Touch is trouble in medieval accounts of the five senses; but it is touch that also tenders the most extravagant promises: promises of transcendence, higher knowledge, eternal fame,
miraculous cures to mortal ailments, joyous couplings with supernatural bodies. The trouble is traceable to Aristotle; the extravagant promises to the Gospels. The two meet in high medieval culture, with momentous consequences for the subsequent cultural history of the West.

Aristotle had elevated the senses to a lofty role: that of gateways for all forms of knowledge, each sense clearly separable from the next and rationally ordered. The order in question was hierarchical, with sight, physically the coolest and cognitively the most intellectual of the senses, at the top of the pyramid, followed by hearing, smell and taste, with touch at the bottom and hot point of the cognitive pyramid. According to Aristotle (and on this point he was
followed by Alan of Lille and the illustrator of Herrade von Landsberg’s *Garden of Delights* [*Hortus deliciarum*], among many others), this hierarchy is directly mapped onto human anatomy. Eyes, ears, nose, throat, skin: such is the sequence of organs extending downward from head to toe in a diminuendo indicative of the cognitive rank of the associated sense. Perched atop the head nearest the inner senses, the eye draws man upward, away from the soil towards the celestial spheres. Located near the heart, the organ of touch exercises the opposite pull: earthwards, through the feet, towards the realm of creatures. Whereas tactile sensations are said to congregate near the heart, visual ones are shielded from the heart’s
passionate disturbances, which makes them cool and lucid yet oddly distant from the very organ where Aristotle had located thought processes. Why should such a separation exist and why the uncanny anatomical closeness between touch, the most creatural of the senses, and thought? Shouldn’t this closeness render touch the highest (not the lowest) of the senses? The usually confident Aristotle is unsure.

Galen, a sharper observer of the human body than his Peripatetic peer, had the good sense to designate the brain as the organ of thought. Even so, he was no more able to resolve
the other problems confronted by Aristotle. If taste is but a particular manifestation of touch, then can touch truly be conceived of as a single sense? Or is it, rather, some sort of multiple or hybrid sense, or even the sense that subtends all the other senses? Then there is the related question of whether one can truly claim that tactile sensations are ascribable to a single organ, given that, unlike the other four senses, operations of touch are dispersed over the body’s entire surface. If so, is this organ on the surface or below the surface of the body? Why, unlike its counterparts, does it alone elude the scrutiny of anatomists whereas sight is clearly located in the eyes, hearing in the ears and smell in the nose? Over and over again, Aristotle has no choice but to throw in the towel on touch. On the one hand, touch must be declared the fundamental or universal sense, the sense upon which all knowledge of sensibilia—which is to say all knowledge—is necessarily based; on the other hand, touch must be conceptualized as a kind of wild card, as the only sense that defies the rationalizing efforts of the logos.
One thing, however, appears certain to Aristotle, Galen, and their medieval followers: that touch is the defining attribute of animal life and the very power that establishes a line of demarcation between animals, other life forms (such as plants), and the non-living world. Aristotle expresses himself eloquently on this point: “… an animal is by our definition something that has sensibility and chief of all the primary sensibility, which is that of touch; and it is the flesh, or analogous substance, which is the organ of this sense .... For of all the sense-organs that of touch is the only one that has corporeal substance” (Parts of Animals 653b22-30).
given animal may lack this or that sense organ, but no animal may lack touch, for touch is the very signature of life’s presence. It is, in Thomas Aquinas’s careful reworking of Aristotelian doctrine, that sense whose purpose is survival and self-reproduction: “survival” as associated with eating and drinking, and distinguishing between feelings of pleasure and pain; “self-reproduction” as associated with love and lust. The senses that operate at a distance and whose stimuli are more remote, like sight and hearing, yield pleasures more closely tied to the pursuit and storage of knowledge; while touch informs humankind only about the world’s most elemental features. Which is to say that it possesses greater immediacy and intensity, but is of lesser value and endurance (unless this very immediacy and intensity are placed in the service of the spirit world). Molyneux’s problem, which so fascinated Diderot and his century, consisting in the blind man who wakes up one day, having regained his sight to face afresh a world of objects—cubes, pyramids, and cones—that heretofore he had only explored through the sense of touch, bears little resemblance to the favorite medieval cognitive puzzles.

Equally alien is Proust’s madeleine, whose taste and texture trigger the reflux of a life’s worth of memories, for there is really no such thing as a tactile memory in the Middle Ages. Medieval touch tells us little about space, the form of objects, an individual’s storehouse of memories, or the structure of the world. Its language, rather, is that of momentary pulsions: of hot and cold, smooth and rough, hurtful and pleasurable. Yet this very immediacy also renders it the privileged medium for providing elementary forms of proof and for making connections and/or marks of the most powerful and complete sort, be they licit or illicit, natural or supernatural. As is characteristic of the medieval forma mentis, such proofs and connections
tend to be conceptualized in genealogical terms. To touch, in summary, is less to discover or to come to know something about the world than it is to establish a bond between bodies that renders them one. The touch of the apostle Thomas who needs to palp Christ’s resurrected body in order to quell lingering doubts about the nature of his master’s resurrection that even the eye cannot quell, thus, has evidentiary status. “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails and put my finger into the place of the nails and put my hand into his side, I will not believe,” Thomas states in John 21:25. Seeing is believing, but touching is knowing. It confirms and communicates the Messiah’s good news. But like the legion of other curative and salvific
touchings found in the Gospels, it also opens up a two-way circuit where the principal current flows run from the dead to the living, the supernatural to the natural. This is to say that, however much it may be said to provide knowledge, Thomas’s touch is first and foremost an act that binds him to his Lord and God. Curative and transformative in its effects, more Christ’s touch than Thomas’s touch, it prefigures the touching of skeletal relics and sacred objects that would become a central feature of medieval piety. Relics that, though apparently touched, in reality are always themselves reaching out to touch the world of the living: to demand that they
be transported from one place to the next; to confer upon the altar, city, and populace of their choice showers of blessings or horrifying curses. Such also is the logic of the sacred touch of the kings of England and France, famously studied by Marc Bloch in The Royal Touch; kings like the Capetian Robert the Pious, to whom “the divine virtue granted ... a very great grace, to wit, the power of healing men’s bodies; for by touching with his most pious hand the sores of the suffering and signing them with the holy cross, he was wont to deliver them from their pains and diseases.” vi Such forms of sacred, restorative touching are but the flip side of the libidinous palping found in Medieval romances. The two come together in works like The Book of Margery Kempe in which the battle between the carnal knowledge sought by the mystic’s husband and Christ’s higher touch hinges upon a choice between two tactile couplings, the first to the world of animals, the second to the world of angels. vii In every case, whether salvific or damning, touch is a sense unlike the other senses. Premnemonic and even antimnemonic, it communicates directly, in the elemental language of the flesh, sets up relays between bodies, establishes transformative new links while sundering others, more often than not leaving a mark: a stigmatum, a halo, a scar, a new identity, a progeny. Just how elemental is this language of the flesh? Aquinas makes sure that we get the point. The sense of touch, he argues in Summa III, is present in embryos even before they possess rational souls, which means that touch is the sole prenatal sense and that Christ, whose body at conception was already so perfect that it was ready to receive a rational soul, would have been in possession of tactile powers from that very instant. viii
Let us turn now to an example of medieval touch at work. A late example, to be sure, but one that may serve as a bridge to the comparative case study which will occupy me in the main portion of my remarks. Masaccio’s *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne*, originally painted for the Florentine church of Sant’ Ambrogio but now in the Uffizi, is a work that could be said to stand at the culminating point of an iconography of touch and transport whose beginnings extend back into the early 13th century. Century of the recovery and assimilation of Aristotle’s *Parva naturalia*, the 13th century saw the appearance of three parallel iconographies of the five senses directly inspired by Aristotle’s treatises: an *animal* one (which identified, for instance,
sight with the lynx, taste with the monkey, and touch with the spider, found in various
Bestiaires d’amour); a hieroglyphic one (which identified the mirror with sight, the flute with
hearing, flowers with smell, fruit with taste, and touch with the harp); and an organic one
(which identified the eye with sight and the ear with hearing; the organ of touch being
indicated by the presence of hands). Though all three rely upon the masculine
characterization of the senses that prevailed until the 16th century, a far larger and more
significant body of sacred images does not. It documents the growth of new forms of piety
centered upon the physical presence and accessibility of the Holy, particularly as embodied by Mary and Christ as infant: forms that, in line with Thomas’s definition of touch as the prenatal sense, increasingly feminize and infantilize the five senses as a whole through an emphasis upon touch as primary sense. Such a work is Masaccio’s and Masolino’s panel, usually dated around 1412. In the three-tiered enthronement that it depicts, the heavy compositional lifting is done by hands. Mary occupies the middle position in a vertical sequence that is also a genealogical sequence, atop which is Anne, the mother of the mother of God, fully clothed except for her hands and face, and at the bottom of which is the unclothed Christ child. The picture hinges upon an inversion of the relation between height, age, social status, presence, and power. Contrary to conventional expectations, the lower a figure’s pictorial position, the lesser his or her age, the greater the degree of his or her fleshliness, the higher in rank and importance. The glue that makes these three bodies into a single communicating body is touch: Anne who touches Mary who touches Christ who touches Mary back. The circuit neutralizes the visual torque created by Anne’s frontality, Mary’s leftward twist, and Christ’s leftward location but rightward orientation. It is completed by a pair of hand gestures, the first of which is that of Anne who blesses the child. It is projected out beyond the compass of the work by the child who blesses us (with a hand so perfectly centered that it reconnects his body to the central compositional axis) and extends his foot forward so as to invite our kiss.

The distinctive work of binding and bearing performed here by touch will be repeated time and again in the sequence of scenes from Dante’s *Inferno* to which I would now like to
turn: scenes in which Dante's protagonist is physically lifted up and carried by his guide beyond an immediate obstacle. The scenes in question are “formative” inasmuch as they play a decisive role in the larger narrative of Dante-pilgrim's individual development: they build up the fiction of Dante's singularity, of his being and seeming unlike his neighbors (to echo Jacob Burckhardt), through and upon Virgil's phantom body. But they are "formative" also in a more general cultural-historical sense, for, in the process of giving shape to a new ethos of individualism, they recast one of the high points of the Aeneid and of ancient Roman literature as a whole in Dantean terms: Virgil's description at the close of Book 2 of Aeneas's flight from
Troy. If in the latter Virgil's contemporaries found their emblem of the fundamental Augustan virtue of *pietas*, then it can hardly be inappropriate to find in Dante's reinactment a counter-emblem founded on the Christian iconography of *pietà* as compassion: a counter-emblem whose subsequent history, as I will briefly show in my concluding remarks, extends to Dante's modern canonizers.\textsuperscript{xii}

Let it be said from the outset that, for some of the reasons already adumbrated, scenes of touching, carrying, and clinging are by their very nature symbolically surcharged. They are, in Victor Turner's terminology, "ritual symbols" capable of containing within them a universe of values encompassing those of nurture, parental guidance, filial dependency, submission to hierarchy, support, respect, obedience, rapture, and transport, particularly transport between this world and the next.\textsuperscript{xii} Yet if the semantic range is broad, the symbol's efficacy is insured by a core polarity which pits the forces of psychic regression, resistance, and self-loss against a simultaneous counterdrive towards independence, hierarchy and differentiation. Hence the particular power with which images of touch and transport interlock with a culture's narrative of individual development and hence their propensity to undergo precisely the sort of reversal to which Dante subjects the closing episode of *Aeneid* 2 in which Aeneas bears his father Anchises on his shoulders.

The scene in question reached Virgil already saturated with meanings derived from visual as well as literary sources.\textsuperscript{xii} Homer's epics contain no representation of the flight from Troy, and little survives of Stesichorus's *Iliou pérsis*. So the earliest literary portrayals date from
around the time of Sophocles' *Laocoön*, the following fragment of which was preserved thanks to Dionysius of Halicarnassus:

Now at the gates arrives the goddess's son,
Aeneas, his sire upon his shoulders borne
[While down that back by thunderbolt
Of Zeus once smit the linen mantle streams;]
Surrounding them the crowd of household slaves.
There follows a multitude beyond belief
Who long to join this Phrygian colony.xlv

What Sophocles describes is a highly distinctive form of touching and carrying. The

"Lewis" painter, *Eos carrying off Tithonas*, Attic red figure skyphos, 450 b.C. [Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge]
gesture is not to be confused with erotic transports of the sort associated with the stories of
Zeus and Ganymede or Eos and Tithonos, where the emphasis falls on the asymmetry in age
and power between the raptor and his or her prey. Nor is it to be confused with the ritual
carrying of the hero's body from the battlefield, site both of his aretē and beautiful death, back
to the domestic and urban world where he will be mourned by women, burnt atop a pyre, and
entombed according to the sacred rituals of the polis. For here the vase painters' emphasis
falls instead on the parity of carrier and cadaver sealed via an embrace. [FIG. 2] The bodily
perfection of the one is the bodily perfection of the other. Whether the pairing be Patroklos
and Menelaos or Achilles and Ajax, carrier and cadaver are mutually substitutable, partaking of
the same beauty, nobility, glory, and fame. Only the absence of armor on the lifeless body
serves as a mark of difference (and a tenuous mark it is in many a vase painting).

That Aeneas's gesture was of another kind is underscored by the phrase

*ep' ō / mōn pater / echōn* or "the father borne on his shoulder." Its distinctive meaning is
confirmed by a later text, the prologue to the pseudo-Xenophon's treatise *On Hunting*

*Kynegetikos*: “Aeneas saved the gods of his father's and his mother's family, and [withal] his
fatheras well; wherefore he bore away fame for his piety [*eusebeia*], so that to him alone among
all the vanquishers at Troy even the enemy granted not to be despoiled.” (1.1.15). Aeneas's
transport of his aged father corresponds to his salvaging both of his family and family gods in a
scene of carrying whose pathos derives from the horrors associated with homelessness.
Ancestral deities uprooted and transformed into portable gods; an entire people vanquished;
fractured families without a past nor future: these are the burdens, collective in nature, that
Aeneas shoulders by shouldering his father. But "shoulders" how? The word ὄμος is imprecise, referring at once to the shoulder and to the upper arm. This left Attic vase painters free to imagine the gesture as a sort of double embrace that emphasizes physical closeness rather than social rank, ties of affection rather than a spatialization of the attributes of power.

Simply attired, Anchises clutches his warrior-son from behind as the latter wraps his right arm around the former's legs and extends his left hand forward to grip and guide his own son Ascanius. Though the paternal and maternal household gods are nowhere to be seen, their presence and that of other family members and slaves is signaled by an array of flanking
portraits: typically Creusa (sometimes paired with Aphrodite), a child doubling Ascanius, and teams of hoplites.

Such was the figurative context against which and within which Virgil shaped his climactic vision of the flight from Troy. Within the logic of the Aeneid, the scene marks a crucial moment in Aeneas’s growth as a hero and subject, especially with respect to his Homeric predecessors Achilles and Ulysses. In a crescendo of events narrated by Aeneas himself, Book Two recounts the tearful tale of Troy’s demise in the high tragic mode. Everything seemingly conspires either to consume Aeneas and his people within war’s ferocious vortex or to forever scatter the
remaining Trojans. In negotiating a middle course between these two alternatives, Aeneas comes into his own. It is consequently neither a Ulyssian love of glory nor Achillean wrath that inspires Aeneas as he determines whether it is best to take flight or to remain, to lead a group escape or to join in the collective suicide, but rather a deeply Aenean sense of civic and family duty—in other words, pietas. And the emblem of this individuality founded on duty to the collective is the procession in which Aeneas leads his entire family—penates, famuli and all—out of Troy. Hewing closely to Roman visual precedent, Virgil constructs a model of the ordered Augustan patriarchy as if an apotropaic sign intended to ward off the specter of

Altar of the Gens Augusta [Musee du Bardo, Tunis]

Touch and Transport
intergenerational strife in contemporary Rome. Anchises occupies the highest position within this social model since he is the genuine *pater familias*. Riding high atop Aeneas's shoulders, less touched or embraced than enthroned, he is identified with the Trojan past. xvii The ties to what once was Troy and to the realm of the dead are reinforced by the crucial fact that he bears the ancestral sacred things and household gods because his hands alone are unstained by the carnage. As the genealogical link between Troy and Rome, dead ancestors and unborn descendants, Aeneas is the pivotal figure and occupies the middle position in the leading group. xviii Whereas the aged Anchises hovers above as if already one of the deceased, Aeneas is instead firmly planted in the soil of history. His hands are blood-soaked, he sports a lion's pelt that associates him with Hercules, and his soul is rent by warring passions. He guides his first-born son, Ascanius, by the hand, whose inferior position is also indicated by the fact that, because of his shorter legs, he somewhat trails his father steps. In the footsteps of this leading patrilineal group one might expect Creusa, Ascanius's mother and Aeneas's wife, as in many of the Attic vase paintings already discussed. Yet in her place we find the scattered *famuli* or household servants who proceed along different paths to the old cypress which will serve as an encounter point. Situated behind them and at the rear of the pack is Creusa, who is twice distanced such that, in the end, she will vanish entirely so that her place may eventually be taken by Lavinia. xix

Two aspects of the scene deserve comment: the particular manner in which Aeneas bears his father and the disappearance of Creusa. As for the first, it is evident that by positioning Anchises high atop his son's shoulders Virgil motivates the gesture of carrying in a sharply
vertical/hierarchical sense with respect to Greek literary and visual precedents (not to mention with respect to Masaccio and Masolino’s inverted hierarchy). The result is a stripping away of some of the gesture's potential for connoting social leveling or the merging of generations. Instead, the point is made that Aeneas can become pius Aenæas only by bowing down towards his own son in a gesture which simultaneously affirms his full submission to paternal and ancestral authority: cervicis imponere nostrae; / ipse subbibae umeris, nec me labor iste gravabit ("load yourself onto my neck; I will place myself under you with my shoulders, nor will the task weigh me down" [2.707-708]); and later, latós umerós subjectaque colla, / veste supér fulvíque internor pelle leonis / succédoque oneri ("across my broad shoulders and bowed neck I spread a tawny lion’s pelt and stoop to the burden" [2.721-723]). If the phrase latos umeros affiliates Aeneas with Homer's Menelaos, himself the carrier of the dying warrior Patroklos, the hero's recumbent neck here can only be a post-Homeric sign. It inscribes Aeneas's personal growth within a larger narrative of development, characteristic of ancient tragedy, in which the moment of individuation is not that of revolt and/or transgression, but rather that in which the protagonist recognizes and submits himself to a preordained fate. In the Roman context, however, the event assumes a collective dimension, for it is accompanied both by the hero's acceptance of the place assigned to him within a vast chain of paternal relays extending, in the case of Aeneid 2, down through the pengtes to Anchises to young Iulius and beyond; and by his embrace of the duties that derive therefrom. In short, spatial hierarchy is enforced over and against any special emphasis upon two-way circuits based upon the sense of touch within the framework of a world-view within which the body figures as a tragically obscured prison.
Notably missing in this genealogical sequence is the traditional object of the sense of touch: womankind—an absence mirrored and reinforced in the pictorial tradition that developed around the Virgilian scene. Of the thousand Roman coins, vases, sculptures, and murals which represent the Trojan exodus as a symbol of *pietas*, all but a few suppress the figure of Creusa, something that surely cannot be said of their Greek predecessors; (and a representative sampling here would extend from Imperial coins like the *denarius* figuring Anchises atop Aeneas holding the Palladium, to a Neronian lamp emblazoned with the legend *Aeneas Anchises Ascanius rex pie*” to the famous Herculanean wall painting parodying the flight...
from Troy wherein an animalized Aeneas transports a dog-headed Anchises.) While the omission of Creusa from all these scenes respects Aeneas's assertion that she walked *longe* (or far behind), it remains nonetheless indicative of the destabilizing role performed by women in Virgil's account of the construction of the Roman *civitas*. At once an obstacle and a means, a detour and a goal, the feminine in Virgil is that which must be either left behind or relegated to a distant future if history's design is to be accomplished. Due to her close ties to erotic love, womankind's relation to *pietas* or, at least, the Augustan era's redaction of *eusebeia*, remains so ambiguous that it is sometimes better for her to be simply edited out of the picture: to become, in short, an empty shade or ghost.

In the case of Creusa, the ghost in question bears a familiar name: to wit, Euridice. In Pausanias and Ennius such was indeed Creusa's name, a coincidence which permits Virgil to cast the close of *Aeneid* 2 in the same poetic mold as the story of Orpheus recounted at the conclusion of the *Georgics*. The flight from Troy thus recreates the escape from Tartarus, but with some differences: it is not in casting a backward glance but in forgetting to do so that the Trojan Orpheus brings about the loss of his beloved. Moreover, in the concluding moments of Book Two, Creusa's *infelix simulacrum atque umbra* her sad phantom and shade, will loom up larger than ever before to proclaim the enduring reality of Aeneas's exile. The message is driven home by a failed triple embrace, an embrace between untouchables, in which Aeneas is confronted with the inexorable barrier which severs the past from the present. There will be no looking back from this moment forward.
In the lower reaches of Dante's Hell, as in medieval culture as a whole, similar embraces between actual bodies and mere shades will prove possible and repeatedly so. Indeed, they play a foundational role whether in the form of relics that dictate to the thieves who transport them the location of their “true” abode, saints so holy that even the shadows they cast have the power to cure ailing bodies, or ancient poets who come back to life after twelve centuries so as to lead Christian poets by the hand around the otherworld. The fact is especially striking in the latter case inasmuch as Hell is the one place in a Christian universe that can accommodate the notion of tragic loss. Accordingly, one might well have expected at least one failed triple embrace to mark Virgil's gradual emergence as the Commedia's central embodiment of the irredeemably lost. But, characteristically, Dante covers his losses, delaying the moment of tragic disclosure until the summit of Mount Purgatory so that the conclusion of Aeneid 2 may be reworked in Christian terms. There, Virgil is cast in his definitive role: as a Creusa and Euridice, an unhappy shade condemned for eternity to reside on the opposite shore. And in Virgil's disappearing act, Dante plays an Orphic Aeneas whose loss is soon made doubly good. In the instant of Virgil's disappearance, the moment of individuation occurs: Dante comes into his name as an epic poet and is carried off by a beatific Lavinia whose name is Beatrice.
To speak of Beatrice “carrying off” Dante in *Purgatorio* 30 may seem a bit strong. Yet it is simply to literalize one the *Commedia*'s most ubiquitous metaphors, figured here in a mid-15th century illumination by Giovanni di Paolo. Beatrice is elsewhere described as she who "carried" the pilgrim "from servitude to freedom" [3.21.85], just as God is he who "lifted [Dante] up with His light" [3.1.75]. Touching, seizing, and lifting figure among the central attributes of Dante's intercessors and guides: Lucy grasps him and raises him up to Purgatory's door, Virgil "raises him away from the beast" of the opening canto [1.2.119] and brings him up the sacred mountain [2.3.6]. The gesture of carrying, moreover, explicitly involves the notion of
taking on a charge or mission: the Incarnation, for instance, occurs when "the Son of God
determined to load himself with the burden of our flesh" (*quando 'l Figliuol di Dio / carcar si
volse de la nostra salma* [3.32.113-114]) and the poetic task of writing Paradise is so weighty
that it causes mortal shoulders to tremble below it [3.23.64-66]. Yet in their predominant
usage, carrying and charging are associated with motherhood and eros: Europa is Jove's "sweet
burden" (*dolce carco* [3.27.84]); Ino bears two infant charges (*con due figli ... caricata* [1.30.5-6]) and *il portato* is in *Purgatorio* 20 (v. 20) the unborn Christ. This network of references
begins to hint at the larger operation to which Dante submits Virgil's account of the procession


*Touch and Transport*
out of Troy. For as soon as one turns from the general to the particular, it becomes apparent that the Augustan emblem of pietas pervades much of the Commedia’s allegory of guidance yet always reconfigured in terms of the Marian iconography of pietà as maternal sustenance and compassion administered via the sense of touch.xxiv

The result is a systematic reinsertion into the scene of the Trojan exodus of precisely that which Roman tradition had written out: namely, the feminine and the maternal, which is to say, the leveling effect of touch as primary sense. That the final disclosure of Virgil’s identity as a figure of irrecoverable loss should coincide with an insistence on his links to Euridice and Creusa is thus no coincidence. For, in the Commedia, the pilgrim’s itinerary may be masculine at its boundaries and major points, but those who rescue Dante-protagonist from the flames of the terrestrial patria, draw him up the sacred mountain and raise him into the celestial Fatherland are, in the end, the shades of mothers, female saints, and lovers.

Let us turn now to some specifics. Between cantos 17 and 34 of the Inferno, Virgil will touch, embrace, and carry his living charge some six times, sometimes protecting him from an imminent peril, sometimes helping him beyond a physical obstacle. The scenes in question unfold within the eighth and ninth circles and precisely frame the area assigned to sins of fraudulence: the first occurring during the descent on the back of the flying monster Geryon and the last during the ascent of Satan's monstrous backside. The association with fraud thus might appear more than fortuitous, and particularly so because much of lower Hell is characterized by an ongoing reflection on the process of fiction making and its uncertain links to the Commedia’s own prophetic claims. After all, what could be more potentially fraudulent
than the claim that an empty shade devoid of weight and substance repeatedly grasped and lifted an actual human body? Yet what could be more typical of Dante's poem and Dante’s world, both built upon the conviction that shades and bodies share in a hybrid reality so unstable that shades may fully partake in the physical attributes of their living counterparts and vice versa? When Virgil carries Dante, that is, the notion of communion with the dead finds itself compacted into a symbol of the coexistence of literality and figurality, history and eternity, the natural and the supernatural. While such considerations extend to the Commedia as whole, the fact remains that Dante emphatically underscores his tactile bond to Virgil only in the second half of the first canticle, precisely where the degree of danger is the greatest, where the guerra del cammin [the war of the path] is the most arduous and issues of physical struggle and survival are meant to be most dramatically staged. This suggests that embedded within the larger meditation on fiction and fraud is also a set of more localized issues which concern the pilgrim-poet's individual progress.

As already noted, it is on Geryon's back that the gap between Virgil's shade body and the pilgrim's body of flesh and blood is initially closed. In order to quell his charge's fears, Virgil enfolds him in his arms and holds him up as the two of them mount upon the shoulders of "that foul image of fraud" (quella sozza immagine di froda [1.17.7]) to descend into the eight circle. Although the scene in question is unlike those that follow to the extent that the phantasmatic Geryon does the actual lifting and carrying, Virgil's gestures remain indicative of what is to come. They are parental in their significance as we learn from contemporary Marian analogues
such as the *Flight into Egypt* and *Adoration of the Magi* panels from Giotto's Arena Chapel, easily paired with early 15th century illuminations of *Inferno* 17.

The point is brought home by two subsequent tercets in which the stories of Phaeton and Icarus are cited as tragic counterexamples. Holding Dante to his chest, Virgil avoids the errors of Apollo and Daedalus, both of whom contributed to their sons' demise by overestimating soundness of judgment. Like a judicious parent, Virgil, to the contrary, recognizes Dante's continued dependency via his embrace and is even so prescient that, all the while that they
wheel downward, he employs his own back as a protective shield against the sting of fraud or Geryon's tail.

Moving from this first incident into the thick of the eighth circle, the narrative and imagistic connections to Book Two of the *Aeneid* grow. Such is the case not only because of overlapping characters such as Ulysses and Sinon, but also because of the prevalence of codes and landscapes derived from the martial epic. Within this general setting, Virgil will carry Dante in and out of the third and the sixth *bolgie*, constantly reaffirming their parental/filial bond. In the first case, Virgil's bodily intervention is motivated by the steepness of the slope. Drawing
Dante-pilgrim down "by that more sloping bank" [1.19.35], Virgil carries him on his anca or side, just as a mother might tote a small child, a point made explicit by several century's worth of illuminations. The reascent of the slope, which follows Dante's exchange with the simonist popes, is described in even more strongly maternal, affective tones:

. . . con ambo le braccia mi prese;
e poi che tutto su mi s'ebbe al petto,
rimontò per la via onde discese.
Ne si stancò d'avermi a sé distretto,
si men portò sovra 'l colmo . . .
Quivi soavemente spuose il carco,
soave per lo scoglio sconcio ed erto
che sarebbe a le capre duro varco.

([with a look of satisfaction Virgil] took me in his arms, and when he had me quite on his breast, remounted by the path where he had descended; nor did he tire of holding me clasped to himself, but carried me up to the summit . . . [where] he most gently set down his burden, gently because the rugged and steep crag would be hard passage even for goats.)

The scene evoked sharply contrasts with Aeneas's procession out of Troy in the way it configures the gesture of carrying. Here the context is one in which Dante-pilgrim has just denounced the Donation of Constantine. The effect of these *parole vere espresse* (these "true words uttered" [1.19.123]) is Virgil's look of satisfaction and a congratulatory embrace which is also a gesture of carrying that emphasizes not the vertical and the hierarchical—the case of *Aeneid* 2—but a horizontal axis expressing mutuality, interdependence, unity and affection.

Yet, as will be the case in the successive example, this "leveling" action at once affirms the bond and hints at its undoing as the result of the pilgrim's future growth.

The inherent bivalence of Virgil's gesture, reflected spatially as well as symbolically, foreshadows the events of the ensuing cantos in which we see Dante-pilgrim progress as his guide's authority is repeatedly subject to challenge particularly in canto 21 where, confronted by a band of devils, the Malebranche, Virgil reveals his limitations as analyst of demons and interpreter of low vernacular farce, the prevailing literary genre in lower Hell. Whereas Dante-pilgrim reads the devils’ shifty signs aright, Virgil blindly denies that their promises are deceptive, that their escort will prove worthless, and that their martial raspberries, mock epic
farts, and grotesque facial expressions mean precisely what they appear to mean—namely, harm.

The eventual consequences of Virgil’s lapse give rise in canto 23 to the most dramatic of the *Inferno’s* scenes of touch and transport, and the one with the strongest affinities to the escape from Troy. With the demons embroiled in a skirmish, Dante and Virgil proceed alone amidst the shadows. The silence is broken by an exchange akin to that of *Aeneid* 2 in which imaginings and reality coincide for a nightmarish moment. Just as in Virgil’s poem the
combined effect of Aeneas's sense that the tramp of feet is pressing upon his ears and Anchises's uncertain sighting of the glitter of enemy shields provokes a furious flight, so, in canto 23, Dante's vivid imagining that he can literally hear the Malebranche's approach is mirrored in Virgil, with the result that they flee their imagined pursuers more rapidly than water flows down a sluice:

Lo duca mio di súbito mi prese,
come la madre ch'al romore è desta
e vede presso a sé le fiamme accese,
che prende il figlio e fugge e non s'arresta,
avendo più di lui che di sé cura,
tanto che solo una camiscia vesta;
e giù dal collo de la ripa dura
supin si diede a la pendente roccia . . .

(My leader instantly took me up, like a mother who is awakened by the noise and sees beside her the kindled flames, and catches her child up and flies, and, more concerned for him than for herself, does not even stay to put on a shift; and, down from the ridge of hard bank he gave himself supine to the sloping rock . . .)

No longer Aeneas carrying his aged father over his back out of the swirling fires of a vanquished Troy, pietas is here figured by Virgil, the father of Roman poetry, who bears a Christian poet upon his breast like a loving mother. Lest there be any doubt as to the meaning of the gesture, Dante adds several verses later that "carrying me upon his breast" Virgil was treating me "not as a companion, but as his child" (come suo figlio, non come compagno [1.23.50-51]). And whereas in the Aeneid it was the living who carried the dying and the dead, the time-line is reversed and it is the dead who bear the living.

The reversal is crucial because it places the past in the immediate service of the future. Instead of figuring as a remote and inaccessible ancestor, in the case of the Commedia, as the
One cannot always carry about one’s father’s corpse [On ne peut pas transporter portrait avec soif cadavre de son père.] It is best left behind in the company of the dead. And when one summons up its memory, it is best to speak with regret and admiration. And should one become a father, one cannot expect that a child will doubt over for the sake of our cadaver’s life. Yet our feet seek in vain to detach themselves from the soil in which the dead are buried.

Guillaume Apollinaire, Les Peintres cubistes (1913)
venerable auctor upon whose works is founded the medieval school curriculum, Virgil may thus be presented in a relation of such immediacy that it is marked by metaphors of palping and nursing. His mission is to lead his charge beyond to Beatrice and so, like a mother fleeing from the flames, he is more concerned for him than for himself. And most of all, it determines a future-centered narrative of development in which the sort of parent-child bonding marked by the tactile embraces of lower Hell may serve to construct an alternative genealogy by means of which Dante-pilgrim's direct ties to his literal origins may be severed in the name of an artificial literary lineage extending from Virgil to Cacciaguida to Dante-poet. If, in the case of Aeneas, the drama of self-becoming had largely turned on his rejection or acceptance of a preordained place within a stable patrilineal chain, the task of building the future city was in reality a call to complete the past. Hence the only lingering uncertainty regards his choice, for, as we learn in Book Six, the history of Rome is already fully written in Elysium. A characteristic Christian emphasis on temporal discontinuity and rupture instead pervades the Commedia and imposes a contrary narrative of development in which the subject comes into his own by revolting against the literal blood-line and building up an alternate, ideal, "exilic" genealogy. The archetypal Christian biography is thus a tale much like those of Jesus, Augustine and Francis of Assisi, in which, via a series of relays, relays that may well rely upon the return to life of dead "ancestors", the biological father is suppressed in the name of God the Father. The event may be set in motion by gestures such as Augustine's refusal of his father's gaze at his naked body, or by Francis's stripping off of his clothes, or in the case of Dante, by prophetic tirades against a
fatherland by which one has been or is about to be spurned. But in every case, the literal father comes to be identified with the dead letter of society, exteriority, and sin. And this leaves as the key intermediaries maternal figures such as Mary, Monica, Lady Pica, Beatrice and Lucy. Unscarred by history and by sin, it is they who touch and are touched in turn, they who ultimately lead out of the realm of history towards the supernal realm and they who emerge as the emblems of a modern vernacular art.xxvii

* * * * *

So the work that touch performs within medieval narratives of individual development is that of forging new identities and sundering old ones within a framework within which the dead, as well as their relics and remains, are presumed to be far more active and alive than are the living who call upon them. This constant return of the past, however, does not subordinate present to past [phrase deleted]. For the activism and agency attributed to the spirit world is always placed in the service of a disjunctive present: a present defined by relics demanding new homes, prophets seeking to found new monastic families, mystics seeking supernatural husbands, poets striving to clear for themselves and for modern art a place within an ancient bella scuola. Which is to say that, far from a quirky medieval allegory, Dante’s dramas of touch and transport remain inaugural with respect to our own:

One cannot always carry about one’s father’s corpse [On ne peut pas transporter partout avec soi le cadavre de son père.] It is best left behind in the company of the dead. And
when one summons up its memory, it is best to speak with regret and admiration. And should one become a father, one cannot expect that a child will double over for the sake of our cadaver’s life [se doubler pour la vie de notre cadavre]. Yet our feet seek in vain to detach themselves from the soil in which the dead are buried.xxviii

The words are Guillaume Apollinaire's, from Les Peintres cubistes (1913), and the doubling of which they speak refers to the recumbent neck of pious Aeneas and to all those sons who would choose to extend the father’s life by merely duplicating it. The ideal of a purified new art, a truer art beyond nature and naturalism, of a higher, more sublime continuity, rather, requires that, like Dante’s Virgil, the father carry the life of the son, that he agree to merge into the cadaverous soil that is the certain resting place of all mortals, so as to free the modern artistic personality to pursue, without interference from regret or guilt, the "spectacle of its own divinity" made flesh in the work of art.
This essay was first delivered as the keynote address for *The Five Senses in the Middle Ages*, a conference held at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, Germany, in March 1998. I am grateful to the symposium participants for their feedback, in particular to Michael Camille, Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, Max Grosse, Andreas Kablitz, Steven G. Nichols, Bernhard Teubner, Eugene Vance, and Rainer Warning. It is dedicated to John Freccero: to the brilliance of his scholarly prose, depth and breadth of his learning, and generosity as a teacher.


Aristotle’s point is that, alone among the various sensorial media, only that of touch corresponds to the body as a whole and to the very flesh of which the body is composed.

“... since pleasure results from a natural operation, it is so much the greater according as it results from a more natural operation. Now to animals the most natural operations are those which preserve the nature of the individual by means of meat and drink, and the nature of the species by the union of the sexes. Hence temperance is properly about pleasures of meat and drink and sexual pleasures. Now these pleasures result from the sense of touch. Wherefore it follows that temperance is about pleasures of touch.” *Summa Theologiae* Ia Ilae.141.4.obj5. Cited from the online edition of the *Summa Theologiae* found at


All translations from the Bible are derived from the King James edition.


In his reply to objection 3 in *Summa III*, q. 34, art. 2, Thomas writes: “Christ’s intellect, in regard to His infused knowledge, could understand without turning to phantasms, as stated above (Question 11, Article 2). Consequently His intellect and will could act without any action of the senses. Nevertheless it was possible for Him, in the first instant of His conception, to have an operation of the senses: especially as to the sense of touch, which the infant can exercise in the womb even before it has received the rational soul, as is said, De Gener. Animal. ii, 3,4.

Wherefore, since Christ had the rational soul in the first instant of His conception, through His body being already fashioned and endowed with sensible organs, much more was it possible for Him to exercise the sense of touch in that same instant.” Cited from the online edition of the *Summa Theologiae* found at [http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html](http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html).

See Nordenfalk’s two groundbreaking studies on this subject: “Les Cinq sens dans l’art du Moyen-âge,” *Revue de l’art* 34 (1976): 17-28; and “The Five Senses in Late Medieval and

Burkhardt’s identification of the Italian High Middle Ages with the birth of Western individualism, for all its Romantic projections, serves as a reminder of the enduring nature of Dante’s: “In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness ... lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was consciously himself only as a member of a race, people, family, or corporation --only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the State and of all things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such.”

Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore, (rpt. London: Phaidon, 1950), pt. 2, section 1, 81-82. Burckhardt celebrates the solitary or "spiritual" individual precisely as industrialization has given rise to a new collectivism founded on the material conditions of capitalist production. The threat in question encompasses the rise of centralized nation states, liberal democratic mass politics, and new nationalisms. But that it is most particularly to be identified with socialism is confirmed by a verbal echo. Speaking of Dante's revolution as a "melting away into air" of history's veils [*verweht dieser Schleier in die Lüfte*], Burckhardt seizes the voice of Marx and Engels for whom in the bourgeois epoch "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober
senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind." Renaissance man thus arises as a counterm mythology to the myth of the revolutionary proletariat. And his revolution—the revolution of individual values with which modernity ought to be aligned—takes place not in 1789 Paris but rather in trecento Florence.

xi The classic study of the pietas/pietà contrast in Dante is Robert Ball’s “Theological Semantics.”

xii "... ritual symbols are 'multivocal,' susceptible of many meanings, but their referents tend to polarize between physiological phenomena (blood, sexual organs, coitus, birth, death, catabolism, and so on) and normative values of moral facts (kindness to children, reciprocity, generosity to kinsmen, respect for elders, obedience to political authorities, and the like). At this "normative" or "ideological" pole of meaning, one also finds reference to principles of organization: matriliny, patriliny, kingship, gerontocracy, age-grade organization, sex-affiliation, and others." Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society, 55.


xiv The quotation is from The Roman Antiquities, trans. Earnest Cary and Edward Spelman, 7 vols., Loeb Classical Library, (London: Heinemann, 1937), I.48.2. I have corrected the original translation, by removing the word "aloft" from the beginning of the third verse, since I can find no Greek equivalent to it. The translator seems to have been influenced by
the Virgilian version of the scene. For the fragments of Stesichorus, see Malcolm Davies, Poetarum Melicorum Graecorum Fragmenta (PMGF) vol. 1, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).


xvi Dating problems with the Cynegetikos, noted by Karl Galinsky in Aeneas, Sicily, and Rome (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) on pp. 43-44, make it uncertain as to whether this work is already shaped by Roman ideas about Aeneas’s piety.

xvii To speak of an enthronement here is no exaggeration, for the term isternor with which Virgil has Aeneas define his shoulder in 2.722 alludes to a piece of furniture. On this subject and on Book Two as a whole, see R. G. Austin’s commentary, Aeneidos Liber Secundus, esp. pp. 262-268.


xix Austin argues that “longe with servet cannot mean more than ‘at a distance’, ‘apart’ ... and pone has no implication of great distance” (263), though there is no reason to suppose that Virgil would have wanted to resolve the ambiguity regarding the precise distance to which Aeneas relegates Creusa, given the need to make her disappear.

xx For a magisterial survey of Roman representations of this scene in relation to Virgil’s epic see Galinsky, Aeneas, Sicily, and Rome, 3-61.
xxi Austin notes several verbal echos that seal the Creusa/Eurydice connection: for instance, the
pone subit coniunx of v. 725 that recalls the pone sequens referring to Eurydice in Georgics 4.487.

xxii With regard to the salvific potential of shadows, I have in mind the iconography of Saint Peter
found in churches such as the Pisan Basilica of San Piero a Grado, discussed in Victor I. Stoichita’s

xxiii All quotations from the Commedia are based upon Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, trans.
and commentary Charles S. Singleton, Bollingen Series 80, 6 vols., (Princeton: Princeton University

xxiv It goes without saying that I am not referring here to the much later pietà tradition
associated with Mary as Mater Dolorosa.

xxv Benvenuto da Imola’s gloss on this scene drives the point home: “Et hic nota, ut videas
quantum comparatio ista sit propria, quod autor, qui saepe solet appellare Virgillum
patrem, hic comparat ipsum matri, ut ostendat intensam affectionem eius in isto casu;
nam mater plus diliget filium quam pater, ut dicit philosophus, quia mater est magis certa
de filio quam pater, et quia plus laboris duravit in eo” (“And here observe how appropriate
is the comparison inasmuch as the author, who usually refers to Virgil as a father, now
compares him to a mother in order to underscore the intensity of the affective bond
demonstrated in this case; mothers are more tender towards their children than are
fathers, because, according to Aristotle, they are more present to the child, or because the
child causes them greater labor and pain.) [cited from the Dartmouth Dante Project

xxvi The Cacciaguida cantos represent Dante's effort to meld the figurative Virgilian genealogical
line with his literal blood-line, though Cacciaguida remains only a great-great grandfather. No
allusion is made anywhere in the Commedia to Dante's own father.

xxvii On Dante's systematic use and abuse of Virgil's "ambisexuality" see Schnapp, "Dante's

xxviii "On ne peut pas transporter partout avec soi le cadavre de son père. On l'abandonne en
compagnie des autres morts. Et, si l'on s'en souvient, on le regrette, on en parle avec admiration.
Et, si l'on devient père, il ne faut pas s'attendre à ce qu'un de nos enfants veuille Mais nos pieds
ne se détachent qu'en vain du sol qui contient les morts." Méditations Esthétiques. Les peintres