Carpeaux’s *Ugolino and His Sons* and Dante’s *Inferno* XXXIII

There are few scenes more gruesome in Dante’s *Inferno* than that horrid sight our wayfarer stumbles across when he encounters the traitor, Count Ugolino, in the frozen ninth circle of Hell. Though Ugolino has committed treason, the sin Dante reviles most, the shade is nonetheless afforded an extensive opportunity to bare his troubled soul, and the first third of Canto XXXIII is devoted to his sorrowful story. Special attention is given to his punishment, which, in an act of great injustice, involves not only the original sinner but also his sons, who are placed with their father in a secluded tower to waste away. As starvation consumes them, Ugolino’s sons encourage their anguished father, who gnaws at his hands, to consider cannibalism. It is to this moment that the French Romantic sculptor, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, dedicated his career-making opus, *Ugolino and His Sons*. Frozen in cold marble, Carpeaux’s Ugolino, unlike Dante’s, is defined not by his particular sin or savage quest for survival but by a more universal dolore – a sense of unconquerable pain that affects all men, whether they be sinners or saints.

Scholars have emphasized the nuance of Dante’s depiction of Ugolino, whom Dante neither fully condemns nor vindicates. Mechthild Cranston, the poetry specialist, writes of this nuance: “his [Ugolino’s] story… evoke[s] both wrath and compassion in Dante” (42). At first glance, Ugolino seems to fall into that category of pitiable sinners whom Dante considers deserving of empathy despite their temporal mistakes. While Dante the poet saw himself as a possible impetus behind Italy’s religious renovation, the pilgrim was far from immune to shows of compassion in Hell; his pity for sinners is most famously shown in Canto V, when he “swooned as if in death” and fainted “as a dead body falls” after hearing the story of Paolo and Francesca, two adulterous lovers (*Inferno* 5.141-42). But this is not the case with Ugolino. Dante, having already proven
his emotional susceptibility to the sinners’ stories, fails to show Ugolino any sign of pity. The shade admonishes his living visitor for failing to shed a tear in his presence, asking: “if you weep not, what can make you weep?” (*Inferno* 33.42). Instead, it is about the collective nature of Ugolino’s punishment that Dante feels most strongly. “Even if Count Ugolino bore the name of traitor to your castles,” Dante remarks, “you [Pisa] still should not have put his children to such torture” (*Inferno* 33.85-87). Commentators have thus noted that “[a]ll of Dante’s sympathy is lodged with the children, none with Ugolino” (R. Hollander and J. Hollander 621).

Dante’s original language, however, reveals more sympathy than the poet may have been wishing to express. One cannot ignore Ugolino’s animalistic tendencies – indeed, he is compared to a dog in line 78 of Canto XXXIII – and the inherent inhumanity of cannibalism, but his conscience is governed by more than just his survival instincts (*Inferno* 33.78). In Canto XXXIII, his dilemma is described using different forms of the Italian word, “dolore,” no less than three times (*Inferno* 33.5, 60, 75). This word has been translated as “grief” or “sorrow,” but, in its most basic sense, it means “pain” – pain which “racks” Ugolino’s heart (R. Hollander and J. Hollander 605, 609; *Inferno* 33.5). When Ugolino “gnaws” at his hands, it may have externally seemed a symptom of his “hunger,” but in truth, it was the internal pain – *dolore* – that brought him to such a tormented act (*Inferno* 33.58). Ugolino’s physical distress, then, ought not be attributed solely to his animalistic survival instincts; his plight is not the particular sin he has committed but the universal *dolore* of a “father over whose sorrows one must weep” (Yates 99).
If this moment figuratively “turned to stone” Dante’s Ugolino, Carpeaux turns him to stone in the literal sense (Inferno 33.49). With a drama only the most adept Romantics could invoke, Carpeaux depicts Ugolino at the moment he begins to gnaw at his hands. Formally, Carpeaux cements Ugolino’s status as a patriarch; the sinner sits physically above his sons, who throw themselves at his thighs as if to prostrate themselves to his authority. Even so, the disparity between his idealistic muscles, which bulge from beneath his marble skin, and his conflicted face, is telling. No amount of positional or muscular strength can detract from the fact that this is Ugolino in a moment of great weakness – at the moment when his human constitution threatens to fail and plunge him into animalistic cannibalism. Ugolino’s dolore is evidently progressive; his hair bears the vertical lines of a man who has run his fingers through greasy locks before moving on to harsher tics, and his sons are each placed along a spectrum from alive and fit to possibly dead and frail. That Ugolino stares so intently outward – perhaps out of the tower in which he and his sons have been imprisoned – is significant; it indicates that he has given up on himself and is searching for some form of external aid. But since his external animalism disguises his internal dolore, and since he has spurned God in his treachery, no aid can come from temporal or divine benefactors.
It is this tension between the internal and external – between dolore and animalism – that animates Carpeaux’s Ugolino. The statue, unlike the text, is uniquely able to present the sinner in the absence of his sin; what is left is a strong man at his weakest point, whose incapacitating dolore has been alienated from his treachery. This decontextualization of sin makes Ugolino’s plight more universally applicable; Carpeaux makes sympathizers of all men who must confront their paternal failings. Francine Koslow notes that “[t]he powerful forms of Carpeaux's sculpture, twisted and intertwined, suggest the self-devouring torment and despair that wracks the unfortunate Ugolino,” but there is more to Carpeaux’s complex web of muscles and limbs than a commentary on individual misfortune (139-40). That father and sons are linked in several bridges of unbroken marble suggests the interconnection of their unjust punishment. While Dante’s text treats this injustice as an afterthought – an unfortunate consequence of Ugolino’s treachery – Carpeaux’s statue treats it as the main focus, and the injustice of the punishment is added to Ugolino’s already overbearing dolore.

When Dante puts the sight of the gates of Hell to verse at the opening of Canto III, his intent is arguably to inspire fear within his readers, who may then be scared into submission to God and motivated to seek an Italian redemption (Inferno 3.1-9). In so doing, Dante becomes a proto-Savonarola – or even a proto-Calvinist – who conjured horrifying images of eschatological doom in order to inspire humanity to regain its righteous dread for the ultimate sovereign in Heaven above. But if we are to consider Carpeaux’s work the artistic equivalent of literary ekphrasis, his intent is clearly to inspire pity, not fear. It is for this reason that Carpeaux represents Romantic sculpture – that impassioned antidote to Neoclassical reason – at its finest. Fear drives us back out into the world, where we shall be servants to a larger cause, but pity draws us in, forces us to see ourselves in the subject, and then drives us to ponder our souls. When Carpeaux’s Ugolino looks out of his tower, does he look through us or at us? If he does indeed look at us, we are no different than Dante – we become living wayfarers peering into the depths of Hell. Ugolino and His Sons, therefore, becomes a cry for forgiveness; Ugolino’s penetrating stare asks whether we, unlike Dante, will weep for him – whether we will help him.
References


