They are forms of Dante's incipient dream, barely detached from the dreamer. They speak interminably about literary matters (what else can they do?). They have read the *Iliad* or the *Pharsalia* or they are writing the *Commedia*; they are magisterial in the exercise of their art, yet they are in Hell because Beatrice forgets them.

[1951] *[EA]*

The False Problem of Ugolino

I have not read all the commentaries on Dante (no one has), but I suspect that in the case of the famous seventy-fifth line of the *Inferno*'s penultimate canto they have created a problem that arises from a confusion of art with reality. In that line, Ugolino of Pisa, after recounting the death of his children in the Gaol of Hunger, says that fasting did more than grief had done (*"Poscia, piú che'l dolor, potè il digiuno"*). I must exempt the earliest commentators—for whom the verse is not problematic—from my reproach; they all take the line to mean that grief could not kill Ugolino, but fasting did. This is also how Geoffrey Chaucer understands it, in the rough outline of the episode he inserted into the Canterbury cycle.

Let us reconsider the scene. At the glacial nadir of the ninth circle, Ugolino infinitely gnaws the nape of Ruggieri degli Ubaldini's neck and wipes his bloodthirsty mouth on that same sinner's hair. He raises his mouth, not his face, from the ferocious repast, and tells how Ruggieri betrayed him and imprisoned him with his children. He saw many moons wax and wane through the cell's narrow window, until he dreamed that Ruggieri, with slavering mastiffs, was hunting a wolf and its cubs on a mountainside. At dawn he heard the pounding of the hammer that was sealing up the entrance to the tower. A day and a night went by, in silence. Ugolino, in his sorrow, bites his hands; his children think he does so out of hunger and offer him their flesh, the flesh he engendered. Between the fifth and sixth day he sees them die, one by one. He loses his sight, and speaks to his dead, and weeps, and gropes for them in the darkness; then fasting did more than grief.

I have said what meaning the first commentators attributed to this final event. Thus, in the fourteenth century, Rimbaldi de Imola: "It amounts to saying that hunger overcame one whom great sorrow could not vanquish and kill." Among the moderns, Francesco Torraca, Guido Vitali, and Tommaso Casini profess the same opinion. Torraca sees stupor and remorse in Ugolino's

Jorge Luis Borges, "The False Problem of Ugolino," in Selected Non-Fictions, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), pp. 277-79.

words; Casini adds, "Modern interpreters have fantasized that Ugolino ended by feeding on the flesh of his children, a conjecture that goes against nature and history," and considers the controversy futile. Benedetto Croce is of the same view, and maintains that of the two interpretations, the most plausible and congruent is the traditional one. Bianchi very reasonably glosses: "Others understand Ugolino to have eaten the flesh of his children, an improbable interpretation, but one that cannot legitimately be discarded." Luigi Pietrobono (to whose point of view I will return) says the verse is deliberately mysterious.

Before taking my own turn in the *inutile controversia,* I wish to dwell for a moment on the children's unanimous offer. They beg their father to take back the flesh he engendered:

> *. . . tu ne vestisti*
> *queste misere carni, e tu le spoglia.*
> [. . . you did clothe us/with this wretched flesh, and do you strip us of it.]

I suspect that this utterance must cause a growing discomfort in its admirers. De Sanctis (*Storia della letteratura italiana* IX) ponders the unexpected conjunction of heterogenous images; D'Ovidio concedes that "this gallant and epigrammatic expression of a filial impulse is almost beyond criticism." For my part, I take this to be one of the very few false notes in the *Commedia.* I consider it less worthy of Dante than of Malvezzi's pen or Gracián's veneration. Dante, I tell myself, could not have helped but feel its falseness, which is certainly aggravated by the almost choral way in which all four children simultaneously tender the famished feast. Someone might suggest that what we are faced with here is a lie, made up after the fact by Ugolino to justify (or insinuate) his crime.

The historical question of whether Ugolino della Gherardesca engaged in cannibalism in the early days of February in the year 1289 is obviously insoluble. The aesthetic or literary problem is of a very different order. It may be stated thus: Did Dante want us to believe that Ugolino (the Ugolino of his *Inferno,* not history's Ugolino) ate his children's flesh? I would hazard this response: Dante did not want us to believe it, but he wanted us to suspect it.[1] Uncertainty is part of his design. Ugolino gnaws the base of the archbishop's skull; Ugolino dreams of sharp-fanged dogs ripping the wolves' flanks (*"e con l'agute scane/mi parea lor veder fender li fianchi"*). Driven by grief, Ugolino bites his hands; Ugolino hears his children implausibly offering him their flesh; Ugolino, having delivered the ambiguous line, turns back to gnaw the archbishop's skull. Such acts suggest or symbolize the ghastly deed. They play a dual role: we believe them to be part of the tale, and they are prophecies.

Robert Louis Stevenson ("Some Gentlemen in Fiction") observes that a book's characters are only strings of words; blasphemous as this may sound to us, Achilles and Peer Gynt, Robinson Crusoe and Don Quixote, may be reduced to it. The powerful men who ruled the earth, as well: Alexander is one string of words, Attila another. We should say of Ugolino that he is a verbal texture consisting of about thirty tercets. Should we include the idea of cannibalism in this texture? I repeat that we should suspect it, with uncertainty and dread. To affirm or deny Ugolino's monstrous crime is less tremendous than to have some glimpse of it.

The pronouncement "A book is the words that comprise it" risks seeming an insipid axiom. Nevertheless, we are all inclined to believe that there is a form separable from the content and that ten minutes of conversation with Henry James would reveal to us the "true" plot of *The Turn of the Screw.* I think that the truth is not like that; I think that Dante did not know any more about Ugolino than his tercets relate. Schopenhauer declared that the first volume of his major work consists of a single thought, and that he could find no more concise way of conveying it. Dante, on the contrary, would say that whatever he imagined about Ugolino is present in the debated tercets.

In real time, in history, whenever a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates and loses the others. Such is not the case in the ambiguous time of art, which is similar to that of hope and oblivion. In that time, Hamlet is sane and is mad.[2] In the darkness of his Tower of Hunger, Ugolino devours and does not devour the beloved corpses, and this undulating imprecision, this uncertainty, is the strange matter of which he is made. Thus, with two possible deaths, did Dante dream him, and thus will the generations dream him.

[1948] *[EA]*

[1] Luigi Pietrobono observes "that the *digiuno* does not affirm Ugolino's guilt, but allows it to be inferred, without damage to art or to historical rigor. It is enough that we judge it *possible*" (*Inferno,* 47).

[2] Two famous ambiguities may aptly be recalled here, as curiosities. The first, Quevedo's *"sangrienta luna,"* the bloody moon that is at once the moon over the battlefields and the moon of the Ottoman flag; the other, the "mortal moon" of Shakespeare's Sonnet 107, which is the moon in the heavens and the Virgin Queen.