Bloom and the Vulgar Body
The Christian Imagination and Modernist Humanism

In *Ulysses* James Joyce achieved the first and perhaps also the highest form of modernist humanism. Written between 1914 and 1921, that is during and immediately after the Great War, the novel deploys both the most sweeping and devastating critique of Joyce’s literary and cultural heritage and at the same time the most satisfying renewal of a humanism that can be traced back to the early Middle Ages and on through the Renaissance. Unlike the other modernists in this study, Joyce was not directly responding to historical circumstance, though he might in some way have been moved to an urgency by the conditions of this volatile era. Rather he seems to have been deeply involved in a profound meditation on an issue that had been plaguing him already and had surfaced in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). It is my contention that Joyce had been preparing for a Christian response to the Platonism of his culture.

This might not seem like an urgent issue, but Joyce made it one. The urgency lay in his need to find a way to escape successfully from a paralytic culture that seemed to doom most individuals to confinement within its labyrinth (which is how it plays out in *A Portrait of the Artist*) or in his need to find a way to elevate human being to heroic or even allegorical status (the issue in *Ulysses*). The problem for both novels is gravity, that incessant downward pull on anything that tries to move upward. It is a question of how to be Daedalus and not Icarus, how to become a Christ-like hero immune to the deflating mockery of a cynical culture. The problem of *Ulysses* may be mockery, but the solution to this problem cannot be the Platonic one. For Joyce that solution fails miserably because the Platonic denial of the body and the material world makes it susceptible to the powerful debunking of a cynical culture epitomized by Buck Mulligan. So Joyce was responding to the Platonic and Cartesian view of humanity and humanism by emphasizing the role of the body in human existence.

Joyce seems to have been aware that Enlightenment humanism may lead to two opposing positions that both suffer from serious error. Heading in one direction, the Enlightenment can lead to a powerful focus on the body and the material world as the horizon of all values, denying any nonhuman or supernatural
grounding for understanding humanity. This is what we call naturalism, and it is represented in Ulysses most powerfully in the character of Buck Mulligan and in the initial style of the novel. But as the mind/body split begun by Plato is exacerbated in the Cartesian thesis, the Enlightenment can lead to a conviction that the mind can become independent of the body, that a human being may fly above the body and the material world and achieve transcendence. This idea dates back to Plato and is most fully represented in the “Scylla and Charybdis” episode by the figure of George Russell. These are the extremes that Joyce’s retrieval and renewal of a Christian humanism seeks to avoid.

In Ulysses Joyce wrote a complex book about the simple theme of love, and he took on as his primary challenge in presenting this ideal perhaps the most permanent aspect of human being that threatens our claims to any ideal: our material nature, our physical bodies. As Richard Ellmann wrote in his introduction to Hans Gabler’s edition of Ulysses, Gabler identified more clearly and definitively than in preceding editions that the mysterious “word known to all men” is “love,” and “Joyce’s theme in Ulysses is simple. He invoked the most elaborate means to present it” (ix). This chapter focuses on the “elaborate means” employed to present the ideal of love as embodied in the figure of Leopold Bloom. We may take “embodied” almost literally.

Joyce is part of a tradition of writers who have focused on the body as a problem to be addressed and understood. The points developed in this chapter derive primarily from imaginative texts written by Christian writers in the West, beginning with Saint Augustine and Dante, continuing through Rabelais and Jonathan Swift, and focusing finally on Joyce as the modernist fulfillment of a distinctively Christian paradigm of writers who have felt the urgency of depicting the body as the necessary site of God’s redemptive action. This Christian tradition of imaginative writing is squarely opposed to the Platonic and the later Cartesian views that separate the mind from the body and therefore lay the foundation for a humanism that is above the body, outside time and outside history. A Christian humanism and in Joyce’s case a modernist humanism are opposed to a rationalist humanism stemming ultimately from Plato and receiving its latest and most urgent formulation after Descartes.

The Christian faith is founded squarely on the twin mysteries of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, both of which focus on the human body as indispensable in God’s plan of salvation: the Incarnation, in which the Word is made flesh, in which an aspect of the divinity takes on human form; and the Resurrection, in which this God-made-flesh rises from the dead in a resurrected body, which he presents in various manifestations as a still human body to his incredulous disciples. Defiantly opposed to Platonic notions of the truth as purely ethereal and wholly intellectual, the Christian faith values the body and
sees it as perfectible, respects the body and its claims as an integral and essential part of the redemptive plan. In fact one of the main effects of making Bloom a Jew is to rescue Christianity from the ill effects of Platonism and to return it to its Judaic foundation in which the body and its life in history are fully respected.

This “Christian tradition of the body” is relevant to a modernist humanism because it provided its most important imaginative writer with a tradition of important literary texts that did indeed focus on the human body, not as an obstacle to be overcome but as a nontranscendible aspect of the human condition that is capable of being understood in ways that are not ironic or debunking. The modernist humanism I describe is not shy of addressing the body and its concerns but instead delights in its depiction and works steadily and well in ennobling humanity in this effort. Too often attention to the body and the material conditions of human existence have led to a debunking of our aspirations for higher things, as if the reminder of our bodily nature is enough to debunk spirit and ideals. In this Christian tradition, the body can be described most fully in all its aspects and still not be an obstacle to the ideal. Joyce's *Ulysses* is the culmination of this tradition of Christian writing, and Joyce is squarely at the center of a “modernist humanism.” Joyce worked to retrieve a kind of humanism that avoids the pitfalls of the rationalist humanism leading to naturalism and the Platonic/Cartesian humanism that denies the body in an altogether too easy transcendence and is thus an easy target for that naturalism. Joyce had access to a tradition dating back to the Gospels, and in *Ulysses* he made this ancient tradition the foundation for his retrieval and renewal of a Christian humanism in the modern era.

**Countering Plato: Augustine, Dante, and the Incarnation**

Like so many of our intellectual problems, this one begins with Plato. With a glance at Plato's attack on the body and its senses in the *Phaedo*, one can see how the Western tradition of metaphysics was launched as strongly opposed to the body and its sensory apparatus. In this dialogue Plato made what appears a fairly simple and very sweeping distinction between the soul and the body—and the body comes off quite badly. Plato clearly asserted that the body is an enemy in our pursuit of truth and that the philosopher's entire life is a "rehearsal for death" (what Grube translates as “practise for dying and death,” 64a) in that the seeker after truth spends his life trying to move as far away from the body as possible and attempting to intuit the truth with pure intellect. The true philosopher must disdain all the “so-called pleasures” of the body, which is explicitly called "an obstacle" in the pursuit of truth (65b). It is a movement inside, away from the senses and into the pure mind, which alone can perceive truth and ideal forms. “If we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body
and observe matters in themselves with the soul by itself” (66e). The body and its senses deceive and mislead. We must avoid the “contamination of the body's folly” and its “infection” in our pursuit of Ideal Forms. “As long as we have a body and our soul is fused with such an evil we shall never adequately attain what we desire, which we affirm to be the truth” (66b). The body is an evil to be overcome by the philosopher in the pursuit of truth.

This has always struck me as an odd place to begin the pursuit of wisdom, with the body and the senses dismissed as obstacles in the path of the philosopher who seeks what we must call disembodied truth. It is important to note that the ideal realm is wholly associated with the soul, and the body is clearly its antagonist.

Saint Augustine squarely and clearly opposed this aspect of Platonic philosophy in his Confessions, making the key to his conversion the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Augustine early on recognized that the use of rhetoric for mere power of persuasion was potentially fraudulent and therefore immoral, and also early on he decided that he would devote his life to the pursuit of truth, trying to reach upward to God by rising above earthly concerns and seeking some sort of heavenly truth. He credited Cicero for developing this love of truth, and he spent many fruitless hours searching for the right path, the right method, for reaching this truth. But the error of Platonism plagued the Roman world in its adherence to the metaphysics of the Greeks, leading Augustine to the belief that truth was disembodied and abstract. His attempts to fly upward to God were unsuccessful because of the flesh, which weighed him down and brought him back to earth; the weight of the body dragged him back down to its needs and desires. The body is a problem, as the Platonists insist, but it is not to be escaped or degraded or denied. Its needs must be respected, its desires understood.

And this is where the Incarnation comes in. In his effort to lift himself upward (and Augustine used the language of rising and falling constantly), he was reading those philosophers whom he called the “Platonists.” He read in them the same kinds of values and moral statements as he heard from Christian preachers and as he read in Christian texts. “But I did not read in them that the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us” (7.9). What he did not read in the Platonists was anything like the mystery of the Incarnation. Every attempt he made to rise was unsuccessful because of the weight of the body and its sinfulness: “Your beauty drew me to you, but soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world. The weight I carried was the habit of the flesh” (7.17). He could not sustain his upward rise to God “until I embraced the mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ, who is a man, like them, also rules as God over all things, blessed for ever. He
was calling to me and saying I am the way; I am the truth and life. He it was who united with our flesh that food which I was too weak to take; for the Word was made flesh so that your Wisdom, by which you created all things, might be milk to suckle us in infancy” (7.18). In the Incarnation, Christ becomes the mediator between God and men, partaking in both natures and showing men the way to become higher and move upward. It is the Incarnation that enables us to know God and not the withdrawal from the body into the pure intellect as the Platonists advocate. Christ in the Incarnation allows human being to reach upward toward God without denying the body and our physical nature.

The Incarnation provides a way to understand the body that does not ask us to deny the body, nor does it require—in the opposite movement that we are more accustomed to in our more ironic age—that we deny the higher realms of the ideal and reduce all to the body. This mystery of Christian belief allows the body to remain the often vulgar thing it is while at the same time allowing it to aspire to higher things. For as God humbles himself to take on this mortal and often vulgar flesh (and this humility is also important), the Incarnation also ennobles the flesh as it becomes the container of the divine. The body and its needs are made legitimate, worthy, and valid by the Incarnation. When in the Resurrection Christ shows his risen body and insists that it is a fully human one with its needs for food, the body is even made more worthy of our attention and in fact something not to be transcended but perfected. This allowed Augustine to understand the nature of the body and its desires, which were plaguing him and seemed as if they would never allow for his movement toward truth. One of Augustine's most searching meditations is on the nature of beauty and human desire. He asks why would a benevolent God create a world filled with beautiful things that we desire to enjoy or possess and then make the flesh too sluggish to ever enjoy them or take possession? The early books of Confessions document how desire for Augustine became overwhelmingly powerful and how it became an itch that increased its demands the more he scratched, leading him to pursue with great energy the things of the world. But the itch only became worse and the scratching created sores and festering wounds. By embracing the Incarnation, Augustine understood that the desires of the body are not be denied but mastered, not to be rejected or overcome but to be directed, by a newfound will, away from the things of the world and toward their Creator. Desire is not sin, nor is it virtue. It is an energy of human being that must be properly directed. The body is not so corrupt that it must be rejected. It is perfectible; it is redeemable.

One final lesson that Augustine gleans from the Incarnation is humility:

None of this is contained in the Platonists' books. Their pages have not the mien of the true love of God. They make no mention of the tears.
of confession or of the sacrifice that you will never disdain, a broken spirit, a heart that is humbled and contrite, nor do they speak of the salvation of your people, the city adorned like a bride, the foretaste of your Spirit, or the chalice of our redemption. In them no one sings *No rest has my soul but in God's hands; to him I look for deliverance. I have no other stronghold, no other deliverer but him; safe in his protection, I fear no deadly fall.* In them no one listens to the voice which says *Come to me all you that labour.* They disdain his teaching because *he is gentle and humble of heart.* For you have hidden all this from the wise and revealed it to little children. (7.21)

Augustine discovered that it is arrogance to believe that we can on our own move upward away from the darkness of the body and earthly things toward the light of the heavenly truth; it is arrogance to believe that we do not have to turn to Christ to begin the movement of our redemption; it is arrogance to believe that we do not have to be humble in order to receive wisdom and approach the truth. The Platonists want to ignore our bodies, which weigh us down and keep dragging us back to earth. The Platonic image of upward flight toward a disembodied truth is one of arrogance and presumption. Augustine learned that the humility of God, who humbled himself to take on flesh, is our model. We must accept the humility of being fleshly creatures as Christ accepted the indignities and vulgarities of the flesh. In this humility we can finally begin the move upward.

As many commentators have pointed out, Dante’s *Comedia* is also informed by the mystery of the Incarnation, a point well established in Charles Singleton’s exposition of allegory and John Freccero’s ingenious readings of various episodes in the poem. What I want to contribute to this discussion of the role of Incarnation in the *Comedia* is an analysis of Dante’s depiction of the body, especially his own body as he undergoes his spiritual itinerary, and his depiction of the problem of language as inherently fraudulent. These two issues unite in and are resolved by the Incarnation, the Word made flesh.

In the very first canto of *Inferno,* when Dante tries to climb to the top of the hill so he can once again see and be guided by the sun, his ascent is blocked almost immediately by the three beasts that represent human sinfulness. This is the first and most dramatic instance of Dante’s quarrel with Plato. Dante follows Augustine in having our sinful nature bring us back down from any easy flight upward to the light. According to Freccero, “The Platonic conversion toward the light is doomed to failure because it neglects to take account of man’s fallen condition” (9). What is needed is humility: “the descent in humility helps remove the barrier that philosophy leaves intact” (9). Even the voyage of Ulysses in canto 26 of *Inferno* is read as an arrogant attempt to go right up to the light
of God: “the voyage was an allegory for the flight of the soul to transcendent truth. . . . Dante’s descent into hell enables him to reach the shore which Ulysses was only able to make out at a distance, a contrast that evokes . . . Augustine’s distinction between philosophical presumption and Christian conversion” (15). Dante must humble himself in a descent to hell in order to be able to begin the more painful ascent up Mount Purgatory, pulled downward by gravity to the center of the earth where Satan is eternally fixed in ice. The mortal body that Dante bears drags him downward and makes him unable to enact the Platonic flight to the light of truth. *Inferno* ends as Dante “passes the point to which weights are drawn from every part” (34.110–11), the force of gravity pulling him down to Satan and as far away from God as possible.

But this movement downward made necessary by the body is also the beginning of a successful movement upward, as Dante and Virgil find a hidden track on the other side of Satan that brings them out to the other side of the globe and onto Mount Purgatory, which they are allowed, even encouraged, to climb. Blocked of an easy ascent up the hill to the light of the sun back in the first canto of *Inferno*, Dante now may participate in an arduous climb up Mount Purgatory. In *Purgatorio* Dante’s body becomes a dominant focal point, as the penitent souls frequently marvel that someone in the flesh is climbing the mountain of purgation. In one of the first instances of this in *Purgatorio*, Dante uses language that encourages the reader to connect this scene to one of John’s Resurrection stories. Seeing the penitent souls stunned by what appears before them, Virgil says, “Without your asking I declare to you that this is a human body you see, by which the sun’s light is divided on the ground. Do not marvel, but believe” (3.94–97). Just as Jesus invited Thomas to believe in his resurrected body, so Virgil asks the wondering souls to have faith: it is our mortal bodies that will be cleansed and perfected, as we become like Christ in his Resurrection. Dante continues to meditate on this story from John’s Gospel when one of the souls, Manfred, whom Dante apparently knew in life, asks Dante to recognize him through his wound: “‘Look now!’ he said, and showed me a wound high on his breast; then said, smiling, ‘I am Manfred’” (3.110–12). It is by the wounds we suffer during earthly existence that we are known, as Christ is known by his wounds. As both Singleton and Freccero emphasize, in the *Comedia* Dante is on a spiritual itinerary allowing him to recognize that the pattern of his life is approaching the pattern of Christ’s, as the individual human life has the capacity to participate in the mystery of Incarnation. Dante is bringing a body up Mount Purgatory that can become like the resurrected Christ’s.

*Purgatorio* is the only part of the *Comedia* in which time is still operative, as the souls must spend the amount of time in each terrace that is required for the purgation of that particular sin for that particular sinner. It is the only section
of the *Comedia* in which change occurs; the penitent souls become purified as they suffer and gradually move upward toward their great goal. As such, *Purgatorio* is the section most concerned with depicting Dante's human body as it undergoes a process of change and overcomes the ill effects of history, the wounds that being in space and time have placed on him in his body. It is the only section of the *Comedia* that Dante considers truly an epic, which he implies when he invokes Calliope as its muse in its first lines. *Purgatorio* is an epic because it recounts Dante's overcoming of the conditions of history and his heroic, but wholly personal, achievement of reaching back to human origins in Eden. Dante brings a full bodily existence, scars and all, as he makes his upward climb to Edenic purity. In this way he is imitating Christ, who in the Resurrection still has a human body scarred from his being in history.

When Dante finally arrives at the base of the mountain and just before he begins the penitential program, an angel places seven *P*‘s on his forehead, each *P* representing one of the seven deadly sins. This sinfulness is what weighs him down and makes the ascent hard. But the spiritual law governing the physics of this mountain are explained to Dante early on: “This mountain is such that it is always hard at the start below and the higher one goes it is less toilsome; therefore when it will seem to thee so pleasant that going up will be for thee as going downstream in a boat, then thou shalt be at the end of this path” (4.88–94). At the end of each terrace, one of the *P*‘s is erased by an angel; Dante becomes lighter and the ascent easier, until there is no effort at all in his movement upward. It is sin, and ultimately not the body, that drags the human downward and makes the Platonic flight impossible. Once sin is purged, the body is made perfect, and Dante rises “naturally.” For the Christian poet, the body is perfectible and not to be scorned and degraded as the Platonists insist. When one of the penitent souls just happens to finish his centuries-long purgation during Dante’s journey, his successful attainment of purity is signaled by angelic voices singing “Gloria in excelsis Deo,” just as angels did at the Nativity of the Christ; and Dante compares himself and Virgil to those “shepherds who first heard those words” (20.136, 140). The purified soul is perfected, becoming like the Christ as he entered space and time in human form. The body will not be rejected but perfected in the Christian imagination. In fact Virgil’s last words to Dante indicate that human desire is perfectible and that Dante has accomplished this great feat: “Free, upright and whole is thy will and it were a fault not to act on its bidding; therefore over thyself I crown and mitre thee” (27.140–42). The body and its desires, which so frightened Augustine that he seems to advocate denial and asceticism, are perfectible in Dante’s understanding, and Dante has felt his body become lighter and lighter as he purges sin after sin. He defies gravity, being more able to ascend as the ascent becomes more arduous, as he feels lighter and...
lighter. The purified and perfected body obeys different laws than it does in its fallen state. As Beatrice explains to Dante in canto 2 of *Paradiso*, “Thou shouldst no more wonder at thy ascent than at a stream falling from a mountain-height to the foot; it would be a wonder in thee if, freed from hindrance, thou hadst remained below, as on earth would be stillness in living flame” (2:136–41). Dante is ascending through the various spheres of heaven as Christ performed his Ascension, fully in a human body freed of the hindrance of sin. It is natural for him to be able to do so.

The purgatorial itinerary is as much for Dante’s language as it is for his body and his desires. The body and the word both are purged, as Dante gets ready to become like Christ, the Word made flesh. This is the double focus of *Purgatorio*: as the body is purified and its desire perfected, Dante is learning how to write a higher poetry, better and purer than what he had accomplished so far. Since poetry is about desire, the perfecting of desire is intimately bound to the perfecting of its poetic language.

This pedagogical component of *Purgatorio* begins right away, with Cato’s response to Virgil’s narrative intended to curry Cato’s favor, “There is no need for fair words.” Fair words, ironically enough, have the potential to be hellish, as Ulysses shows us in canto 26 of *Inferno*. Virgil’s rhetorical powers are to be trusted less in *Purgatorio* than they were in *Inferno*, just as his authority as a guide is diminished in *Purgatorio*, where he acts more as a companion than a guide. We watch Dante develop his own “purgatorial poetics” as he proceeds up the mountain, able to see more clearly and more fully as he ascends. He must learn how to write about the heightened sensual experience of purgatory. In hell the sun was silent and the light was mute. Here he must learn to see more than he is used to and to record it. In *Paradiso* he will write the poetry of light; he will allow the sun and more brilliant lights to speak.

Dante develops a theory of language in the *Comedia*. For him language is inherently fraudulent, and one of the main themes of the *Comedia* is Dante’s effort to find a true language that we can trust. This problem of language as inherently fraudulent was also a major theme in Augustine’s *Confessions*, which is centered on the notion of hearing God’s voice with the ears of the heart. Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric and became increasingly suspicious about the tendency of language to mislead and deceive. In fact Augustine noted how the Platonists are too arrogant to listen to the voice of God in their hearts, and the plot of *Confessions* moves toward the garden scene in which he was finally able, after having embraced the Incarnation, to hear the voice of God in the singsong nonsense of children saying, “Take it and read, take it and read” (8.12). Having rejected rhetoric as a way to truth, he achieved the humility needed to discern how God chose to speak to him.
The problem of language is pervasive in the *Commedia*, beginning from the first moment Virgil is present, when he is described as someone whose voice seems weak from long silence. It is Dante's failure to have been listening to Virgil's voice—his failure to have been reading and attending to the words of Virgil—that is indicated by this seeming weakness of Virgil. When Dante expresses fear to go on the journey Virgil describes in canto 2 of *Inferno*, Virgil's response is to tell a long story that comes to focus on Beatrice's solicitude for Dante. This story from the poet's mouth inspires Dante: "Thou hast so disposed my heart with desire for the journey by thy words that I have returned to my first intent" (2.136–38). The poet's words encourage and inspire the pilgrim to make this dangerous and difficult voyage.

So the poet's language has this rhetorical power. It becomes problematic most vividly in *Inferno* when Dante encounters the great figure of Ulysses, who is damned as a fraudulent counselor. Dante begins canto 26 of *Inferno* by expressing the great care he is about to take in recording this encounter: he will curb his powers more than he is wont. Because of Ulysses' excess, Dante wants to make his readers aware of his own self-control and rhetorical discipline. For Ulysses narrates his ability to lead his men on a doomed and (for himself at least) damned voyage. He uses all his skills as a speaker to inspire his men to go on this dangerous voyage, and the resemblance of his speaking ability to Virgil's rhetorical power is the crucial point. Language can be used fraudulently just as easily as it can be used truthfully—maybe much more easily, as attention to all the sins of fraud in Dante's lower hell may make us aware. And the association of Ulysses' voyage with the Platonists' desire for transcendence makes us wonder about the fraudulence of such calls to the light. So Dante is anxious about his own language: is he like Ulysses, leading his reader on a dangerous journey that can end in doom, or is he like Virgil, called by heaven to lead the reader on the true way to the heavenly city?

We see this anxiety early in *Inferno*, in a canto that at first might not seem to be about the poet's own language. In canto 5 Dante enters the second circle of hell, the first where sinners are punished, and witnesses the punishment of the lustful as they whirl about helplessly in a hellish storm. Their lack of will is underscored by their punishment. When Dante calls two of them over to speak with him, they must respond "such force had my loving call." His call has a force they cannot resist. Francesca speaks about her sin, and it is not original on my part to note how bookish her speech is, how much like a courtly romance she sounds. She has learned to speak like the books she loved to read. By internalizing their language, she takes on its ethics as well, which all seem to suggest that "Love" is the agent in a lover's life and the individual has no ability to overcome its power. When Dante hears this he asks for the specifics of her sin, and
she tells the story about how she and her brother-in-law were reading an
Arthurian romance that led them (against their will, as the courtly ethos would
have it) to commit adultery. She blames the book for her sin, and when Dante
hears this he “falls like a dead body falls.”

Why does Dante faint? Among the various reasons that make sense and add
to our sense of the richness of this scene, the one that is most compelling to me
is Dante's own possible complicity in her sin. For what is Dante in the year 1300
but a writer of love poetry that might indeed be part of the romantic world
Francesca has so deeply made her own? If the writer of the book is to blame (in
addition to the adulterers themselves, for obviously God has not absolved them
from their guilt merely because of their culture), then Dante might be damned
for some sort of fraudulent counsel himself. Dante took great pains in Convivio
and Vita Nuova to reassess his poetry, not as erotic love poems but as philosophi-
cal poems about divine love and Beatrice. He is anxious about his writing here,
and Ulysses teaches exactly what he had to fear.

Inferno presents a subtle and profound lesson in the possibilities of discover-
ing a true language, one that can be trusted to lead to redemption. Deep in the
lowest hell Dante hears the heartbreaking story of Ugolino and his sons. Part of
the drama of the scene is to note if Dante loses the faculty of rational judgment
as he absorbs the sorrowful details of Ugolino’s last days. If Ugolino were not a
treacherous man, he would not be placed in this part of hell, and to question
the placement would be to question God’s justice. And this Dante does not do.
Ugolino must have been a traitor, and he did not repent to earn God’s mercy.

This failure to repent is the most important part of Ugolino’s narration, and
Freccero has analyzed this scene most thoroughly. Ugolino misses the opportu-
nity to repent when he fails to hear in his sons’ voices the sacrifice of Christ. For
they offer their flesh for him to eat, as Christ has given humankind his body in
the Eucharist. Ugolino most likely does eat his sons’ bodies after they die, and
this descent into cannibalism is a grotesque inversion of Christ’s offer. Ugolino
could have heard in his children’s voice the voice of Christ and turned to God
as he awaits his death. But he turned to stone and failed to be moved to repen-
tance.

The words of Christ are the food humankind is to eat. Christ is the Word
made flesh, and in the Eucharist the bread-made-body is the material manifesta-
tion of the Word. The two themes, of the body and of language, begin to merge
here in the mystery of the Incarnation, in Christ as Word made flesh. The child’s
voice asking his father to eat was the way God tried to reach Ugolino to bring
about his conversion, and this is reminiscent of Augustine’s hearing God’s voice
in the voices of children playing a childish game. What Ugolino missed we must
learn to hear.