

Article

The Soul's Tangibility in Dante's *Commedia*Yi Liu^{1,*}¹ Shanghai University, Shanghai, China

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Abstract: Dante's *Commedia* presents a striking and persistent inconsistency in the treatment of the soul's tangibility across its three canticles. Infernal shades can be stepped on, struck, and clung to, while purgatorial souls sometimes prove intangible and at other times embrace one another successfully, and the blessed in Paradise appear not as bodies but as lights. Existing scholarship has attempted to explain these apparent contradictions through theological ambiguity, dramaturgical exigency, or the linear purification of sin, yet no study has offered a systematic account of the conditions under which touch is permitted or withheld in the afterlife. This paper argues that tangibility in the *Commedia* functions as a deliberate narrative device whose role shifts according to the theological and poetic requirements of each cosmic realm. Drawing on an approach that treats bodily perception as a locus of meaning-making, scenes involving touch across Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso are analyzed to reconstruct its narrative purpose. The analysis reveals a functional-differential model: in Inferno, tangibility materializes sin as a perceptible consequence and an instrument of exposure; in Purgatorio, touch is selectively deployed to correct desire, construct communal identity, and reorient love toward its proper end; in Paradiso, the apparatus of touch is surpassed as relationships are expressed through light and vision, though the soul's longing for the resurrection body affirms the enduring significance of embodiment. This model reframes the *Commedia's* textual contradictions as deliberate articulations of Dante's theological poetics, demonstrating that what changes across the three canticles is the nature of the relationship that touch enacts.

Keywords: dante; divine comedy; tangibility; soul; embodiment; theological poetics

1. Introduction

In classical epic and medieval theological narratives, the encounter between the living and the spirits of the dead has long served as a central literary motif. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus fails three times to embrace his mother Anticlea's shade, who declares herself a phantom of the dead; in the *Aeneid*, Aeneas likewise fails three times to embrace his wife Creusa, who explains this as the law of the Underworld. These episodes establish the classical convention of the soul as an insubstantial, untouchable entity. In the *Commedia*, this motif is reworked through both inheritance and departure from tradition. In the Inferno, souls exhibit a high degree of corporeality: Virgil can push or carry Dante, and Dante steps on sinners' heads and pulls out their hair. In Purgatorio, however, the rules of tangibility are no longer stable: Dante fails three times to embrace Casella; when Statius tries to embrace Virgil, he is rejected and reminded that as shades, he and Virgil are empty forms; yet Virgil and Sordello successfully embrace multiple times. Tangibility, thus, displays notable textual inconsistencies.

From a theological perspective, it has been observed that medieval conceptions of the afterlife body lacked definitive doctrinal consensus, and that in poetic practice the rules governing tangibility are often suspended according to the dramatic demands of a scene; the resulting inconsistencies therefore function as a representational counterpart to the inherent complexities of theological discourse. Another line of inquiry treats the corporeality of shades as directly linked to moral condition: the heaviness and solidity of infernal souls reflect the burden of wrongdoing that impedes spiritual progress, while

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purgatorial souls grow lighter as they undergo refinement [1]. Further development of this view proposes that corporeality diminishes with the soul's moral and intellectual transformation, suggesting that not only ethical state but also depth of spiritual insight affects tangibility; the failed embrace between Dante and Casella is interpreted as arising from the disparity between Dante's advanced understanding and Casella's residual earthly attachments. While insightful, this interpretation does not fully account for the non-linear pattern in which tangibility shifts across the narrative. Shifting focus from systematic doctrine to the author's lived experience, it has been argued that the poet's emphasis on corporeal identity—the preservation of each shade's individuality in every bodily detail—reflects his own condition as an exile who has lost his earthly home. Regarding tangibility, it is contended that the deeper criterion is theological alignment: as a work grounded in traditional spiritual frameworks, the poem cannot permit physical equivalence between those undergoing purification and those beyond redemption, so that the physical impossibility of certain embraces operates not as a cause but as the effect of this fundamental distinction—the necessary consequence of a poetics shaped by distance from ultimate reconciliation. While past scholarship has thoroughly explored the philosophical and theological dimensions of the body-soul relationship in the *Commedia*, the specific textual inconsistencies concerning the tangibility of souls—why some interactions are permitted and others are not—have yet to receive a systematic analysis that traces the conditions under which tangibility is granted or withheld.

This paper regards tangibility in the *Commedia* as a narrative device whose function adapts to the requirements of each scene, rather than as a fixed doctrinal principle. Drawing on phenomenological perspectives that emphasize bodily perception as a primary site of meaning-making, the study first reconstructs, from each specific context, the narrative purpose of every scene involving touch, and then examines how the permission, failure, or absence of touch contributes to the realization of that purpose. On the basis of this method, a functional-differential model of corporeality across the three realms is proposed: in *Inferno*, tangibility manifests as the material weight of wrongdoing and the reality of consequence; in *Purgatorio*, touch is unstable and its occurrence depends on contextual conditions; in *Paradiso*, relationality is no longer expressed through touch but is manifested directly through light, vision, and the unity of shared intention.

2. Materialized Sin in Inferno

In *Inferno*, the permission of physical contact and the intensity of its application serve a specific purpose: to transform the abstract theological proposition that "sin has consequences" into a perceptible, inescapable material reality. Unlike *Purgatory*, where physical contact will be deployed selectively in service of purification and the reordering of desire, the *Inferno* employs contact as a mechanism of exposure [2]. The greater the intensity of contact, the more clearly the nature of the sin is inscribed upon the body, made legible through the very act of physical interaction.

The infernal embodiment is first explicitly raised in the circle of gluttons, where the poem introduces a fundamental dynamic that will structure all subsequent encounters with contact [3]. As Virgil and the pilgrim walk over the shades, the poet notes:

Noi passavam su per l'ombre che adona
la greve pioggia, e ponavam le piante
sopra lor vanità che par persona [4].
We were passing through the shades that the
heavy rain weighs down, and we were placing our
soles on their emptiness that seems a human body [5].

Here, the shades possess a "vanità"—an emptiness, an insubstantiality—yet they seem like real bodies. The pilgrim walks on them, his feet making contact with their forms. This is the first moment in *Inferno* where the nature of the shade body is directly thematized, and it occurs precisely in a circle where the sin involves the body's appetites [6]. The gluttons' punishment—eternal rain, hail, and snow—is fully physical, yet the

pilgrim can walk through them, his feet meeting a quality that is both tangible and intangible. Virgil's subsequent explanation of the Last Judgment clarifies the stakes of this embodiment: "ciascun rivederà la trista tomba, / ripiglierà sua carne e sua figura" (each will see again his sad tomb, will take again his flesh and his shape). The resurrection will restore "carne" (flesh) and "figura" (shape)—a wholeness that the shades in their current state lack. The pilgrim's inability to fully engage with the shades, then, is related to their condition: they are tangible enough to be subject to punishment, yet their tangibility is a "vanità" that merely appears as a real body.

This dynamic between the reality of punishment and the insubstantiality of the shade becomes more pronounced when the pilgrim himself becomes the agent of physical interaction. In the circle of those who ended their own lives, contact produces not merely response but blood and speech. When Dante plucks a branch from a thornbush, "e l' tronco suo grido: 'Perche mi schiante?'" (its stem cried out: "Why do you split me?"). The pilgrim has performed an act affecting the shade, breaking off a twig [7]. The response is immediate and startling: "Da che fatto fu poi di sangue bruno, / ricomincio a dir". Blood issues from the broken branch, and the soul speaks. Virgil explains to the wounded soul that the pilgrim "non averebbe in te la man distesa" had he been able to believe what he has "seen only with my rhymes." The breaking of the branch is a necessary action, a means of making the pilgrim believe what he has only read. The purpose of this contact is epistemological: it transforms textual knowledge into experiential certainty. The pilgrim has read of such metamorphoses in classical poetry; now his own hand has produced blood from a speaking tree. This action reflects a broader observation: "The physical transformations and bodily alterations that are so evident throughout the *Inferno* depend for their impact precisely on a sense of bodily integrity." Here, the alteration is initiated not by the punishment itself but by the pilgrim's investigative contact. The action serves a higher purpose: to disclose the nature of the sin. The individual who ended their own life had violated the unity of body and soul; now, in Hell, that unity is symbolically restored in a modified form—the soul is bound to a tree that bleeds when touched.

From the active engagement of breaking a branch, the pilgrim's relation to infernal bodies shifts toward a different mode of apprehension: the altered body as a text to be interpreted rather than physically engaged [8]. In the fourth bolgia, the soothsayers' heads are twisted backward upon their bodies:

che da le reni era tomato 'l volto,
e in dietro venir li convenia,
perche 'l veder dinanzi era lor tolto [9].
for the face was turned toward the kidneys, and
they were forced to walk backwards, since seeing
forward was taken from them [10].

The pilgrim does not touch these shades; instead, he observes their altered forms. This is interpretation through visual engagement: the body itself has been physically rearranged, its material form permanently modified to reflect the sin. The soothsayers wished to see too far ahead; now their bodies enact that distortion, their faces turned toward their own backs. The pilgrim's act of observation becomes a form of reading—reading the sin inscribed on the body. The mimesis of the first canticle is dedicated to reproducing instances of textual distortion [6]. The soothsayers' bodies are texts that have been misquoted, their original form altered by the operation of divine justice. The pilgrim's gaze, moving over their altered forms, performs an act of interpretation. The body becomes legible as a sign of the sin that produced it. Contact here is transformed into sight, but the underlying logic remains: the body's material form has been altered, and that alteration is the consequence.

The trajectory of contact reaches its culmination in Cocytus, where the pilgrim moves beyond observation and engages directly with the physical form of the condemned [11]. Among the traitors, Dante encounters Bocca degli Abati and grasps him by the hair:

Io avea già i capelli in mano awolti,
e tratti glien' avea più d'una ciocca,

latrando lui con li occhi in giu raccolti,
quando un altro grido: "Che hai tu, Bocca?
I had already wrapped his hair around my hand
and had removed more than one tuft of it, he barking
with his eyes kept down,
when another shouted: "What's wrong with you, Bocca?"

When Bocca refuses to identify himself, the pilgrim removes a portion of his hair. Only when another sinner calls out "Che hai tu, Bocca?" does the identification become certain. The pilgrim's role is suited to the place where compassion is no longer operative, among those who have violated all bonds. The pilgrim does not merely observe the consequence; he participates in its manifestation. The narrative purpose of this direct contact is disclosure through physical interaction. The traitor, whose nature is concealment, is prompted to reveal his identity through physical engagement. The pilgrim's hands become instruments of divine justice, eliciting the truth from a form that would otherwise remain silent [10]. This is the logical endpoint of the infernal logic of contact: when words fail, the body can be made to communicate through physical interaction.

The most intense form of infernal contact, however, is not administered by the pilgrim but constitutes the consequence itself [12]. Count Ugolino perpetually gnaws the skull of Archbishop Ruggieri:

e come 'l pan per fame si manduca,
così 'l sovràn li denti a l'altro pose
la Ve 'l cervel s'aggiugne con la nuca
and as bread is eaten by the starving, so the one
above put his teeth to the other, there where the
brain joins the nape

The verb *manduca* (from Latin *manducare*) is used in sacred texts of the Eucharistic meal, suggesting a parodic reference to the Eucharist [13]. The contact here is consummated as consumption: the sinner's teeth penetrate the other's skull, and this act of biting is the consequence itself. Ugolino's violation of trust is addressed by a perpetual violation of the body's integrity. The contact is not a means of consequence; it is the consequence. Ugolino's own narrative of his death, the starvation of his children in the tower, culminates in the ambiguous line: "Poscia, piu che 'l dolor, pote 'l digiuno" (Then fasting had more power than grief). Whether this implies cannibalism has been debated, but the ambiguity itself is significant: the boundary between the father's suffering and his potential act of consuming his own children mirrors the boundary between the contact that addresses and the contact that is addressed.

The final image of infernal contact is Satan himself, whose three mouths perpetually chew the three greatest traitors:

Da ogne bocca dirompea co' denti
un peccatore, a guisa di maciulla,
sì che tre ne facea così dolenti [14].
In each of his mouths he was breaking a sinner
with his teeth in the manner of a scutch, so that he
made three suffer at once [12].

The verb *dirompea*—translated by Durling-Martinez as "was breaking"—suggests a force that exceeds even Ugolino's gnawing. The sinner is not chewed but fragmented by the demonic teeth. This is contact as total incorporation: the body reduced to substance, processed through the digestive machinery of the infernal king [2]. Yet even here, the pilgrim's relation to contact undergoes a final transformation. The ladder out of Hell is the body of the devil himself. Virgil instructs: "Attenti ben, che per cotali scale," "convien si dipartir da tanto male" (Hold fast, for by such stairs... must we depart from so much evil). Contact that was throughout the *Inferno* an instrument of consequence and disclosure now becomes the means of departure. The pilgrim must engage with the form of evil itself to leave it behind. Singleton observes that even at the limit of infernal contact, "Nothing

is terminal here....Signs point beyond, even here. And Virgil soon is saying *tutto avem veduto* and is looking on to the climb out of Hell." Even the most intense interaction serves a purpose: it establishes what sin is, what it does to the body, and why it must be left behind.

Throughout the *Inferno*, then, the pilgrim's encounters with infernal bodies follow a progressive intensification of contact. He begins by walking over shades whose tangibility is both real and unreal; he moves to breaking a branch and drawing blood, an act that makes him believe what he has only read; he learns to interpret the altered bodies of the soothsayers as texts inscribed by sin; he becomes an agent of physical engagement, removing a sinner's hair to prompt identification; he witnesses cannibalistic consumption as the consequence itself; and finally, he holds onto Satan as the means of ascent from Hell. Each escalation deepens the revelation of sin's material consequences [15]. Unlike Purgatory, where the narrative apparatus of contact will be deployed selectively in service of purification, Hell offers no such selectivity. Here, every contact is a judgment, every interaction a revelation, every physical engagement a materialization of the sin that has defined the sinner eternally. The body in Hell is the sin itself, made manifest, made available to perception, made impossible to disregard.

3. Disciplined Touch in Purgatory

Of the many gestures that punctuate Dante's journey through the afterlife, the embrace might at first seem unremarkable. It appears to be a conventional sign of affection or reunion. Yet in the *Purgatorio*, the embrace is never merely conventional. Before examining the three embraces that structure the *cantica*, it is clear that embraces are not the only form of bodily contact between souls, or between the living pilgrim and souls, in Dante's Purgatory. When Virgil washes the soot of Hell from the pilgrim's face with dew gathered from the grass, he touches the pilgrim intimately and deliberately:

ambo le mani in su l'erbetta sparte
soavemente 'l] mio maestro pose:
ond' io, che fui accorto di sua arte,
porsi ver' lui le guance lagrimose;
ivi mi fece tutto discoverto
quel color che l'inferno mi nascose.
both his hands, spreading them, my guide
gently placed on the tender grass: and I, aware of
his intention,
offered him my tear-stained cheeks; there he
uncovered all that color of mine which Hell had
hidden [16].

This cleansing touch is unilateral and ritualistic. Virgil acts upon the pilgrim, who receives the gesture passively. Later, on the terrace of the envious, the shades lean against each other and against the cliff in postures of mutual support:

Di vil ciliccio mi parean coperti,
e l'un sofferia l'altro con la spalla,
e tutti da la ripa eran sofferti [15].
They seemed clothed in base haircloth, and each
suffered the other to lean against his shoulder, and
the cliff suffered them all.

These contacts are punishments and supports, forms of necessary proximity that the souls cannot choose or refuse. Their narrative purpose resembles that of similar contacts in *Inferno*: they function as material consequences of sin. The embrace, by contrast, is an active reorientation of desire. It implies reciprocity, affection, and a desire for union that goes beyond mere support or purification. Because of this crucial distinction, the embrace becomes the site of Dante's most intense narrative correction. This part will therefore focus on the three embraces in the *Purgatorio*, between Dante and Casella, Virgil and Sordello, and Virgil and Statius.

The first embrace occurs in Canto 2, when the pilgrim, newly arrived on the shores of Purgatory, recognizes his deceased friend Casella among the souls in the angelic boat [17]. Overcome with affection, the pilgrim reaches out to embrace him:

Io vidi una di lor trarresi avante
per abbracciarmi, con sì grande affetto
che mosse me a far lo somigliante [18].
I saw one of them draw forward to embrace me,
with affection so great that it moved me to do the
same.

What follows is one of the most famous failed gestures in the poem:

Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!
tre volte dietro a lei le mani avvinsi,
e tante mi tornai con esse al petto.
Oh empty shades, except in appearance! three
times I clasped my hands behind that shade, and as
many times I drew them back to my chest.

The choice of the embrace as the vehicle for this encounter is itself significant. In the classical epic tradition, the embrace serves a precise function: it is the ritual gesture through which the living confirm kinship with the dead, complete mourning, and establish succession. Virgil's narrative in the *Aeneid* tells the reader an unalterable fact: death severs physical connection, and the failure of the embrace marks the irreversibility of loss. The classical hero learns through the failed embrace to accept absence. Dante borrows this same gesture but assigns it a fundamentally different theological function. He makes the embrace a test of whether the soul's desire is directed toward its proper object. When the pilgrim's hands pass through Casella's shade, the failure is not a sign that death is irreversible—for in Dante's Purgatory, death is precisely reversible through grace. Rather, the failure signals that the pilgrim's desire has been aimed in the wrong direction. Cato's rebuke is not about the dead being incapable of physical contact but a "Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio (Run to the mountain to shed the slough)"

A comparison with Virgil's canonical scenes reveals three ways in which Dante reworks the embrace topos. First, by evoking Virgil's canonical scenes, he places his own poem in explicit dialogue with the epic tradition, establishing a shared referent against which his rewriting becomes legible. Second, he systematically transforms the function of the embrace: in the Purgatorio, the embrace is no longer a ritual of mourning loss but a measure of the direction of desire. Failure is not an end but the beginning of education. Third, and most fundamentally, Dante uses the embrace to construct what might be called an embodied theology: the soul cannot grasp with its hands, but the heart can recognize. Physical contact is denied, but spiritual belonging is affirmed. This is precisely the logic of Purgatory itself—the body is left behind, but the will is reshaped [7].

Later in the same Canto, Casella sings the pilgrim's own canzone "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona", a poem that in the *Convivio* Dante would later claim to be an allegory of the poet's love for philosophy [12]. The sweetness of the song has so captivated the souls that they have stopped moving toward their purification. Cato, the guardian of Purgatory, interrupts with a sharp rebuke:

"Che è ciò, spiriti lenti?
Qual negligenza, quale stare è questo?
Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio
ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto."
"What is this, laggard spirits?
What negligence, what standing still is this? Run
to the mountain to shed the slough that keeps God
from being manifest to you."

It has been observed that Cato's rebuke constitutes a rejection not of poetry as such but of a particular kind of poetry—one that arrests movement toward the divine. In the analysis of the episode, it is noted that the rapt attention of the souls to Casella's song is

compared to the total absorption of birds feeding on wheat or tares [14]. The simile might be explained by the association of the flight of birds with the ascent of the soul, in Plato as well as in Dante, or with a retrospective glance at the canto of Francesca, where the subject was also 'amore'. The canzone "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona," whatever its allegorical intention, has become in this scene an occasion for what is identified as a momentary satisfaction of desire that must be interrupted. The failed embrace of Casella is, therefore, a narrative correction. The pilgrim's desire to hold his friend is a desire for a lesser good: the consolation of personal affection and aesthetic pleasure that, however genuine, cannot be the final end of the purified will. Cato's rebuke explicitly names the "slough" (scoglio) that must be shed, and the failure of the embrace makes the lesson bodily and immediate. The souls "hurry up the mountain-side... an unmistakable indication that they go toward an objective that transcends human reason and therefore the limits of philosophy". In its failure, the pilgrim begins to learn that authentic love cannot be recovered through physical grasping.

The second embrace presents a sharp contrast [7]. Here the embrace succeeds, but it occurs not between the pilgrim and a shade, but between two shades, the poets Virgil and Sordello. When Virgil identifies himself as a Mantuan, Sordello immediately rises and embraces him:

e l'ombra, tutta in sé romita,
surse ver' lui del loco ove pria stava,
dicendo: "O Mantoano, io son Sordello
de la tua terra!" e l'un l'altro abbracciava.
and the shade, all gathered in itself,
rose toward him from the place where it had
been, saying, "O Mantuan, I am Sordello from
your city!" and each embraced the other [9].

The embrace is instantaneous, unmediated, and fully realized. Notably, the pilgrim does not attempt it. Unlike the pilgrim's frustrated desire to hold Casella, the embrace between Virgil and Sordello is a sign of civic and poetic kinship that does not require physical bodies to be actualized. Both figures are shades, yet their embrace is described as a real embrace ("l'un l'altro abbracciava"). The gesture's meaning depends not on material solidity but on recognition of shared identity: language, city, poetic vocation.

This success is remarkable precisely because both figures are shades—the same insubstantial condition that made the pilgrim's attempt to hold Casella end in emptiness. In the Casella episode, the failure of the embrace dramatized the impossibility of recovering a lost personal relationship through physical touch. The name of their shared birthplace generates an immediate and powerful affective charge that manifests itself as an embrace. What matters is not the materiality of the bodies involved but the force of the identity they share.

This embrace is, within the logic of the Purgatorio, an exception. Souls in Purgatory do not generally touch each other in this way. Dante stages this exception not to make a general claim about the nature of shades but to make a specific argument about the power of communal identity to produce embodied gestures of love. The embrace translates an abstract category—"being from the same city"—into a visible, tangible, and affective action. The pilgrim, who has just failed to embrace his own friend, watches two strangers embrace over nothing more than the name of a city. The embrace is immediately followed by Dante's great invective against Italy, which contrasts the spontaneous affection of fellow citizens with the political fragmentation that divides the living. The successful embrace of the two poets functions as a normative model. It shows what political community ought to look like: immediate, unforced, and capable of generating love without the need for prior personal acquaintance. The poet-narrator laments that Italy has become "nave sanza nocchiere in gran tempesta" (a ship without a pilot in a great storm), a land where "l'un l'altro si rode / di quei ch'un muro e una fossa serra" (and the one gnaws at the other, even when enclosed by one wall or one ditch). The invective condemns the absence of imperial authority and the misalignment of secular and spiritual

responsibilities, which "per confondere in sé due reggimenti, / cade nel fango, e sé brutta e la soma" (by conflating two distinct spheres of responsibility, falls into disorder and undermines both its own integrity and its mission). The embrace between Virgil and Sordello serves as the positive countermodel to this picture of disunity. It shows what the living have forgotten how to do: recognize a fellow citizen not as an adversary but as a fellow member of a shared community, and manifest that recognition in a gesture of physical affection. The embrace that succeeds is the one that affirms a community. It is not an attempt to hold onto a lost past but an enactment of a present belonging. The pilgrim, watching from the outside, sees what love between strangers can look like when it is grounded in shared identity [14]. And the poet, immediately after recording the embrace, launches into a lament that the Italy of his own day has lost precisely this capacity.

The third and most complex embrace occurs in Canto 21. Statius, newly freed from his purgation, recognizes Virgil as the source of his poetic and spiritual inspiration. Overcome with gratitude, Statius moves to embrace Virgil's feet: "Già s'inchinava ad abbracciar li piedi / al mio dottor" (Already he was bending to embrace my teacher's feet). Virgil stops him with a remarkable line: "Frate, / non far, ché tu se' ombra e ombra vedi" (Brother, do not, for you are a shade, and a shade is what you see). Statius's response completes the logic that the earlier embraces have been building:

"Or puoi la quantitate
comprender de l'amor ch'a te mi scalda,
quand' io dismento nostra vanitate,
trattando l'ombre come cosa salda."
"Now you can grasp the
greatness of the love that burns in me toward you,
when I forget our emptiness,
treating shades like solid things."

It has been argued that this scene dramatizes the dynamic of poetic influence in the afterlife. Statius owes his very existence as a poet and as a believer to Virgil's text, yet the two can never meet as bodies. The scene is constructed as an enactment of Statius's own envoy to the Thebaid: "Vive, precor; nec tu divinam Aeneida tempta, / sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora" (Live, I pray; nor try the divine Aeneid, but follow from afar and ever adore its footsteps). The non-embrace of Statius and Virgil is a complex instance of the vestigia topos and itself an illustration of the moment of tradition, of the act of constructing the tangency between two texts. Statius wants to treat the shade as if it were a solid body because his love is so intense, and this forgetting of their shared insubstantiality is an error that springs from the highest possible motive: gratitude for the salvation of his soul. Virgil's correction is not a rejection of love but a redefinition of love's proper object [13]. Statius's love for Virgil is real, salvific, and complete without the embrace. The aborted gesture thus becomes the most positive of the three. It shows that love has become so interior, so truly oriented toward the spiritual, that the outward physical gesture is superfluous. The embrace that does not happen is the most spiritually complete because it acknowledges the truth of the shade's condition while not diminishing the love that prompted the gesture. The pilgrim, who witnesses this scene as well, learns that the desire to touch, to hold, to embrace has now been fully sublimated into recognition and gratitude that require no bodily confirmation.

After these three encounters, the pilgrim meets Matelda in the Earthly Paradise and finally Beatrice. Neither Matelda nor Beatrice is embraced. The pilgrim gazes at Matelda [13]. He kneels before Beatrice. He weeps. He confesses. But he does not attempt to embrace either figure. When the pilgrim's eyes are fixed too intently on Beatrice, the theological virtues turn his face away, saying "Troppo fiso!" (Too fixedly!). The desire to embrace—so urgent with Casella—has been completely transformed. In its place stands a different kind of relation: the vision of Beatrice's eyes, the sound of her voice, the acknowledgment of guilt and grace. From the initial failure of the pilgrim's attempt to hold Casella, through the successful but external embrace of Virgil and Sordello, to the aborted yet spiritually complete gesture between Statius and Virgil, Dante constructs a

sequential education in the nature of love. The embrace that is not given—first impossible, then observed, then deliberately withheld—becomes the most telling gesture of all.

4. Light and Love in Paradiso

The Paradiso transforms how souls appear. In the Inferno and Purgatorio, souls are consistently called "ombre" (shadows) and are characterized by having corporeal form and features that in most cases can be touched, seen, and recognized. The Inferno depicts a realm that is emphatically corporeal throughout, a place of mud, ice, palpable air, running sores, stone sarcophagi, grappling hooks, leaden cloaks, and other tangible elements. The Purgatorio maintains this emphasis on recognizably human forms; the penitent souls retain their earthly features, albeit often distorted by their purgatorial suffering. In the Paradiso, however, this mode of presentation changes [14]. The souls no longer appear as shadows with human shape but as "luci" (light) whose form is luminous rather than corporeal.

This transformation is evident from the pilgrim's first encounter with a blessed soul. When Dante enters the sphere of the Moon, he initially mistakes the souls for reflections: "quelle stimando specchiati sembianti" (thinking them to be mirrored images). As the text explains, this error is the opposite of Narcissus's mistake; Dante believes real souls to be reflections, whereas Narcissus believed a reflection to be real ("dentro a l'error contrario corsi / a quel ch'accese amor tra l'omo e 'l fonte"). This passage reveals that the souls in Paradise are not accessible in the same way as those in the lower realms; they appear through a transparent medium ("per vetri trasparenti e tersi"). The episode also establishes that the primary mode of encountering these souls is through vision, not touch. Piccarda's soul is described as "perla in bianca fronte" (a pearl on a white forehead), a visual image that emphasizes perception rather than physical contact.

As Dante ascends through the heavens, this process continues [7]. In the heaven of Mercury, Justinian's soul becomes so bright that its human features disappear entirely:

si come il sol che si cela elli stessi
per troppa luce, come 'l caldo ha rose
le temperanze d'i vapori spessi,
per più letizia si mi si nascose
dentro al suo raggio la figura santa.
Like the sun, which hides in its excess of light,
when the heat has worn away the tempering
of thick vapors:
so in its greater gladness that holy face
became hidden from me within its own rays, and
thus, all enclosed, it answered me
in the mode that the following canto sings.

Here the soul's "figura" (shape) is hidden by its own radiance—the light of joy replaces the physical form that had been visible. From this point onward, souls are described primarily in terms of luminosity. Peter Damian explains in the heaven of Saturn that this light is a direct consequence of the beatific vision: "Luce divina sopra me s'appunta,/...per ch'a la vista mia, quant' ella è chiara, /la chiarezza de la fiamma pareggio." Here the soul's flame is the direct expression of its participation in divine light. The Paradiso presents a world where the inhabitants of Paradise are properly incorporeal but are given a perceptible shape of light—now not ombre, but luci. This light is a perceptible shape but not a tangible one.

The Paradiso does not merely change how souls appear; it also changes how relationships between souls and the pilgrim are expressed. Whereas the Purgatorio stages embraces as a means of expressing recognition, affection, and communal identity, the Paradiso replaces such gestures with the exchange of gazes and the mutual illumination of light. The pilgrim's relationship with Beatrice exemplifies this shift. In the Purgatorio, Beatrice functions as a mirror through which the pilgrim perceives the Incarnation: the Griffon's double nature appears reflected in her eyes, "or con altri, or con altri reggimenti."

When Beatrice unveils her smile, what Dante sees is not the living and eternal Light 'nel suo fontale principio,' but the splendor of that light 'in altra parte alluminata ripercorso.' In the Paradiso, by contrast, the souls no longer retain human shape but appear as lights. They are described as sempiternal flames, blossoms, coruscations, jewels, sparks rather than somatomorphic figures. Dante's understanding of light was informed by the optical science of his day, which conceived of the eye and brain as the meeting place between the corporeal individual and two sorts of external information: sensory news from this world, and intellectual or spiritual intuitions from God. In the Paradiso, the spiritual intuition of God becomes the primary means of knowing and relating to others.

The transformation from shadows to lights, and from touch to gaze, reveals the function of tangibility in Paradiso. In the Inferno and Purgatorio, the possibility or impossibility of touching souls is a device whose deployment varies according to the needs of each scene. In the Paradiso, this device has been surpassed. The souls no longer need to be touched because their relationships with one another—and with the pilgrim—are expressed directly through the medium of light and love. This is not to say that touch is abolished in any absolute sense. Its function has simply been completed. In Inferno, touch manifested the material weight of sin and the reality of punishment; in Purgatory, touch is selectively deployed. In each case mentioned in the two sections above, the presence or absence of touch serves a specific purpose [8]. In Paradise, these purposes have been fulfilled. Sin's weight is no longer at issue; communal identity is realized through shared vision of the divine; love has been perfected and no longer requires external confirmation.

The persistence of the souls' desire for their bodies confirms that the disappearance of tangibility in the Paradiso is not a denial of the body's importance. On the contrary, the souls' longing for the resurrection of the flesh testifies to the body's enduring significance. Solomon articulates this significance in Canto 14. The soul's beatitude is complete in itself, but it will be intensified by the resumption of the body:

Come la carne gloriosa e santa
fia rivestita, la nostra persona
più grata fia per esser tutta quanta.
When we are once again clothed with our
glorious and holy flesh, our person will be more
pleasing by being whole [10].

What Solomon says is that the body is considered a component of the person whose absence leaves the soul incomplete. The soul is an entity that needs the body in order to exist fully. Without embodiment, the soul has a mere shadowy kind of individual existence. The resurrection of the body is the completion of the person in glory.

The resurrection body will not, however, function as earthly bodies do [15]. Solomon explains that the glorified body will surpass the soul's own radiance:

così questo folgor che già ne cerchia
fia vinto in apparenza da la carne
che tutto dì la terra ricoperchia
so this brightness that encircles us will be
surpassed in appearance by the flesh that today
is covered up by earth

The resurrection body will be more glorious than the soul's light. The body itself has been transfigured, but the function of tangibility has been surpassed.

Comparing with the previous two sections, in the Inferno, the relationship between the pilgrim and the damned is mediated through violent touch; in the Purgatorio, touch becomes a diagnostic tool—its presence or absence signals whether a relationship is oriented toward purification or still entangled in earthly attachment. In Paradiso, touch is no longer the medium of relationship. The souls do not reach out to one another; they do not need to. Their relationships are expressed through the exchange of light and the mutual orientation toward God [16]. The Paradiso thus completes the trajectory of tangibility that runs through the *Commedia*: touch in Hell manifests separation and

punishment; touch in Purgatory marks the process of reorientation; touch in Paradise has been surpassed because relationship itself has been perfected. The souls' transformation from shadows to lights corresponds to a transformation in how they relate to one another and to the pilgrim: through the exchange of gazes and the mutual illumination of divine light rather than through physical contact. The souls' longing for the resurrection of the flesh reveals that the body remains essential to the person's completeness. The resurrection will complete what the Paradiso has already begun: the transformation of relationship from external contact to interior participation in the light of God.

5. Conclusion

Tangibility functions in the *Commedia* as a narrative instrument whose operation is calibrated to the distinct theological and experiential logic of each afterlife realm. A coherent poetics emerges from this analysis: the presence or absence of touch serves as a precise indicator of the soul's relationship to its own sin, to other souls, and ultimately to divine love.

Tangibility in the *Commedia* operates according to three distinct and internally consistent frameworks of corporeality, each aligned with the theological and narrative demands of its realm. In *Inferno*, touch is generally possible and often violent, because sin must be rendered materially legible—the body becomes the permanent inscription of moral failure. In *Purgatory*, touch assumes a pedagogical role, permitted or withheld depending on whether it supports the correction of desire, the formation of communal bonds, or the reorientation of love toward its proper end. In *Paradise*, physical contact ceases to operate, as relationality has been elevated to a mode of expression that requires no bodily mediation; yet the souls' longing for the resurrection body affirms that embodiment is transfigured rather than abolished.

This functional-differential model reveals that apparent textual contradictions are deliberate compositional choices. Rather than resolving them into a single unified system, the work distributes them across three complementary poetics of the body—each appropriate to its realm, each essential to the integrity of the whole. Tangibility is not an inherent property of the soul but a narrative and theological resource deployed at each stage of the journey. What changes across the three canticles is the nature of the relationship enacted through touch: from the exposure of sin, through the education of desire, to the vision of love that needs no hand to grasp it.

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