Thoughts on Canto 33 of the Inferno

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February 6, 2013
2/10/13 12:07 PM

1 Frozen Tears

I have tried to group my thoughts around three themes : Suffering, Sin, and Forgiveness. Nevertheless, the lecture has four parts.

Suffering or Passivity

Though I may have been led to wander, I originally wanted to focus closely on the following passage. [Read aloud *Inferno Canto 32, line 124 - Canto 33, line 99*] As elsewhere Dante gets the denizen of Hell to tell his own story and leaves the reader to sort out the self-deceptions and distortions of the tale to see why the speaker is where he is. It is a little like reading Chaucer, or a Platonic dialogue : why does this person have these opinions and what do they have to do with his life? Where is the truth in the story?

We know that Count Ugolino is in the circle of the traitors, and we hear from Dante that he had the reputation of handing over some of the fortresses of his city to her enemies, but it seems mysterious that this crime should have placed him in shouting distance of Satan himself, there at the very bottom of the inverted cone of hell. He does not mention having done anything to deserve the terrible suffering that was inflicted on him by the Archbishop Ruggieri, whose head and neck he is now to gnaw upon forever. One begins to suspect that he is after

all telling why he is in Hell by telling how he responded to that suffering. What he betrayed was not chiefly the fortresses of Pisa but the trust of his children. He says he turned to stone within.

A few years ago Phil LeCuyer suggested in a lecture that the fate of Cain could be better understood by the hypothesis that a gap known to exist in the text between the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and his death at the hands of his brother must have contained Cain's request to his brother to be taught how to sacrifice acceptably and Abel's refusal. The first sin of a human against a human, said Mr. LeCuyer, was hence not an envious murder, but a turning of one's back on a brother.

The thought has stayed with me; and now it seems to me that just as every section through a cone will yield some piece or perspectival projection of a circle, so every sinner in Dante's Hell will turn out to be a version of the others, who have all turned their backs in different ways; and that the circle of traitors makes that universal kinship especially clear.

"What man, " asks Jesus, " when his children ask for bread, will give them a stone?" It is that man we see in Ugolino's story, and if we read carefully we may recognize something of ourselves in him. Why did he turn to stone? Why did he have no words of love or consolation or hope when they were most needed? He does not even suggest

that it occurred to him to embrace his sons, if no words seemed adequate to the situation. He bit his own hands.

He now demands that his listeners weep as he tells his story, but he relates that he himself wept neither for nor with his children. Certainly he was in a gruesome position: he had realized that he would witness their death by starvation and that it was on his account that they were to be tortured and killed, although innocent. Does the thought of terrible suffering, especially if it is undeserved, anesthetize us? What hardens our hearts?

Undeserved suffering might be said to be a keynote of Jesus's life, as related by the Gospels: the first practical consequence of his birth is the Slaughter of the Innocents, the murder of all baby boys in Bethlehem and vicinity under two years old by Herod's soldiers. Jesus saves the world from sin, we are told, by fully accepting his own undeserved suffering and death. That is something I would like to understand better. Ugolino's story may offer a chance at that: it resonates in so many places with the story of Jesus that Dante must intend it as a kind of meditation on salvation as much as on sin. Are we each to ask ourselves whether we are more like bread or more like stones?

Hardness of heart is found throughout Hell, in a variety of forms, but turning to stone is mentioned prominently in only one other place, outside the city of Dis, in Canto 9, as

Dante and Virgil seek to leave the circle of the Wrathful and enter that of the Heretics. The Furies appear on the battlements of the fortified city and defy the visitors, refusing them entrance and threatening to show Dante the Medusa to turn him to stone. Virgil takes the threat very seriously and not only tells Dante to close his eyes and cover his face but himself covers it as well, and the narrator pauses to tell those readers with healthy minds to see the teaching hiding itself beneath the veil of the the strange verses.

Active Suffering

The city of Dis, whose red hot iron walls contain Heretics, looks like the first part of Hell in which Anger might become aware of itself as at war with God. Dis is thus the beginning of Hell Proper. The Furies who threaten Dante are ancient Greek goddesses of revenge; they claim to serve Justice, but they urge their votaries to that perpetuation of wrong upon wrong that seems to drive Tragedy. The damned will become steadily more reminiscent of the figures of Tragedy the further down we find them. Dante portrays the Furies tearing their own flesh, striking themselves and screaming. It is the attitude of a mourner who may soon seek to rend the flesh of someone else.

The heretics we will meet first inside and who seem paradigmatic are Epicureans, who are described as

believing that the soul dies with the body. Whoever has read Lucretius knows that they also believed that everything is made of atoms and void and that everything happens by necessity or accident. They are thus the stoniest of the souls Dante has met since he read the inscription " Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here", and first appear as stone tombs.

The God or Gods of the Epicureans are thought as either ignorant of human concerns or indifferent to them; and Lucretius recommends a similar stance to readers who would live wisely. Yet Dante may be right that such a philosophy is a near neighbor to anger and vengeance. Lucretius says that it is clear the world was not made by divinities because it is so badly put together and that the goal of all religion is to terrify human beings. The indictment has to do with death and the fear of death. If we must die, let us at least not lose time fearing it.

The fear of death inside us must be killed, he suggests, as doctors kill parasitic worms with poison. But one must be careful not to poison the patient along with the parasite. The turning to stone before the Medusa may be, as various commentators have proposed, the surrender to despair at the sight of the evil and terrifying ugliness of the world and especially of the worst of human deeds; the most fearful thing might be to see the worst of one's own deeds in its unalterability. It has been done, the terrible words have been said, there is no taking back word or

deed. It is all set in stone. There could be some relief in the conclusion that such things take place by necessity, that we are all only particles bumping and bumped by one another, but it is a bitter relief, as Lucretius admits when he proposes that his remedy requires poetry like the honey on the rim of a cup of wormwood. We certainly cannot logically fear death if we can be convinced that we are not really alive to begin with.

That Virgil must join Dante in covering his eyes against the Medusa suggests that the sight of Necessity or unalterability is almost irresistible : that the sight has itself the compelling character of what it reveals. Once you see it you cannot turn your head away. The unalterability of the past is an aspect of inevitable death; it is unalterable because it is dead and gone. All we have is a few years to do and suffer and all of that little is taken from us. Face to face with death one is suddenly certain that everything has come and must come to nothing; and that there is nothing else. Next to death there seems no possibility of meaning, of God or of hope. One turns to stone even while nominally alive. All of us avert our eyes as much as we can, one has not really ceased to see what one energetically looks away from. The kinship of Sin and Death becomes clear. They seem to have the same unescapable character. Until the arrival of a rescuing angel Virgil and Dante, the two great poets and admirers of human intellect, could only hide Dante's living eyes from this unbearable truth. The meaning of Dante's description

of Hell as "second death" is also near. But was Lucretius's famous image of the honey on the cup meant to suggest that poetry could be of such strength as to counterbalance all suffering and even death and allow life to seem nevertheless well worth living? Or is such poetry finally mere hiding? Could that be the meaning of Virgil's hands over Dante's eyes? Can Christians use poetry differently than pagans ?

The episode outside of Dis shows how one might turn stony out of a rebellious anger, as clay or enamel is fired to hardness by great heat: " Let Medusa come," say the Furies, " so we shall make him enamel" (" si il farem di smalto").

The deeper truth of sin is great cold, as we discover at the bottom of Hell, and it is implicit in Anger, as Gluttony is implicit in Lust. The ice in which the souls in the circle of treachery are all implanted is a frozen lake, fed by a river of tears; it still has water's properties of transparency and reflection, apparently; for Dante's first impression of Cocytus, in Canto 32, is that it is glass. The center of the universe, which we sometimes accuse selfish people of thinking they embody, is a realm of reflection and reflexivity. The first two sinners he describes in detail are so close pressed against each other that the hair on their heads is mixed, he says; and when he asks who they are he is angrily asked in return why he is staring, or literally, " Why do you mirror yourself so much in us?" A good

question. Why do we all "project" ourselves so much onto those we look at? This may be a place where Suffering meets Sin.

Sin

The sixth chapter of the Gospel of Luke contains a possible answer to the frozen sinner's question. In verse 41 it says, " And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Either how canst thou say to thy brother: ' Brother let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye,' when thou thyself perceivest not the beam that is in thine own 11 eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam that is in thine own eye and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye." What we hate or fear or regret most deeply in ourselves is what we notice first and with maximum repugnance in others. We only need to see a speck of it in them to become indignant and angry, even vengeful, as if we could drive it out of ourselves by punishing anyone who reminds us of its existence. The larger the beam, the more sensitive we become to the mote. Sometimes -- should I say often? -- we even imagine the mote because the beam has become all we can see. A famous modern saying, " Hell is other people, " takes on a different flavor in this light. Hell may appear as other people when it has gotten into our eyes.

How do we know that our pain and anger at the ways of

the world are not generated by our pain and anger at ourselves? Ugolino bites his own hands as he realizes the fate he has brought on himself and his children. I said earlier we might recognize ourselves in Ugolino; what if the very structure of *every* human consciousness is divided against itself and always only a step away from self-condemnation? Pascal would ask, " Why should we have such an expectation of perfection as to rage at our own shortcomings? *Were* we once perfect?" The two who are so close as to be mistaken for one but of whom one is always hatefully devouring the other could be an emblem of what La Rochefoucauld calls " Amour-propre", self-love. He remarks that the natural consequence of not worshipping God is sufficient punishment: one is condemned to worship oneself. A corollary might be that if one cannot accept one's need for daily bread from others, one may be condemned to devour oneself. Here are a few passages from La Rochefoucauld's longest description of what he takes to be the human soul unassisted by grace. I suspect he was not uninfluenced by Dante.

Self-love

We can neither plumb the depths nor pierce the shade of its recesses. Therein it is hidden from the most far-seeing eyes, therein it makes a thousand imperceptible twists and turns. There it is often invisible to itself; there it conceives, nourishes and rears, itself unaware, innumerable loves and hatreds, some so monstrous that

when they are brought to light it cannot resolve to avow them and disowns them...

[I]t is by itself that its desires are inflamed rather than by the beauty and merit of its objects; its own taste embellishes and heightens them; it is itself the game it pursues, and which it follows eagerly when it runs after its own eagerness. It is made of contraries. It is imperious and obedient, sincere and false, piteous and cruel, timid and bold...

[I]t lives everywhere and upon everything; it subsists on nothing; it accommodates itself either to things or to their absence; it goes over to those who are at war with it, enters into their designs, and, most astonishing, with them even hates its own self. It conspires for its own defeat, it works towards its own ruin -- in fact caring only to exist; and providing that it may BE, it will be its own enemy! ....

[E]ven when it is at last defeated and one thinks oneself rid of it and that it is undone, here it comes again, triumphing in its own undoing...

[--- From Maxim 1 of La Rochefoucauld's first edition of the *Maximes; unprinted in all later editions during his lifetime.]*

I think La Rochefoucauld suggests that if we can deny each of our own thoughts, impulses, deeds, and (I would

add) in the case of the traitor even our most solemn commitments, we *can* worship ourselves; love ourselves with an absolute love unrestricted by the thought of any finitude in its object; we can love ourselves as if we were God loving God. The only act of love available, however, will be our ceaselessly renewed declaration of freedom: an unending War of Secession from the bondage of every particular. Freedom begins to look like a very mixed blessing.

But isn't freedom inseparable from the power to think? Would we be human at all without the power to look at ourselves, without the power to have second thoughts? It makes a kind of sense that the place where we are most in the image of God would be the place where we have the capacity to sin. If our self-consciousness is what makes us free and capable of acting upon ourselves, then it might offer us the chance to turn our backs on everything but ourselves. If we are not in fact God, but only made in his image, that turning away would be nearly fatal to us: it would turn us to stone. We need others and otherness to sustain us in life, as our simple need for food reminds us more than once a day. It is only a little harder to see that we need non-material food just as much, if we are to be truly alive.

But since to be made in the image of God is apparently a gift that cannot be withdrawn from us, we have the strange power to persist in stony-heartedness without simply

perishing. Encased in ice we gnaw our own hard bones. The point at the bottom of the cone of Hell is Satan himself, who is thus revealed to be entirely separate from everything and merely self-referential. As a visible image he is a giant with three faces, each mouth chewing on one of the three sinners who most resemble him. He has no love at all, especially not for his closest followers, who are apparently most hated. All the other sinners exist in particular circles where they are ultimately shown likewise to be only seeking themselves, only chasing their own tails, but at the very bottom even the illusion of going somewhere provided by the circle has vanished. It is what students of calculus might call an "ultimate case" of freedom, but if we are to be in the image of God's freedom and self-sufficiency, we must all have some such point-like power to be on our own and separable from all else, including our own most recent thoughts or perceptions; including our whole prior self. Call it the power to say " no."

It lies so deep in us as to raise the question whether it may not be the whole of our essence, undeniable and prior to any hypotheses about God. I can deny everything but my own existence as Denier. The " I think, therefore I am" of Descartes is sometimes proclaimed the beginning of modern thought. It is recognizable already in Dante as a kind of bedrock, or foundation of the universe, which Juniors and Seniors will recall was one of its uses for Descartes and his followers in their efforts to found a new

science, a new politics, and a new world on something unshakable.

Forgiveness or Life

But not only do the sinners closest to Satan reflect God in their capacity to exist by and unto themselves; Ugolino in particular, as I said before, has a story that is full of reflections of Christ. His innocent children are to die before his eyes because of his crimes. Could he have acknowledged his responsibility for their deaths and accepted the forgiveness they offered? Their disposition to forgive, like Jesus's, appears in the offer of themselves as food. Even this is not enough to allow him to speak to them. " I quieted myself then, not to make them more sad", he says, not meaning that he had been speaking, for we know he had not, but that he grew yet more still, more fully silent and stone-like, not even showing his anguish by gesture. " That day and the next, we all were mute. Ah, hard earth, why didst thou not open?" Astonishing lines : *He* had become the hard earth, the locked stone tower that would not open, and he still doesn't see that in reproaching the earth he reproaches himself! In the story of the crucifixion, we read that the earth quaked, that rocks split apart and that graves opened and many of the dead came back to life. In *this* story we read of the living Ugolino, dead above ground, silent as the tomb. The connection of his children to Christ is made clearer yet when we hear of one crying out before he dies, " Father, why don't you help me?" as Christ asked why he was

forsaken, and when Dante the narrator exclaims to the city of Pisa at line 85, " For if Count Ugolino had the fame of having betrayed thee of thy castles, thou oughtest not to have put his sons on such a cross." The whole tercet is :

Che se il Conte Ugolino aveva voce
d'aver tradita te delle castella,
non dove tu i figliuoi porre a tal croce.

The Italian for " had the name" or " was reputed" is "aveva voce": had *voice.* In the time when Ugolino was still speaking, he was not known by his own statements even then; there were rumors, a voice, that he had made a deal with enemies of his city. Those betrayers whom Dante describes as made dog-like by the cold had already been in some way mute even when they had seemed to speak. Rumor had become their only voice. Yet more profoundly, Dante rhymes *voce* or voice, with *croce,* cross. The power of speech is the power to share who we really are: not to sequester ourselves and our thoughts within our freedom; it is why Christ is called the Word; Dante is showing how the crucifixion is God's voice.

Why again did Ugolino demand the tears of his listeners? Where are we to weep? He says before he starts that Dante will see him weep and speak simultaneously, but nowhere does Dante describe him as weeping. Yet weeping surrounds Ugolino: he is up to his shoulders in the ice of frozen tears and we see sinners both

immediately before and immediately after him whose tears freeze in their eyes, thus blocking any further relief. " Lo pianto stesso li pianger non lascia," says Dante : " Weeping itself prevents weeping there." This illuminates Ugolino; his kind of grief prevented him from properly grieving with and for his sons and himself. His question to Dante and Virgil, " If you do not weep at this then at what do you weep?" seeks vindication from their tears. Merely anticipating what would happen next, he says, he turned to stone, and if that same anticipation can make them weep, then he may feel justified in *not* having wept. He wants turning to stone to count as a more powerful kind of weeping.

Why are tears at issue? Dante says of the frozen-eyed, " The grief which finds the eyes stopped up above/ Turns itself within to increase the anguish", so he sees even the tears of the damned as bringing some relief. It will be a great turning point for him in the end of the Purgatory, when the ice around his own heart is said to melt and *he* can at last weep. Like laughter, tears may be a whole-hearted, spontaneous recognition of some truth. Tears are prominent at various moments in the Gospels, most notably in the shortest verse, *John* XI, 35: "Jesus wept." Why does he weep?

He has asked where they have laid the dead Lazarus and been told, " Come and see." These are the words at which he weeps. They are his own, coming back to him,

almost the very first we hear him speak in the book of John. His absolute first words were, " What do you seek?" and when answered, " Where are you staying?" he replied, " Come and see": a kind of first commandment. Now in his tears the full reciprocity of God becoming man appears: not only can man now be invited by God to come and see where He dwells, and presumably invited to live with Him there, becoming like Him as the future disciples in Chapter One were invited to do, but God can now be invited to see where man stays, and to accept the human lot of dying and staying there, in the tomb.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the second blessing is for those who mourn, " For they shall be comforted." Doesn't everyone mourn? Perhaps not; nearly everyone weeps to lose those they love, but some try to minimize this response. Epictetus points out that no-one is grief-stricken when a cup breaks because we all know they are breakable; and he urges us to remind ourselves frequently that everyone we love is mortal, so that we may face our coming losses with equanimity. Swift's perfectly rational animals, the Houyhnhnms, start and finish their mourning period in a half day for a spouse they have lived with for a lifetime. Tears seem no part of their experience.

Presumably those who learn not to mourn cannot be comforted because they feel no need to be. To mourn

then, is to deny that the disappearance of those we love is perfectly natural and nothing to wonder at, let alone be downcast about. It is a wish, felt with such visceral intensity as to seem a natural force itself, that the temporal should have eternal significance. If indeed we have been created by God, and are in his image and likeness, it seems a possibility that as the work and reflection of an infinite being we could partake of the infinite. It even seems possible that our grief is a kind of knowledge that we do. It is easier to understand that than to understand how the infinite could produce anything entirely finite, or why it would want to. But mourners need not be theologians; they are simply those who cannot accept that some particular person's whole being has been completely voided by a little hole in a blood vessel, or by the mere passage of some finite number of days, months and years. Such repining at the inevitable is a most unreasonable response: everything that is born must die. But if the mourners are right not to be reasoned out of their grief, then instead of irrationality or so-called "magical thinking", the danger might be to let the pain of loss, or even just the anticipation of that pain, freeze our tears so that they "turn within to increase the anguish." Like most of the pains we see in Hell, the image of the frozen tears is not Dante's fantasy of a future punishment, but an observation of something people are doing to themselves now.

What eternal life might look like to those who are not undergoing the second death is more directly addressed in

the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso,* but the wholeness of the work allows us to see some things even from the bottom of Hell. Ugolino anticipates a kind of crucifixion in his children dying for his sins and it turns him to stone. Perhaps it could also have made him more alive?

He says his dream of the father wolf and his sons eaten by the dogs rent the curtain of the future for him: another parallel with the crucifixion, during which the veil in the temple at Jerusalem which screened the Holy of Holies from view was torn from top to bottom. The essence of God was revealed, according to the gospel, to be love so great as to die for his children in the crucifixion; the essence of Ugolino, as it seemed to him, was revealed to be his responsibility for the coming death of his children, and rather than face it, he became something neither alive nor dead: what Dante says he himself became in the presence of Satan.

But the sight of our essence can also appear in the gospel account as our shared responsibility for Christ's death, since it is in taking the blame for our sins that he dies. If we are to be changed by his deed we must agree to take the blame for his torture and death on the cross. How are we to do that? Forgiveness and Sin and Suffering all come together here; we are trying to see how the very same suffering of the innocent can save some and damn others according to their responses. What might it do for us to see a full acceptance of undeserved suffering? We

know by reading the newspapers what it does to become outraged by it: it petrifies us.

It was clearly possible for Ugolino to acknowledge to himself and his children that he was the reason for the pains and death they all would soon face. His children's acceptance would have meant forgiveness. He could not bear to ask for it; he turned to stone instead. It was also possible to blame Ruggieri, or to blame God. He may have done both by turning to stone. What about us? We are in a world filled with the suffering of the innocent and we may not see any way in which they are suffering for our crimes. We may live in simmering outrage or we may turn a bit stony when we see that after all the starving children across the globe or even just in Santa Fe are indeed suffering for our sake: our present ease and comfort is a tacit acceptance that they continue miserable. But selling all we have to give to the poor would not exonerate us. It does not ease Ugolino that he too will die in the same pain as his sons. We must do all we can to help sufferers, but beyond that, to accept the blame for their suffering is what Christ teaches, and to do so from love. Forgiveness is both given and received in that acceptance.

If God's forgiveness is to be full and real for mortals then the one forgiving *must be guilty* of the sin that is forgiven. I don't mean " must be able to see himself as capable of the same crime". It is too easy to say, " It could have been me who did it, " while leaving in silence the precious

parenthesis: " but I'm glad it wasn't." You remain the magnanimous superior. The sinner is the lucky beneficiary. Instead the one forgiven is to be loved as ourselves; his sin, once forgiven, is not to come between us and him or between him and God. So we must not say, " I could have done what you did." We must say, " I did what you did." This is what it means for Jesus to take upon himself the sins of the world and for God to die. The simple finitude that distances us from God is not allowed to come between us.

But how can we do more than conclude such things as if they are algebraic answers: If perfect forgiveness, then shared sin? How can we feel it true that we *do* share in all sins? Is that really the only path to forgiveness? Can't I get my own particular sins forgiven while reserving the right to think myself better than those whose actual sins were surely far worse?

I must first be aware of my own particular deep need for forgiveness, to see that asking for it is ultimately the same as taking responsibility for all sins and that being forgiven is the same as forgiving them all. These thoughts are hard to think because they are repugnant to our notion of a core in us: our untouchable and unshakable difference from everything else and everybody else : our freedom, our precious inviolable self. Do I after all not even own myself? Does it not finally matter what I do or don't do?

There is a tendency to think one might reason all of this out and perhaps with luck arrive at the solution, which could be shared with other reasoners, as if it were independent of the learner's heart. The tendency belongs to a reason that refuses to go beyond itself. But all I do here is to sketch the look from the outside of someone who accepts responsibility for all sins.

To the objection that the whole idea is fantasy, I have only partial replies. The first is that Christianity does not propose such acceptance as concordant with ordinary common sense or habitual human preferences. Nor is it offered as a general teaching to be grasped by a generic human being. The Gospels are not treatises, nor is the *Divine Comedy*. God's particular help, manifest in one's own particular life, is required to see this account as one's own truth. Our particular crimes, pains, and sorrows are not redeemable in their particularity except by what is particular.

Another partial answer is to point out the anger we often feel at the suffering of someone we care about. I say " at the suffering" but sometimes it is clearly at the sufferer. If we were entirely confident in our own innocence we might not feel so put upon, so resentful of the suffering or the sufferer as we often do. " I'm so sorry," we say dutifully on hearing of someone's pain or ill-fortune, to which may come the reply, " It's not *your* fault." Could that answer be telling us what we really need to hear because we suspect

it is not true? The closer one is to someone, the harder it is to hear of their pain, and the more one may feel a wish to take it from them, to suffer in their place, but one may also suspect one's own wish of hypocrisy: easy to wish for what isn't really possible. The wish may be sincere, but some feeling of fault is in the mere recognition that one is at the same time partly relieved not to be in their pained condition. The relief may be of a piece with that freedom that is our selfhood; the feeling of fault may be most clearly visible in what is called " survivor's guilt". Why did he die and not I? I know I am no better than he.

If Jesus is to be believed, it is harder to forgive sin than to heal pain and sickness. But both may be accomplished when someone takes another's sin as his own. If sin is at bottom the sense of victimhood and betrayal, of turning one's back on a world that turns its back, of unfreedom and despair, of having turned to stone, then acceptance of responsibility could be life and redemption and health.

When the locking up of the tower becomes the locking up of Ugolino's own heart it looks as if there is no chance of taking responsibility. He says nothing about making a choice: he looked at his sons' faces, he said not a word, he did not weep, he turned to stone within. Like other details from the lives of Dante's fictional sinners, this has an eerie familiarity. We do wrong mostly without reflection, without being able to help ourselves. Fear, habit, inertia, ignorance, all collude. Sinning may be compared to

getting lost or falling asleep, as Dante does in the first twelve lines of the poem.

What Theology calls Original Sin is both mine and not mine. It is an inherited disposition, in a world full to the brim with the inevitable consequences of earlier wrongs, and it is a fall I have made my own. Ugolino can certainly claim that if he became a traitor it was not without having first been betrayed by others. It seems necessary to regard him as truthful when he says he could not respond to his children's tears, and at the same time to blame him for not responding.

Aristotle might say that Ugolino had by a series of choices made himself into someone who could not at that moment have acted otherwise. He would also grant that Ugolino had no choice in his parents, his upbringing, or the time and place of his birth, and that all of these matter enormously in forming character. Yet in spite of all, there is something in us that cannot agree to sheer passivity. " I should have known better, " we sometimes say, precisely when we could say merely, " I just didn't know." Oedipus blinds himself and says, " All my ill sufferings Apollo accomplished; but none struck himself except me." But why choose a deed of self-punishment if all else was purely undergone and in no way chosen?

The possibility of redemption, around which Dante has built his poem, means that Ugolino might have received

God's help in overcoming all the circumstances conspiring to turn him to stone. MIght have, if he had asked and God had given. Jesus's point about bread and stones was that if God's child asks for what he needs most, God will not refuse. It is encouragement to prayer. As Llyd Wells remarked in our Sophomore Seminar last week, Ugolino can still see the sky from his cell; he counts the moon's phases but simply uses them to tell time. He doesn't mention the stars, nor does it occur to him to see them as a sign of sustaining love. He does not say to himself, " If I am ever going to pray, it had better be now." But we don't know who he might have become if he had. We may learn something about who we are becoming if we ask ourselves what we weep at and whether we ever feel an impulse to pray.

Ugolino's hungry children are the presence of God in his cell: closer than the stars, their offer of themselves to be his food is a reminder of the possibility of giving up one's self, of holding nothing back, of sharing whatever we have and whatever we are. They do not need an explicit confession to sense that they are there because of their father; and they do not hold it against him. It is not a practical solution that any of them should eat the others, but the offer is an expression of unstinting love. Out of the mouths of babes come words of wisdom. It is here we should weep.