts to gain at the expense of the community, thereby incurring the community's vengeance. One attempts to undermine from within the community, thereby enforcing a community's fatalism, as though treachery were the norm of human relations rather than the exception. Permanently sullied is the very notion that any individual ever sacrifices for the greater good. The cycle of hatred and betrayal continues, not just because certain individuals continue hating and betraying but because the intentions of those who do the opposite—those who sacrifice their individual well-being for the well-being of the group—are rendered suspicious. In a sense, Ugolino's failure to interpret the symbolism of his sons' offer is a failure to believe in the possibility of anyone's, even his own sons', selflessness. And thus is the bread of life deprived of its sustenance.

In many ways, then, these commentators are interpreting Ugolino like a modern unreliable narrator, not just an untruthful character. Barolini writes: "How talkative Ugolino is now . . . how willing to communicate

his point of view and his sense of his own pain, and how he failed utterly to offer a word of consolation to his dying children!" Giuseppe Mazzotta has written that Ugolino "lacks any perspective on himself and on the world around him." This explains his "hatred and blindness" (Mazzotta, p. 111). This makes him, ultimately, into a tragic figure.²⁴

And yet, it was Aristotle who said that a character cannot be tragic if everything they get is completely deserved. Anyone wholly bad who goes from prosperity to adversity provokes neither pity nor fear. In order to be tragic, you have to get—at least a little bit—more than you deserve.

V

Arguments against Ugolino's charisma function by transforming the cannibalism question into the cannibalism theme—a familiar tactic. When critics argue against Francesca's charms, they focus on the ways her language directs attention away from her choices ("Love" made her do it). Ulysses redefines his personal ambition as self-sacrifice (a love of knowledge made him do it). In both cases, the character's sin manifests in Hell as a style of rhetoric—as the sinners chose to cleave themselves from the responsibilities required of God's grace, so their rhetorical moves cleave the individual from the responsibility of their actions. The sinful act becomes a theme of the sinner's language. This allows the language to reflect not just the crime but the criminal. Even a single misdeed becomes "an illustration of a deeper disposition that reveals overall character" (Bellioti, p. 91).

When a decision from a character's life becomes a theme of that character's speech, an individual appearance comes to reflect a broader characterization. The sinner's speech brings to life the sinner's moral qualities, uniting past life and current afterlife. In addition, the thematization of the sin through rhetoric unites the characterization's moral qualities with its aesthetic ones. The beauty of language does not distract from right and wrong; it demonstrates rightness or wrongness. A character's rhetorical charms demonstrate beatitude—as they do for those in Paradise—or else unmask hypocrisy. The *Inferno* conflates ethical and aesthetic realms of value, not just by juxtaposing a sinner's charisma with God's judgment but by making this charisma into evidence justifying God's judgment.

As a result, readers are confronted with an impossible dilemma: to remain wary of a sinner's rhetorical strategy, since it demonstrates this person's sinfulness, but to appreciate the ways Hell incorporates this

strategy into its punishments. Remain unaffected by Francesca's story of desire sweeping her off her feet; swoon at the image of Hell sweeping her up in a tempestuous wind. Brush aside Ulysses's rhetorical brilliance; marvel at the brilliance of his *contrapasso's* flickering flame. Ignore that Ugolino was brought to the point of considering the unthinkable; appreciate the way Hell has turned the unthinkable into the very symbol of its logic. In other words, certain aspects of a sinner's story should affect us only as they relate to the setting. This implies that what is aesthetically meritorious about these episodes is the elaboration of a theme, not the characterization upon which this theme is based.²⁵

The sympathetic fallacy is a fallacy in this poem, because it assumes that Hell should be considered differently from the way we consider Hell's inhabitants, all the while harping on the way Hell functions as a symbolic extension of these inhabitants. If what affects audiences is what demonstrates sinfulness, then we are being affected by sinfulness. Aesthetic charms cannot merely be employed with nefarious intentions. Not here at least. In Hell, where characterizations demonstrate iniquity, where each specific type of iniquity is woven into symbolic systems of punishment, the only way to be aesthetically meritorious is to exploit that which is ethically dubious. A setting like the *Inferno's* can in no way benefit from its characters without benefiting from their crimes.

Does that make all admirers of the *Inferno* into immoral—or at best, amoral—readers? No. It makes us disobedient ones. The evidence for this lies in the commentaries. No critic, no matter how unsympathetic to Ugolino, is unsympathetic to Ugolino's suffering. Right after calling Pisa's most infamous traitor "an emblem for the systemic exploitation of family to political ends," Barolini admits that "there is no denying the horror to which Ugolino was subject. . . . It is impossible for any of us readers to know with certainty how we would behave under such circumstances." The *Inferno's* greatness lies in its ability to incite conceivable grounds for its readers' sympathies. We know these characters acted horribly in life. Does not matter. We also understand—because Dante's poetry leads us to understand—that no one is capable of construing the panoply of human suffering into a perfectly rational and fair architecture of pain and redemption, not even a poet of Dante's abilities. Even in the most fantastic of afterlives, no justice can be completely fair to its inhabitants as well as apropos of these people's convoluted past lives.

And therein lies the relevance of the cannibalism question. It makes Ugolino's story into a tragedy. Aristotle argued that pity is aroused when a character's misfortune reaches such a pitch that it seems, at

least partly, undeserved. When this happens, the image of a specific character's undeserved suffering may lead to the idea of undeserved suffering, and to the fear that comes when another's pain—no matter how extraordinary the circumstances that led to it—could, conceivably, be visited upon us as well. "It is impossible for any of us readers to know with certainty how we would behave under such circumstances." The cannibalism question is so important to Ugolino's story—and to the *Inferno* as a whole—precisely because it cannot be answered, the point being that one can never fully comprehend what another has undergone, no matter how much that person tells you, no matter if God Himself has done the dirty work of appraising the sum total of that person's life beforehand.²⁶

The Ugolino episode is not tragic because its sinner may or may not have eaten his sons's dead flesh, or because he may or may not care to make other people feel bad for doing so. Ugolino's story is tragic because the suffering Hell inflicts upon him forces him to recall his sons' suffering, which is tantamount to a most depressing moral: the lesson that punishment is not as fairly meted out in life as it is in Hell. The tragedy of Ugolino is not the tragedy of a life unfairly punished, but of an afterlife reminiscent of unfairness. Which is to say, nothing is tragic about Ugolino's story for Virgil. Ugolino's story is tragic to those with more life left to live—to Dante's pilgrim and to us, Dante's living readers. In Auerbach's eloquent summation: "Even though the *Comedy* describes the state of souls after death, its subject, in the last analysis, remains earthly life" (p. 132). The Ugolino episode is a tragic reminder of what often awaits the guilty and innocent alike in *this* life.

So then, am I arguing for a sympathetic reading of Ugolino? Of course. The cycle of hatred that characterizes Ugolino's afterlife need not characterize my reading life as well. One can sympathize with anybody, including the undeserving. Doing so does not necessarily make us as undeserving as the object of our pity.

NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY

1. Daniel Pinti notes "no fewer than eight learned commentaries" on the *Comedy* between Dante's death in 1321 and the early 1340s alone. This gives "resounding, sometimes cacophonous testimony to one undeniable fact: Dante's Italian audiences in the Trecento

thought that the *Comedy* needed to be explained if it were to be fully understood." See Daniel Pinti, "The *Comedy* of the *Monk's Tale*. Chaucer's Hugelyn and Early Commentary on Dante's Ugolino," *Comparative Literature Studies* 37, no. 3 (2000): 277.

Meanwhile, audiences less familiar with Dante's context have stressed the poem's intelligibility. "One might say that understanding of the scheme, the philosophy, the concealed meanings, of Dante's verse was *essential* to appreciation; and on the other hand one might say that these things were quite irrelevant," says T. S. Eliot, who is not arguing against in-depth study; he is arguing that the poem's aesthetic merits do not hinge on a reader's in-depth study—"What is surprising about the poetry of Dante is that it is, in one sense, extremely easy to read" (*Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode [San Diego: Harcourt, 1975], pp. 205, 206). No one would ever find the *Inferno* boring, writes Peter Hawkins. "There is too much passion, too much demonic mischief to enjoy" (Peter S. Hawkins, "All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante," *PMLA* 121, no. 2 [2006]: 371).

2. Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), p. 106; hereafter abbreviated Auerbach.

3. The *Inferno* damns many souls for sins we find forgivable today: suicide, gluttony, homosexuality, not to mention all the virtuous pagans in Limbo. Auerbach finds the punishment of the neutrals particularly troubling: "What strikes and appalls us in reading the *Comedy* is the intensity of Dante's contempt for those who were neither hot nor cold" (Auerbach, p. 109).

4. All citations of the *Inferno* in the original and in translation come from Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), canto 33, line 75; hereafter cited by canto and line number of the Italian. I only include the line number of the English if it differs.

5. Robert Hollander is one critic who dismisses the cannibalism debate, even if he has gone to admirable lengths to catalogue it. For a review of the controversy see Robert Hollander, "Ugolino's Supposed Cannibalism: A Bibliographical Note," *Quaderni d'italianistica* 6, no. 1 (1985): 64–81.

6. Raymond Belliotti points out that the murder deprives Francesca and Paolo of the chance to repent. However, like most commentators, Belliotti argues that Francesca's sin is merely indicative of her sinful nature: it demonstrates why she is in Hell rather than accounts, fully, for why she is there. If this is true, then one wonders whether more time to repent would have mattered. See Raymond Angelo Belliotti, *Dante's Deadly Sins: Moral Philosophy in Hell* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); hereafter abbreviated Belliotti.

7. The *Ottimo Commento* of 1333, one of the earliest, speaks of the "people" of Pisa taking revenge against Ugolino's family (commentary to 33.1–9). At the same time, the commentary to 33.85–88 also supports the judgment of Dante's hero, for whom Ugolino's sons were young enough to be considered blameless. See *L'Ottimo Commento* (1339), *Dartmouth Dante Project*, dante.dartmouth.edu. John Freccero eloquently sums it up: "The suffering of the children, like the slaughter of the innocents, represents the most radical instance of the irreducibility of evil" (John Freccero, "Bestial Sign and Bread of Angels: *Inferno* XXXII and XXXIII," in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 152; hereafter abbreviated "BB.")

8. According to historical evidence, Gaddo, the son who pleads for help, would have been an adult. The youngest of the prisoners would have been Anselmuccio, at fifteen years old. See Dante Alighieri, *Dante's "Inferno": The Indiana Critical Editions*, ed. and trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 241n50.

Commentators condemn Francesca for something similar. In her speech, she comes across as a young lover in the early days of a forced marriage. In real life, Francesca had been married for many years by the time of her affair. Martha Nussbaum writes that the poem "infantilizes" Paolo and Francesca, who "behave like two starry-eyed teenagers" (Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], p. 586; hereafter abbreviated Nussbaum).

9. By this logic, any historical inaccuracy in fiction should discredit the work in question. This would make the third person narration of a novel like *War and Peace* into a disingenuous omniscience, thereby making the entirety of the novel misleading. What happens, though, when new historical evidence emerges? Does it make Tolstoy's narrator more or less truthful, given that we might not have evidence that the author knew of this revisionist data?

10. Justin Steinberg has argued that the poem's ethical design adheres to "transcendent standards and collective norms." The *Commedia* is a "supplement to, but not a substitute for" the institutions that enforce these norms. While I agree, it is also true that the text provides the initial framework for determining which extratextual "standards and norms" to even consider. See Justin Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 57, 58.

11. In defining an artwork's aesthetic qualities in light of enjoyment, I am calling a work good because of its ability to provoke a deeply felt experience rather than because it teaches a lesson or moral and helps us become better people as a result. Maintaining at least this nominal distinction between ethical/moral and aesthetic forms of value is the sine qua non of ethical criticism, even when the interpretation argues for the intersection of both values. And while the category of the aesthetic is a hazy one in the literature, it continues to prove useful as a means of distinguishing the value of a work of art as art, versus the value of art as an artifact of a moral perspective. My bringing together of aesthetic and enjoyment also qualifies as aesthetic merit in light of recent ethical criticism, which tends to import terms and concepts from cognitive science and evolutionary theory. What was once called aesthetically meritorious for its formal techniques is now lauded for its ability to incite affective-cognitive responses in audiences. To see what I mean by this, see the following article, especially the sections on "acquaintance" and "cultivation" as responses to "cognitive triviality" arguments: Noël Carroll, "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research," *Ethics* 110, no. 2 (2000): 350–87.

12. At times Dante's pilgrim cowers in fear or misinterprets in ignorance, often leading to an upbraiding from Virgil. But these moments display the protagonist's frailties, which Dante's pilgrim has to learn to overcome in virtue of the fact that he has been selected by God to undertake this journey. Little is reprehensible about these frailties, which provide the *Commedia* with a way of unfurling a character's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development.

Much has been made of the lack of emotion Dante's pilgrim displays before Ugolino, in marked contrast to his swooning before Francesca. As Enrico Malato argues, Dante's silence is not indifference but distance. His journey up to this point—along with Virgil's various scoldings—have taught him to control his emotions. For more on the affinity between the Ugolino and Francesca episodes, see Enrico Malato, "La 'morte' della pietà: 'e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?'. Lettura del canto XXXIII dell'*Inferno*," *Rivista di Studi Danteschi* 5, no. 1 (2005): 35–102; hereafter abbreviated Malato.

13. Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 33: Dynastic Wife to Dynastic Wolf," *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2018), digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-33/, n.p.; hereafter abbreviated Barolini.

14. John Freccero, *In Dante's Wake: Reading from Medieval to Modern in the Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Danielle Callegari and Melissa Swain (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 376; emphasis added.

15. Belliotti argues that, in granting humans free will, "God lovingly allows them to choose their destiny. Instead of sentencing souls to eternal damnation, God merely respects the choices human beings have made" (Belliotti, p. 88). Thus, if God were to make sinners suddenly willing to accept their just desserts, "then God would be overturning their choices and reneging on their freedom" (p. 89). The problem with this form of justification, though, is that it projects freedom of will onto a continuum of eternity. No one chooses the circumstances in which they would like to be born, just as no one in Dante's universe gets to choose whether or not God's ethical taxonomy is valid—Belliotti admits as much when he says that sinners may not decide whether or not to submit to God's system of justice (p. 89). In my mind, the very unwillingness of each sinner cannot help but demonstrate either Hell's ineffectiveness or its gratuitousness. Either these torments fail to make the sinner understand the rationale behind the suffering, or else these torments lack any rationale at all, other than to produce suffering.

Though no sinner repents, some moments lead one to wonder whether a sinner would repent if he could. The elder Cavalcante from canto 10 comes to mind. As Antonio Gramsci has observed, the father of Dante's good friend appears "umile, abbattuto, forse inginocchiato" (humble and beaten down). See Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 1, nos. 1–5 (1929–32), ed. Valentino Gerratana (Torino: Einaudi, 2007), p. 518 (my translation).

16. Quoted in Jules C. Alciatore, "Stendhal and the Ugolino Episode," *Italica* 31, no. 4 (1954): 201.

17. Sanguineti has likened the "occhi torti" (maddened eyes) with which Ugolino turns to this meal to the gaze of Ciaccio, the principal sinner encountered among the gluttonous of *Inferno* 6. Both the Ciaccio and Ugolino episodes are focused on Tuscan politics. See Edoardo Sanguineti, "Canto XXXIII: Count Ugolino and Others," in *Lectura Dantis: Inferno*, ed. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 430; hereafter abbreviated Sanguineti.

18. In his discussion of incontinence, Mazzotta notes that the conceit of the city as a "body" politic goes back to Livy: "The basic conceit in this canto is that of the city and the body. In the classical world the typical conceit involved the correlation between the

soul and the city, but for Dante this is a soulless city.” See Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Reading Dante* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 47; hereafter abbreviated Mazzotta.

In my opinion, the themes of hunger and satiation also present metaphorical opportunities for Dante’s invocation of Tuscan politics. In canto 6, Ciacco is rendered unrecognizable by an infernal rain, which has buried him in the muck: “L’angoscia che tu hai / forse ti tira fuor de la mia mente,” says Dante’s pilgrim, “sì che non par ch’i ti vedessi mai” (The punishment you suffer / may be blotting you from memory: / it doesn’t seem to me I’ve ever seen you) (6.43–45). Gluttony, unlike other sins, stamps itself onto the body. Perhaps the body politic has been rendered as unrecognizable by corruption as the human body is by overconsumption.

19. “Such acts,” writes Jorge Luis Borges, referring to the *contrapasso* and the dream, “suggest or symbolize the ghastly deed. They play a dual role: we believe them to be part of the tale, and they are prophecies.” Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), p. 279.

20. For more on this, see “BB,” p. 156, from which this translation comes.

21. I am certainly not the first to assume Ugolino’s silence is the outcome of his suffering. In his commentary from 1324–28, Jacopo della Lana paraphrases line 49 thus: “Cioè per lo grande dolore . . . che non potean piangere, nè lagrimare” (Therefore, it is because of tremendous pain/suffering . . . that he couldn’t cry nor weep.) The *Ottimo Commento* of 1338 says that lines 46–54 “describe the fear and horror of the father.” See Jacopo della Lana, “Commentary to *Inferno* 33.49,” *Dartmouth Dante Project*, my translations.

22. Robert Hollander, “*Inferno* XXXIII, 37–74: Ugolino’s Importunity,” *Speculum* 59, no. 3 (1984): 554.

Benfell, Di Pietro, Franke, and Camozzi all offer interpretations that echo Hollander’s and Freccero’s—testaments I believe to the lasting influence of the latter two on Dante scholarship in America. See V. Stanley Benfell, *The Biblical Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Robert J. Di Pietro, “Lectura Dantis: *Inferno* XXXIII,” *Lecturae: Inferno* (Fall 1987), brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/LD/numbers/01/dipietro.html; William Franke, “The Death and Damnation of Poetry in *Inferno* XXXI–XXXIV: Ugolino and Narrative as an Instrument of Revenge,” *Romance Studies* 28, no. 1 (2010): 27–35; Ambrogio Camozzi, “Ugolino and the Practice of Divination through Dreams,” academia.edu/243466/Prophetic_and_Prognostic_Dreams_Ugolino_and_the_Oneirocritical_Practice_-_Dante_e_i_Sogni.

23. Critics also impugn Francesca’s abilities to “read” well, though in her case, the focus rests on her literal reading of literature about romantic love. For example, Peter Levine goes so far as to argue that Francesca is damned more for her failures as a reader than as a wife and lover (Peter Levine, *Reforming the Humanities. Literature and Ethics from Dante through Modern Times* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009]; hereafter abbreviated Levine).

24. *Lolita*’s unreliable narrator has been interpreted similarly. If we swoon at Humbert’s prose, it means we have been lured by a master of manipulation. Look closer, though, and we will see what Vladimir Nabokov wants us to notice, not just what Humbert wants us to enjoy. Richard Rorty has made this case most canonically. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Two problems arise with this line of argumentation, an ethical and epistemic one. Alexander Nehamas sums up the ethical problem: When good reading is equated with moral values, “it connects ethical worth with intellectual ability in a way that may make the former a prize for a very few.” In other words, if Humbert’s—or, say, Francesca’s—language is too convincing, then you are a bad reader, and thus potentially, a bad person too. Notice the Cartesian dualism here, as though we should learn to overcome our emotional vulnerability with our rational faculties. See Alexander Nehamas, “What Should We Expect from Reading? (There Are Only Aesthetic Values),” *Salmagundi* 111 (1996): 50.

Epistemically, the problem has to do with the evidence substantiating the accusations. Any clues we have of how Ugolino failed his sons is provided to us by Ugolino, the same way any evidence of Francesca’s unwillingness to take responsibility, as with any evidence of Humbert’s obliviousness to another’s suffering, is provided to us by them. Our evidence for the culprit’s iniquity comes from the words this same culprit is supposedly attempting to woo us with. This means that either the culprit is at least partly aware of the evidence being given away (implying that they too recognize the things we claim they are ignoring), or else they are unaware of giving away this incriminating evidence (implying that their famed abilities as rhetoricians are overblown).

25. Nussbaum’s reading of canto 5 demonstrates why these assumptions produce complicated arguments. She wants the poem to present a “merciful understanding of the struggles of the individual will within a tangled history” (Nussbaum, pp. 574–75). In order to do so, she argues that Paolo and Francesca “seem far too immature to comprehend one another as individuals” (p. 586). At the same time, it seems—to me at least—that such logic impugns Hell’s comprehension of its individual sinners. After all, Nussbaum’s ideal love encompasses “the whole particularity” of the individual, including the individual’s “defects, its body, its flaws and faults” (pp. 574–75). How, though, does Hell’s eternal punishment of a single category of sin consider all of this particularity without reducing the individual sinner to nothing more than a single defect? How does the love that moves God’s punishment—as the signage at Hell’s entrance states—take into account the individual’s particularity if that particularity is reduced in the afterlife to a theme of rhetorical manipulation?

Levine, meanwhile, has argued that canto 5 depicts a kind of “philosophical debate” between Dante’s view of romantic love and Francesca’s, “according to which love is involuntary and beyond reproach” (Levine, p. 3). He argues that the intended moral of the poem is to prove Dante right, to learn to distrust Francesca’s influences—not just the beauty of a lover but the lure of the romantic stories Francesca claims led her to commit adultery. This argument is in keeping with the vast majority of interpretations, which present the pilgrim’s susceptibility to Francesca’s charms—or in Levine’s terms, claims—as a frailty. In aligning the pilgrim’s frailty with Francesca’s, then, one wonders why God is so willing to grant Dante’s pilgrim the chance to make amends, but not Francesca. Is it just because she was killed too soon to repent? All these arguments allow us to interpret Francesca as a myopic interpreter of her lover’s individuality. However, they also imply that God is Himself just as myopic, or at least, He was just as myopic when judging Francesca.

26. “Maybe [Ugolino is] saying that fasting had more power than grief. . . . We don’t know, and I think that part of the tragic mode that Dante is trying to convey to us is that we are left without a definitive answer” (Mazzotta, pp. 112–13). Dante does not insinuate something unthinkable because he delights in the macabre, but as a way of implying “a sense of *tragedy*” (Malato, p. 77; my translation).