Dante's Ugolino and the Eucharist
Christian Moevs

The great American dantist Robert Hollander once remarked that reading Dante's *Inferno* is like reading the "What's Wrong with this Picture?" game that one finds on the back of a cereal box, or in *Highlights* magazine for children. One has to spot the incongruities, the anomalies in what on the surface seems a perfectly plausible scene.

The shock value of Dante's *Inferno* is that most of the sinners there are more or less like us, even if their deeds were more egregious, or unrepented. But they're in Hell. So what are we missing in our own picture of the world, of ourselves, that could imply we're actually in Hell? To be in Hell, for Dante, means to live without existential hope. His Hell is defined by/as the absence of hope ("Abandon hope, ye who enter here"): we enter Hell by abandoning hope. The hope Dante is talking about is to be alive to, to be connected with, to trust that there is, to live as though there is, a dimension of eternity, infinity, absolute freedom, joy, unlimited awareness and love at the very core of our being, that is our truest deepest self. His preferred name for that core reality is love, which is an infinite self-giving, to recognize as oneself everything that is or can be. Its antithesis is pride, the sense of the finite self -- the flux of thought and desire -- as an autonomous, somehow self-subsisting, irreducible entity, divorced from others or any deeper reality. Pride is to be so attached to "I am this or that" that it precludes the experience of "I am." It is to have lost contact with what has been called the "infinite depth" of the "I".

The dantist John Freccero remarked that "understanding in the *Inferno* is a process that might be characterized as hyperbolic doubt systematically applied to the values of contemporary society. Each encounter in Hell amounts to the ironic undercutting of the values enunciated by the separate characters. Even when those values seem perfectly defensible from a human point of view."

Francesca's understanding of love may well be more refined and delicate than our own. But she is in Hell. Ulysses set out to gain experience of the world and to pursue virtue and knowledge, like many of us as scientists or scholars. But he is in Hell. If we can't tell why they're there, if their self-presentation seems completely unproblematic to us, we are also in Hell, living without hope. We are not good readers, either of texts or of ourselves. If we can learn to read against the grain, to start to detect the stresses, self-deceptions, fault lines in their self-presentation, we can begin to free ourselves from the net they -- and we -- have ravelled around ourselves.

The basic procedure then for reading a canto of the *Inferno* is to ask first what the failing ("sin" is the classical term) is that is depicted there. How, in what way, did these souls sell themselves short, fail to live up to, live for, the full potential of what a human being is? How is that failing defined or represented? The second question is: what does the contrapasso, the "punishment" or suffering the sinners undergo, reveal to us about that failing or sin? Third, one must carefully analyze the sinners' speeches, their self-presentation in words. They are living out in their speeches precisely the understanding, the picture of the world and of themselves, that for Dante constitutes a living death, a self-imposed snare or jail, a torment with no evident way out. So here we must ask: is this sinner's self-presentation persuasive? What's missing? What does the sinner not see? Apply hyperbolic doubt: what's wrong with this picture?

The Ugolino episode is the last great encounter in the *Inferno*, in the same circle (of traitors) that contains at its center Satan himself. The ironies of the episode cut deeper than ever, and reach farther: the entire episode plays on the antithesis between cannibalism and the Eucharist, between physical and spiritual hunger. (Remember the early Christians were accused of cannibalism: they ate their leader's body . . .) So in addition to the questions above, one must also watch for traces of the Eucharist, of Christ's self-sacrifice, of redemptive possibilities present and denied. The test Ugolino faces is the ultimate test: not only his own imminent death, but that of all his children. What is his response to that test? How is that response connected with treachery? How else could he have responded? In the background of these questions must be: What is the pilgrim's response? How is his understanding evolving? Which leads to: What is our response? How is our understanding evolving?