

# The Death and Damnation of Poetry in *Inferno* XXXI–XXXIV: Ugolino and Narrative as an Instrument of Revenge

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Dante has an increasingly hard time progressing on his journey *and* in writing poetry about it as he approaches the bottom of the *Inferno*. Symbolic expression loses its grip before the nullity of absolute evil. Language returns to a pre-semiological state of signifying like a brute thing — especially by virtue of the concrete, literal, root senses of words that are reactivated as their conventional sense fails. Most penetratingly, Dante dramatizes in Ugolino the way that narrative, as used for revenge by the damned self, can kill meaning. Rather than opening events to being understood in their true purport, Ugolino’s narrative attempts to fix one hate-driven conclusion and blot out all other potentially redemptive meanings of events. Thus, the raw significance of eating flesh is stripped of the sacramental significance it has for his sons, whose gestures imitate those of the Son of God. Ugolino’s rage blinds him to every meaning other than revenge. Dante runs a similar risk: this episode exposes his own penchant for using narrative as an instrument of revenge. He thereby indirectly confesses to the damning sin of producing narrative that serves his own anger, thereby opening his poetry to redemption by grace and purgation in the sequel.

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In the last major structural division of Dante’s *Inferno*, the well of Cocytus, where traitors are punished, the difficulty of progress increases; it approaches a zero-point, not only for the pilgrim but also, and expressly, for the poet. These two kinds of difficulty have been linked before: for example Dante’s weariness and Virgil’s exhortations to exert in order to make an enduring mark and achieve fame (*Inferno* XXIV. 46–51), for example, apply not only to the pilgrim struggling over the rough ridges of Hell, but also indirectly to the writer descending ever deeper into the representation of ever more unspeakable sin. Here, at the bottom of the universe (‘fondo

a tutto l'universo', XXXII. 8), Hell explicitly becomes a 'place about which to speak is hard' ('loco onde parlare è duro', XXXII. 14). Writing becomes as hard as the rock and ice at the bottom of the pit. The writer can only wish that he had adequately harsh rhymes to represent it:

S'io avessi le rime aspre e chioce  
 come si converrebbe al tristo buco  
 sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce . . . (XXXII. 1-3)<sup>1</sup>

Here, Dante apparently abandons his aspirations towards higher interpretative significance and attempts simply to describe the literal reality before him ('discriver fondo a tutto l'universo'), which is arduous enough, not a task to be taken lightly or in jest ('ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo', XXXII. 7-8). The Muses are invoked once again to ensure that the saying does not diverge from the facts ('sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso', XXXII. 12).

Yet just such plain, literal description of Hell proves impossible, and as Dante descends via the giants of classical fame into the frozen lake of Cocytus, the journey is turned back virtually into myth, which is all that this poetic production of the eternal world can really be, at least in the absence of divine grace. At the same time, the myth is defined in the most factually objective terms, for example, by the comparison of Nimrod's face to the bronze pine cone that once stood outside St Peter's. Such reduction of the mythic to the factual signals a deflation and a deadening of the symbolic potential of literary signs. Despite scattered signs of moving towards apocalypse (for example, the trumpet blast announcing war in XXXI. 12), the ultimate disclosure in this section — and consequently in the conclusion to the *Inferno* as a whole — is disclosure only of sound and fury signifying nothing. Satan, like the evil he perfectly personifies, is in fact a perfect nullity.<sup>2</sup> So is all human effort, including writing, in the end, nothing — unless something can be made of this nothing by a wholly other power, a power that declares itself thereby as transcendent and divine.

Already at the end of the Malebolge, Dante represented himself as speechless with shame, having been reprimanded by Virgil for being transfixed before the scuffle between Mastro Adamo and Simon Greco (XXX. 130-36). He points out that it is ironically his very inability to excuse himself that excuses him:

tal mi fec'io, non possendo parlare,  
 che disiava scusarmi, e scusava  
 me tuttavia, e nol mi credea fare. (XXX. 139-40)

That he does not and cannot say what he would like to say is the exact expression of the bitter embarrassment and shame that overpowers him. Such an expression by negation of expression becomes, at some level, Dante's mode, most importantly as a writer, as he bears down on the inexpressible absolute nullity of Hell. Dante has had to evolve a negative form of expression throughout his journey, and now he must complete and perfect it. The reality he aims to convey, namely, absolute evil, is, strictly considered, nothing and therefore without significance and literally unsignifiable. This makes him impotent as a writer, and paralleling this writerly impotence Dante as a character, too, is denied speech as he passively submits to the grasp of the giants.

The linguistic impasse Dante reaches at the core of Hell is emblemized in the figure of Nimrod, the main instigator and engineer of the building of the tower of Babel and thereby of the fall of human language into confusion, according to Genesis 11: 1–11. Nimrod presides, with a language that has degenerated to unintelligibility (XXXI. 67), over Dante's descent to the ninth and last circle of Hell. Reminiscent of Nimrod's leading role in the building of the Tower of Babel, the giants appear to Dante in the illusory form of towers: they are seen to 'tower' ('torreggiavan', XXXI. 43) above the well of Cocytus. Again, as Dante is lowered by Antaeus, he perceives the giant as a tower of Bologna, 'la Garisenda', leaning over him (XXXI. 136–38). The 'reality' of the literal giants is thereby changed back into the imagination's figure for them — the tower. In the collapse of language to the level of literal fact, literal sense itself tends to collapse back upon the metaphors lying at the origin of words.

One of Dante's techniques throughout the *Inferno* is to literalize the language that he uses to describe features of Hell, taking his cue from the root meaning of metaphors in order to determine the literal reality that is represented. The simonist popes who put money in their purses end up literally 'impursing' themselves ('mi misi in borsa', as Nicolas III says in XIX. 72) in the pouches ('bolge') of the Malebolge. Such cases suggest how language can become most revealing by a kind of failure to signify in the usual way. They reveal a crassly literal, crudely true meaning beneath language's overt meaning as used for conscious purposes of representation — and, inevitably, also misrepresentation. This meaning remains as a stubborn residue and resists the motivated manipulations of sense. Another more basic level of meaning below the conventional level of signification emerges from the concrete sense of words taken according to their etymological meanings based typically on the physical content of images. Such displacement and apparent distortion by improper metaphorical language turns out to disclose a deeper, truer reality beneath what is said by the official, conventional meanings of words.

As Dante descends to the last circle of Hell via the giants in XXXI, he makes much out of the optical illusion they present to him in their guise as towers, emphasizing at the end of the Malebolge how sight can be just as deceptive as discourse. This suggests that there is no reliable standard for judgement in the *Inferno*. And yet it is precisely this uncertainty that is superlatively revealing about the human condition. When language shakes itself loose from conscious, conceptual control and meaning spills over into metaphor, the author or authoritative statement may be undermined, but the truth thereby first finds a way to get out. Language in the poem lets us 'see' a truth that cannot as such be consciously and deliberately said.

The canto immediately following Dante's being lowered by the giant Antaeus harps on the inadequacy of language to present the reality the poet has to describe: 'S'io avessi le rime aspre e chioce . . .' (XXXII. 1). The dead-wood literalness of language comes to stand for its lack of transitivity, of referential transparency — and especially of transcendence in a theological sense. While the *Inferno* tends to concretize the literal meaning of its own language, in the *Paradiso* language is metaphorical in a sense that points away from the concrete towards infinitely open and ineffable meaning. Here, in Hell, it is not the Infinite and divine that is being contemplated, at least not directly, but fallen and sinful humanity. Language's falling into the dark opacity of the literal expresses this. Here the truth is a matter of facing brute facts — most immediately and intimately a matter of facing oneself without the distorting

lens of language. Dante must take the lead in this process of self-exposure. His *vision* of himself in the *spectacle* of the damned comes to articulation in the question put to him by Camiscion de' Pazzi: 'Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi?' (XXXII. 54).

In the last circle of the *Inferno*, it finally becomes explicit that Dante is viewing himself in the sinners he encounters — here, those that are frozen in the lake of Cocytus. However, most importantly as writer, and not only as character, Dante has shown himself to be complicit in the sins examined in each region of Hell. His interpretative acts as poet are equivocally adulterated with falsehood in the forms specifically of sensuality, violence, and fraud. In the last segment of the *Inferno*, Dante concentrates on writing no longer merely as fraudulent but as outright treacherous. His very act of writing and publishing about Hell betrays certain individuals (Canto XXXII. 55–69 and 116–23 furnish two lists of five names each) to everlasting reprobation in the minds of fellow humans and in history, and Dante is perhaps somewhat sadistically conscious of this power as a punishing weapon he can wield. In this vein, he (now as protagonist) reviles Bocca degli Abati, taunting him with the promise to carry news of his damnation back to the living:

... malvagio traditor; ch'a la tua onta  
io porterò di te vere novelle. (XXXII. 110–11)

It is striking and really quite shocking to see how Dante is now meting out, with genuinely hateful animus, the punishments of Hell before which he had previously recoiled in pity and horror. While crossing the lake with sinners frozen in it, he kicks Bocca degli Abati in the face — whether by destiny or by fortune he does not know ('se voler fu o destino o fortuna | non so', XXXII. 76). Again, the levels of character and poet interact, and the insinuation of culpability creeps from the one to the other.

Perhaps the most deliberate illustration of Dante's actually practising treachery among and upon the treacherous is his treatment of Frate Alberigo. Dante promises to relieve Alberigo of the heavy visor of ice congealed on his brow in exchange for the sinner's story, but he expresses this promise equivocally in a conditional: 's'io non ti disbrigo, | al fondo de la ghiaccia ir mi convegna' (XXXIII. 115–17). Since that is exactly where he is going anyway, he can omit performing the favour requested without technically breaking the word of his promise, even while betraying the soul with whom the pact was made.

Dante is seen torturing Bocca, pulling his hair out while he screams, in order to force him to reveal his identity. It is uncannily accurate that the voice that then cries out Bocca's name should ask, 'Qual diavol ti tocca?' (XXXII. 108). Dante himself has assumed the role of a punishing devil in this awful bottom of the infernal abyss. Dante as character, here and elsewhere in the *Inferno*, in this way doubles the writer — the prodigious inventor of so many devilish designs of punishments imagined as inflicted, as if for his own revenge, on many whom he had reasons to hate and, in fact, resented in real life.

Dante the writer's complicity in treachery is scrutinized above all in the justly famous episode presenting the Count Ugolino, where the veritably Satanic potential of narrative is terrifyingly exposed. Dante is here concerned to show how the art of narrative can be a treacherous instrument of suppressing and killing meaning. This

*exposé* is the more poignant in that it occurs within Dante's own revenge narrative, and thus may bear a sharply self-critical edge. While narrative ideally reveals meaning and discloses truth, it also remakes whatever it reveals in the image of the narrator: narrative inevitably shapes what it tells and moulds it to the motivations and character of the teller. Consequently, the true meaning of the story can be buried beneath the infernal purposes of an evil narrator. Narration can in this case be turned into a highly destructive engine of sin.

Ugolino's speech begins with the *topos* of how the telling of a tale about painful experience renews the pain. He remarks that the experience of pain in a sense can even (re)originate in the verbal imitation in narrative of past pain. The thinking about pain, which issues in narrative, renews that very pain, as Ugolino protests:

Tu vuo' ch'io rinovelli  
disperato dolor che 'l cor mi preme  
già pur pensando, pria ch'io ne favelli. (XXXIII. 4–6)

This echoes the *incipit* to Francesca's oration — itself based on the lines of Aeneas to Dido at the beginning of his tale of travels and woe in Book II of the *Aeneid* — which is in turn an echo of Odysseus's proem to his autobiographical narrative of adventures in the *Odyssey*, Books IX–XII. Dante began his own *Inferno* the same way with the phrase 'the fear renews in thought' ('nel pensier rinova la paura', I. 6). Here in Cocytus, where traitors are punished, this *topos* of narrative self-consciousness, par excellence, signals Dante's attention to the intentional use of narrative for its potential of inflicting pain — and also for betrayal.

Ugolino's speech — and even more emphatically what he does not say — constitutes a reflection on rhetoric and its fatal traps, its aptitude for becoming treacherous. Dante indicts the art of rhetoric more mercilessly than ever before in this all-out onslaught upon the presumption built into human rhetorical projects, not excepting the *Inferno* itself. Ugolino uses the form of his story as a weapon of revenge upon the bishop against whom he burns eternally in hatred. His aim in speaking is none other than that his words might be seeds bearing the fruit of infamy for the enemy whose temples he gnaws (XXXIII. 7–9). And in the intensity of his malicious purpose, he is devilishly deaf to the redemptive possibilities of the situation he describes, however tragic it may be: concentrated on the vengeful aim of his own rhetoric, he closes off and seals this story with a meaning that satisfies only his own hate. He misses the broader human meaning and indeed the divine, Eucharistic significance of this fatal ordeal, which his young sons, in contrast, are able to discern and communicate. The narrative itself and the events it relates are full of signs of this potentially redemptive meaning, but to Ugolino all other possibilities of meaning besides those serving his own revenge are as dead and frozen as the ice of Cocytus. His all-consuming rage is made incarnate in the 'bestial segno' (XXXII.133) that he himself has become, gnawing in ghastly, mock-Eucharistic fashion on the flesh of his enemy's skull.

Ugolino's account shows exactly what it means to be imprisoned — not only in the tower that for him has the name of 'hunger', but also within *narrative*. Indeed, this 'tower' will continue to enclose other persons ('e che convien ch'altrui ancor si chiuda', XXXIII. 24), and it will continue to enclose Ugolino in and by his narrative, which he repeats perpetually in the text of the *Inferno*. There he remains, eternally obsessed with the unconscionable facts of his demise. He is unable to see beyond them

to any higher meaning, such as is nevertheless poignantly expressed, particularly by his sons' Christological gestures. They offer their own flesh ('carni') in sacrifice to their father (XXXIII. 61–63) and echo the cry of abandon by Christ on the Cross to his Father (XXXIII. 69).

The sons offer themselves with the words 'mangi di noi' in recognition of their progenitor's right over all that they are: 'tu ne vestisti | queste miseri carni, e tu le spogli' (XXXIII. 62–63). They are saying, in effect, 'Take, eat, this is my body', as in the sacrifice of the Son in obedience to the Father enacted in the Mass. The Eucharistic rite of the Mass calls — as we can see more clearly than ever from this medieval text — to be understood as a ritual rehearsal of the self-offering of Christ on the Cross. The echo of 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me' (Matthew 27: 46) in the words 'Padre mio, ché non m'aiuti' (XXXIII. 69) is perhaps somewhat subtle, but if we were unsure whether they were really meant to recall Christ's cry from the Cross, our doubts must be dispelled by Dante's voice a few lines later remonstrating with 'Pisa' for having 'put the sons on such a cross' ('non dovei tu i figliuoi porre a tal croce', XXXIII. 87).

We cannot help but observe that Dante's calling upon the islands offshore from Pisa near the mouth of the Arno, where it flows into the Tyrrhenian sea, to dam up the river so as to drown *every person* ('ogne persona!', XXXIII. 84) in the city implicates the poet himself in a vengeful narration of his own. Following his instincts for what is authentic, Dante admits to the virtually murderous passions that drive his own narrative. The islands' names 'Capraia' and 'Gorgona' — recalling damnation, as in Christ's separation of sheep from goats in Matthew 25: 33, and petrification, as with the Medusa — invoke dangers condemning the denizens of the *Inferno* and menacing its author himself. It is difficult to know what to do with such vituperative violence on Dante's part, unless it can be seen as part of a strategy of self-subversion and of admitting that Dante as human poet is complicit in such abuse of narrative art for his own vindictive purposes. Having admitted this, his narrative is open to being used from above and beyond Dante's own human control for other, divine purposes: it can then bring an illumination of grace and truth into its readers' lives, to the extent they are examined in its light, their own worst risks exposed.

The sacramental overtones of the whole passage in Dante's text are there to reveal, by conspicuous contrast, all that Ugolino's own interpretation overlooks and indeed savagely blots out. Ugolino reports only how he 'petrified within' ('sì dentro impetra', XXXIII. 49). He is unable to respond with any genuine human emotion to his sons' deeply moving offer of themselves in sacrifice for him. He is, furthermore, unable to perceive any potentially sacramental, redeeming significance in the dire plight of the whole family. As in Canto IX, where the Medusa threatens to forever arrest Dante's gaze and his reader's alike, petrification serves as emblem of the death of interpretation and of the inability to envisage any further sense to events beyond the literal (Franke, 1994).

Ugolino avails himself of the device of direct address to his hearer — 'Ben sei crudel, se tu non già ti duole' (XXXIII. 40) — that Dante himself often employs to such momentous effect, signally in Canto IX, but, as Ugolino uses it, the purpose of such address is not to open the text to interpretations by the variety of readers who may themselves apply it to their own lives. Ugolino's purpose is rather that of locking the receiver into his own interpretation of the events, a fixed judgement that is, according to his own words, set in stone in his heart. How ironic, then, that his

account itself proves finally to be uninterpretable, particularly with regard to the undecidability of its last line. Ugolino's own narrative takes its revenge against him by remaining forever ambiguous, despite his obsessive determination to fix its meaning. Its last line ('Poscia, più che 'l dolor poté 'l digiuno', XXXIII. 75) could mean either that despite his sorrow hunger drove him to consume the corpses of his sons or simply that he starved.<sup>3</sup> Given the former possibility, it is his own inhumanity, more than that of his enemy, that turns out to be the meaning perpetuated by his tale.

Either way, meaning, as a single, deliberate, intentional act, is sacrificed. It is the very lack of properly intentional and determinate meaning that becomes the line's linguistic and human significance. Thus it demonstrates how linguistic signification is by its very nature open and interpretable. The meaning of the scene is horribly displayed in the bestial act of cannibalism that we actually see Ugolino performing as he gnaws on Ruggieri's skull, at the point where the brain is joined to the nape, the way one chews on bread in hunger ('come 'l pan per fame si manduca' (XXXII. 127). In the 'bestial sign' (XXXII. 133) of Ugolino's grisly revenge, meaning sinks below the threshold of language and humanity rather than transcending them both, as in the Eucharist, which signifies the divine beyond the order of the material signs by which it is conveyed. The language of narrative is used by Ugolino no longer to illuminate and convey a transcendent truth, but to occult it in the darkness of his blind passion sunk in sin and gorily materialized.

Even prophecy, which is in principle a means of revelation, can become part of the narrative mechanism of annihilating true meaning and its intrinsic openness when used with treacherous intent, precisely by attempts to manipulate it. Ugolino's 'bad dream' 'rips the veil of the future' ('io feci 'l mal sonno | che del futuro mi squarcìo 'l velame', XXXIII. 26–27) and reveals the horror that awaits him. Nonetheless, he proves blind to the full meaning of his own prophetic dream that depicts him as a wolf being chased along with its little ones ('il lupo | e' lupicini', XXXIII. 29). He interprets these figures simply as 'lo padre e' figli' (XXXIII. 35), ignoring the much more sombre and sinister connotations of the wolf as a predator fabled for its treachery and ruthlessness. This insensitivity to the meaning of the prophecy he himself recounts, and which indeed is fulfilled in the sequel in which he (manifestly and by the implications of his own words) savagely devours human flesh, exemplifies the gross betrayal of meaning that Ugolino's general practice of the art of narrative embodies. He is hell-bent on using his narrative to manipulate his hearer's sympathies, and as a result he is deaf to its deeper human and even divine significance. As is repeated constantly in this text, his chilling narration enacts a petrification of his understanding, which is forever blinded by hatred and vengefulness.

This is all the more provocative in that Dante, too, produces a narrative that would fix significances permanently, significances which are driven by his own sometimes admittedly unholy passions. At this juncture, Dante could hardly fail to be preoccupied with the pitfalls of his own poem as itself prone to turn into a revenge narrative against his personal and political enemies. It is therefore imperative that his narrative enfold a self-criticism of narrative, an exposure of its own diabolical potentialities. By this means, Dante's narrative opens to question the significances that it also inevitably establishes. It simultaneously suspects itself as narrative, so as to keep the dialectic of meaning open and in motion. It thereby undermines the type of fixity in which Ugolino's damnation is narratively sealed for all eternity. The horrendous

presumption of Dante's pronouncing eternal condemnations against others in his poem is to this extent mitigated by the poem's built-in self-reflection on the deceptiveness and treacherousness of narrative, not least his own narrative — by its owning up to the inherent liability of narrative to being instrumentalized for revenge.

The last stage of the *Inferno* marks a return to the blockage of an impenetrable narrative, such as was encountered first in Canto IX, just before its address to the reader. Dante now provides an image for this type of impasse in the frozen lake in which the sinners are immobilized. The ice prevents the damned from venting their emotion ('Lo pianto stesso lì pianger non lascia . . .', XXXIII. 94–99). They can express virtually nothing, and it is only Dante's representation of this nothing that enables them to take on significance in the poem. Significance is trapped and cannot escape the ice that freezes it to the zero-point of expression. (Of course, the very cancelling of meaning, or containment of expression, can itself be highly significant!)

All this is condensed and concretized in an immobile, impassive, mute Satan. He is the absolute cipher, the absolutely evil being — absolute lack, as St Augustine had taught. Considered dramatically, this is an anti-climax — hence the ironic *incipit*, announcing the king of Hell's banners unfurling, as if for a great battle and final show-down: '*Vexila regis prodeunt inferni*' (XXXIV. 1). But theologically it makes perfect sense. Satan is the absolute zero of the universe, an ontological nullity, from which only a cold wind blows, and that is exactly what evil is in a world created good, where everything that is, insofar as it is, is good.<sup>4</sup> Evil is exposed as a tale of sound and fury signifying precisely nothing. It can acquire meaning only by being the parody of the Good — that is, of God: hence this 'emperor' is threefold, an unholy Trinity of heads and mouths punishing the arch-betrayers of Christ (namely, Judas) and Caesar (Brutus and Cassius).

Dante's metaphorical representation of Satan conveys the nullity of evil that is Hell's core reality precisely by failing to be dramatically compelling like Milton's Satan. After this encounter, Dante is turned around, literally 'converted', and prepared to ascend to the stars. The abstract nullity of evil has been encountered face to face, and from this point on Dante can begin to climb the mountain of virtue, the 'diletto monte' sighted in vain at the outset. And in the same movement, he can 'let dead poetry arise', as he raises his sails to embark on 'better waters' ('miglior acque', *Purgatorio* I. 1).

How poetry dies is the business specifically of the *Inferno*'s last segment, the ninth and final circle, which occupies Cantos XXXI–XXXIV, but also in many ways of the *Inferno* as a whole. In fact, everything human is mortal, and the pride of poetry, which Dante shares in common with the great poets eternally suspended in Limbo (Canto IV), is likewise claimed by death. In the invocation of the *Purgatorio*, Dante calls for a resurrection of dead poetry ('la morta poesi resurge', *Purgatorio* I. 7), and he will define the new poetics of Purgatory with reference to the divinely-inspired psalms and the angel pilot's 'etterne penne, | che non si mutan come mortal pelo' (*Purgatorio* II. 35–36). But before that can happen, he must complete his denunciation of poetry as one of the humanistic means by which man presumptuously attempts, like Brunetto Latini, to 'make himself eternal' (XV. 85) and consequently loses himself to eternal death. The *Inferno* climaxes with some of Dante's most thoroughgoing and devastating indictments of poetry as it is actually practiced by fallen humans pursuing their sinful purposes.



Only afterwards, upon leaving Hell, will Dante be ready to begin to learn the discipline of a purgative poetry that renounces itself in order to live for God. In the *Purgatorio*, poetry is seen in the process of being punished and purged of its own inevitably flawed, self-serving motivations: this happens most explicitly in the persons of some of Dante's poetic predecessors in the vernacular like Forese Donati, Bonaggiunta da Lucca, Guido Guinizelli, and Arnaut Daniel in Cantos XXIV–XXVI. Then poetry is prepared finally to flower in a figure of theological transcendence, spectacularly in the Celestial Rose (*Paradiso* XXX) — a transfiguration among other things of the profane French poetic masterpiece, the *Roman de la rose*. Poetry is transfigured beyond the human and even beyond the articulable altogether in Paradise, since 'transhumanizing cannot be signified by words' ('trasumanar significar per verba non si poría', *Paradiso* I. 70).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Dante's text is quoted from *La Divina Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata* (1966–1967) with my own translations. Any informed interpretation of Dante cannot help but be influenced by the vast commentary tradition assembled, for example, in the Dartmouth Dante Project (<http://dante.dartmouth.edu>). The present treatment largely bypasses the philological archaeology determining exactly where ideas originated in order to refract certain aspects of Dante's vision into a philosophical outlook that belongs to our own time. Excellent criticism referring to current scholarship on each canto of the *Inferno* can be consulted in Mandelbaum, Oldcorn, and Ross (1998). Of particular interest in relation to the cantos discussed in this paper are: Massimo Mandolini Pesaresi, 'Canto XXXI: The Giants: Majesty and Terror'; John Ahern, 'Canto XXXII: Amphion and the Poetics of Retaliation'; Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Canto XXXIII: Count Ugolino and Others'; and Remo Cesarini, 'Canto XXXIV: Lucifer'.
- <sup>2</sup> Such is the theological conception of evil as a lack of good and as nothing positive in itself. This conception was adopted by Church fathers from originally neo-Platonic sources, notably Plotinus. It is sometimes called the 'meonotic' conception of evil as 'non-being'.
- <sup>3</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, whom I take as exemplary of a broadly cultivated reader, maintains that we must suspect Ugolino of cannibalism. Accordingly, the episode's significance remains lodged in the text's ambiguity and in the necessary uncertainty of the purported fact: 'Debemos incluir en esa textura la noción de canibalismo? Repito que debemos sospecharla con incertidumbre y temor' (1982: 110).
- <sup>4</sup> In Genesis, at several reprises, God saw what he had made and 'saw that it was good' (Genesis 1: 12, 25, 31). The fathers of the Church saw this as Scriptural confirmation of the Platonic doctrine that all being is some form of the Good.

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