Ugolino's Supposed Cannibalism: A Bibliographical Note

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Ugolino's narration of the horrifying week during which he and his children were starved to death by the agents of Archbishop Ruggieri ends with a verse that causes greater difficulty than is perhaps warranted:

"Poscia, piú che 'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno."¹
("Then fasting had greater effect than grief.")

While, with only few exceptions, the first five centuries of the commentary tradition took the line to mean only that Ugolino died of starvation, the last one hundred and sixty years have witnessed the emergence of one of the most vexing controversies that currently exists among exegetes of the *Commedia*. This fairly recent *crux interpretum* receives various resolutions. The majority of modern commentators would agree with the general sense offered in my own translation (above), and either assumes or reasons that the verse signifies exactly what it seems to assert, namely that Ugolino's week-long deprivation of any nourishment finally overcame the last energy of which he was aware as promoting his will to live, that of grief. Others, as is well known, assert that Dante is here intentionally ambiguous, having left the possibility of a cannibalistic atrocity balanced in our minds. Still others — a small but growing minority — hold that we should understand no less than that the verse requires us to understand that he bit into the flesh of the dead children in a last despairing attempt to nourish himself.

In a recent article I have argued that the central drama of the concluding portion of Ugolino's narrative (XXXIII. 37-74) lies elsewhere than is usually perceived. In my view the suppressed revelation — one that Dante hoped we would read between Ugolino's

lines — concerning this horrified and horrifying sinner is nothing other than his own failed paternity. In this reading Luke's gospel, and in particular the parable of the importunate friend (Luke 11: 5-13), becomes the most pertinent antecedent text that conduces to a clearer understanding of the desperate drama of this problematic canto.² If this perception of a palimpsestic presence of Luke's parable is convincing, if a reader believes that Ugolino's spiritual failure is the most important fact which we discover about him when we consider his words with circumspection, then we may find ourselves less ready to consider him a sympathetic or a noble victim of Ruggieri's cruelty than has been many a previous reader. It might then also seem reasonable to expect that such an understanding of Ugolino's wider culpability would lend support to those who claim that he ingested the flesh of the children. It is, however, my opinion that acceptance of such a reading, which has a sole early champion in Jacopo della Lana,³ adds a dimension to the scene which is probably gratuitous, given the importance of Ugolino's spiritual failure. It would have been strange, I think, for Dante to have wished to conclude an episode which is concerned with carnal misinterpretation of spiritual truth by inviting us — with whatever degree of ambiguity — to make a carnal interpretation of Ugolino's last utterance. The four recent American proponents of a cannibalistic reading, Shapiro (1974), Freccero (1977), Cook/Herzman (1979), and Herzman (1980), are among the few discussants since Pietrobono (1946) and Raya (1955) to insist upon this spectacular but unlikely interpretation.⁴

Earlier reviews of the *crux interpretum* that should be consulted include Blanc (1861), pp. 316-21; Scartazzini (1874 — but see his fuller bibliography in 1900); Poletto (1894) — the first modern commentator to suggest that, if Ugolino did not ingest the flesh of the dead children, he at least momentarily attempted to do so; Murari (1898); D'Ovidio (1907); Ricci (1921²). D'Ovidio offers the single most exhaustive review of the problem which we possess (pp. 63-116 are devoted to "Le ultime parole di Ugolino"; but see also pp. 3-60, which discuss "L'episodio di Ugolino" and pp. 119-40, which confront "L'Ugolino del De Sanctis"). It is surprising that so few contemporary discussants make use of this essential and sensible work.⁵ It is probably significant that nearly all who have devoted a major effort to the history of the interpretation of the verse reject the cannibalistic reading.⁶

What follows is a tabular review of the history of the debate put forward in the hope that future students of the problem will find

some of their task accomplished. This form of representation does not allow for the shadings which one finds in at least some of the arguments as they are advanced. It does reveal the fluctuating nature of critical debate, as well as the tendency of any given critical position to replicate itself.⁷

*Ugolino died of
hunger*

*Ugolino died of
hunger; he did not
eat (or try to eat)
children*

*Verse ambiguous,
but lends credence
to notion of canni-
balism*

*Ugolino ate (or
tried to eat) the
children*

Lana (1324)

Guido da Pisa
(1327)
Ottimo (1333)
Pietro di Dante
(1358?)
Benvenuto (1373)
Buti (1385)
Anon. Fiorentino
(1400?)
Serravalle (1416)
Guiniforto (1440
ca.)

Nidobeato (1477)

Vellutello (1544)
Daniello (1568)

Venturi (1732)

Lombardi (1791)
Biagioli (1818)
Costa (1819)

Viviani (1823)

Cesari (1824)
Rossetti (1826)
Arrivabene (1827)
Borghi (1827)
Tommaseo (1837)
"Philaethes"
(1839)

L. Martini (1840)
B. Bianchi (1844)
Fratlicelli (1852)
Lambri di
Longiano (1854)

Zani de' Ferranti
(1855)

Andreoli (1856)

Gregorette (1856)
M. Romani
(1858)

- Bennassuti (1864)
 Trissino (1864)
 Venturini (1865)
- Blanc (1861)
 Di Siena (1867)
 Camerini (1869)
- B. Bianchi (1868)
 De Sanctis (1869)
- Fornaciari (1869)
- F. Betti (1873)
 De Marzo (1873)
 Scartazzini (1874)
- Bergmann (1881)
 Lubin (1881)
- Cornoldi (1887)
- Campi (1888)
 Bartolini (1889)
 Casini (1889)
- Longoni (1889)
 Gubernatis (1891)
- Berthier (1892)
 Butler (1892)
 S. Betti (1893)
- Belli (1894)
 F. Martini (1894)
- Vernon (1894)
 De Leonardis (1895)
- Passerini (1897)
- Acquaticci (1898)
 Murari (1898)
- Palmieri (1898)
- Oelsner (1900)
- F. Romani (1901)
- Tozer (1901)
- Fornaciari (1904)
- Vincent (1904)
- Torraca (1905)
- Boselli (1907)
 D'Ovidio (1907)
 Lisio (1907)
 Grandgent (1909)
 Espinasse-
 Mongenet (1913)
- Poletto (1894)
- Plumptre (1886)
 Hazelfoot (1887)
- Pascoli (1898)
- Carroll (1904)

- Laminne (1913)
 Langdon (1918)
 Olschki (1918)
 Casini/Barbi (1921)
 Federzoni (1921)
 Mestica (1921)
 Ricci (1921)
 Steiner (1921)
 Rossi (1923)
 G. Mazzoni (1924)
 Scarano (1924)
 G. A. Venturi (1924)
 Pompeati (1925)
 Del Lungo (1926)
 Tamburini (1926)
 Johnston (1928)
 Folingo (1929)
 Scartazzini/Vandelli (1929)
 Howell (1931)
 Grabher (1934)
 Trucchi (1936)
 Provenzal (1938)
 Vitali (1943)
 Porena (1946)
 Pietrobono (1946)
 Rivalta (1946)
 Spoerri (1946)
 Villaroel (1947)
 Lepore (1950)
 Falchitto (1952)
 Gmelin (1954)
 Malagoli (1955)
 Sapegno (1955)
 Raya (1955)
 Soprano (1955)
 Montanari (1956)
 Mattalia (1960)
 Ammendola (1962)
 Bianchi/Manetti (1962)
 Chimenz (1962)
 Marcazzan (1962)
 Morvidi (1962)
 Sbriccoli (1963)
 Contini (1965)
 Fallani (1965)

Pézard (1965)		
Ramat (1965)		
	Russo (1966)	
		Sortino (1967)
Bargellini (1968)		
	Giacalone (1968)	
	Petrocchi/Ciotti (1968)	
	Caliagaris (1969)	
	Gallardo (1969)	
		Sansone (1969)
	Singleton (1970)	
		Bàrberi Squarotti (1971)
		Musa (1971)
		Mazzoni (1972)
		Shapiro (1974)
	Bosco (1976)	
	Cioffari (1977)	
	Lonergan (1977)	
		Freccero (1977)
Bosco/Reggio (1979)		
		Cook/Herzman (1979)
	Pasquini (1980)	
		Boitani (1981)
	Pasquini/Quaglio (1982)	

While I would be the last to suggest that a "majority vote" among the commentators is in itself convincing evidence for a given interpretive position, I do think that the history of the debate is instructive on several grounds.

1) Lana's (1324) position, whether it was his or an anonymous copyist's, was available from the earliest days of the exegetical tradition. That it received no support from other early commentators (and was strongly opposed by Buti [1385], who is generally conceded to have been the most knowledgeable local historian of things Pisan) is probably to be considered a serious objection to the validity of the more melodramatic reading.

2) Niccolini's resuscitation of Lana's reading (see note 6), while it did occasion a nineteenth-century debate of some acerbity, did not eventuate in extensive scholarly attention to that debate, which remains an interesting curiosity, but not an important contribution toward resolving the difficulty.

3) De Sanctis (1869), on the other hand, is the true father of the modern cannibalistic interpretation. Yet even such as Raya (1955) have complained that his reading is far too cautious. De Sanctis actually argued for the probable correctness of the traditional interpretation, going on to suggest that the line was — whatever Dante's intention — ambiguous, that it allowed for, if it did not finally sanction, such a reading. It is surprising that so many who align themselves with De Sanctis's interpretation use it to support a far less delicate critical response to the verse.

If a given reader of a text perceives something in it, one who does not see that something runs the risk of playing Polonius to that observer's Hamlet. The shape of poetic utterance, like that of a cloud, tends to call up subjective responses. To those who find the cannibalistic interpretation attractive, one who does not do so can only offer his scepticism. There are no proofs in such matters. On the other hand, those who seek to prove the cannibal's case by drawing our attention to the many images of eating in cantos XXXII and XXXIII — as has several times been done — may be reproved. Are we to understand that Tydeus, because he gnawed on the freshly severed head of Malanippus (*Thebaid* VIII. 751-66 — the source of Dante's horrific description of Ugolino and Ruggieri), will also be found punished in hell as a "cannibal"? Or that Lucifer, chewing on three sinners (and indeed on the head of Judas) should be similarly regarded? It is probably more sensible to believe that the cannibalism which we find enacted here in Dante's pages points beyond itself to a spiritual condition, that it is not so much reflective of the literalist's desire to find a carnal cause as it is of a deliberately wrought poetic effect.

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NOTES

1 The text is drawn from Petrocchi (1966). For this and all following references to Dante's commentators, see the chronologically ordered Bibliographical Note which follows these remarks. I would like to acknowledge the contributions to this investigation of my research assistant at Princeton University, Timothy Hampton, and of the staff of Special Collections at the John M. Olin Library at Cornell University, as well as that of Interlibrary Services at Princeton's Firestone Library.

2 See Robert Hollander, "*Inferno* XXXIII, 37-74: Ugolino's Importunity," forthcoming in *Speculum* (1984?). Perhaps the focal verse in Luke is "If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone?" (11:11). In my interpretation, Ugolino's stony silence (see *Inf.* XXXIII. 49: ". . . sí dentro

impetrai") reveals his failure to assume even the minimally responsive role attributed to the father in the parable.

- 3 Two pieces of information may undermine the importance of this singular early reading. First, Scarabelli, the editor of Lana (1324), points out (pp. 501-02) that one MS (the Magliabecchiano) simply reads "qui mostra che furono morti, il digiuno vinse il dolore." Scarabelli speculates that the [rather jumbled] continuation found in other MSS may result from a later anonymous interpolation: ". . . dolore, ch'elli mangiò d'alcuni di quelli. Infine morì pure di fame perché non durò che non putrefacessero le loro carni." Second, it is *this* reading which later appears verbatim in the compilation of earlier commentators published in 1477 (Venice, Vendelin da Spira — see the *Catalogue of the Cornell Dante Collection*, pp. 3-4) and in Nidobeato (1477), a similar compendium. Whether or not the notice of the cannibalistic conclusion to the episode is Lana's or another's, we can say that there was only one source of this interpretation which we have to date been able to locate. Both that fact and the formulation of what Ugolino purportedly did (began to ingest the flesh of the children but then disgustedly ceased — a rather colorful inference to make from the bare bones of the verse) tend to reduce the authority of the comment. It is advanced with less dubiety than its nature should summon by some of those who discuss this problem.
- 4 Mattalia (1960) "officially" opts for an ambiguous meaning, but confesses a personal preference for the more flamboyant reading. Like Poletto (1894), Pietrobono is drawn to the cannibalistic hypothesis, but retreats from fully embracing it: "L'espressione è volutamente misteriosa," he says; he continues by arguing that this possible reading of a possible action may be justified by other references to eating in the surrounding text. Enlarging upon this observation, Raya (1955) was the first to offer an aggressive argument in favor of a cannibalistic interpretation.
- 5 For more recent responses see Russo (1966) and Bosco (1976), p. 799.
- 6 But see Raya (1955), who puts forth seven reasons for believing that the verse should be taken as indicating that Ugolino ate the children. His article offers a review of the local and passionate nineteenth-century debate — one that, because of its amateurish bearing and legalistic tone has not often entered into the commentary tradition (and is not reflected in the text of this discussion or in the following table — initiated by G. Niccolini, who in 1825 resuscitated the interpretation attributed to Jacopo della Lana, in which Carmignani and Rosini were the major adversaries (the former in the service of the Lanean thesis). See also Ricci (1921²), pp. 227-28.
- 7 For full bibliographical entries for each of the discussants in the following table see the Bibliographical Note. With regard to the table itself it should be explained that some later commentators who interpret the verse to mean only that Ugolino starved to death are in implicit polemic with those who propose that the verse allows us to believe that he ate (or attempted to eat) the children; others seem not to want to enter the controversy or do not care (or perhaps even know) that it exists. Since it is not possible to make such distinctions with certainty, I have merely reported each absolute verdict as accurately as I was able to do.

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