

## Intact

### Steven Connor

A lecture given at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, as part of *Embodied Values: Bringing the Senses Back to the Environment*, the John E. Sawyer Seminar Series at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), University of Edinburgh, 20 May 2011

## Tact

There are many different modes and manners of touching, so many, in fact, that it is difficult to be sure to what we are referring when we advert to the 'sense of touch', or at least to be sure that we are referring to one thing. The more one thinks about all the many different things that touch is supposed to be, or to implicate it, the more unlikely seems the probability of possibility of putting one's finger on the specifically tactile substrate of toothache, taking off in a plane, testing the temperature of the bath, tapdancing, tracing a tetrahedron, tugging at an elastic band, twiddling your thumbs, and saying 'tut'. Unlike the other senses, touch seems to have no unique channel or identifying frequency-band. Vision, for example, responds almost exclusively to the luminous portion of the electro-magnetic spectrum, hearing almost exclusively to oscillations of air-pressure at much lower frequencies. Touch has no such exclusive frequency, being definable no more precisely than the sense of things being in contact, of things coming up against us. Thus thermoception, the sense of traction, the sense of gravity or equilibrium, and even coenaesthesia, the sense of mine-ness or me-ness that is supposed to adhere to all my sense perceptions, have all been represented as modalities of touch.

Aristotle saw all the senses as modalities of the sense of touch, and touch has often since been taken to be both the reference sense, and also the most adaptable and augmentable of the senses. When new or overlooked forms of responsiveness are mooted, in addition to the traditional quintet of the senses – electro-magnetic sensitivity, for instance – they tend to be represented as modulations of touch. Forms of 'sixth sense', or so-called extra-sensory perception, are also often represented through forms of touch – phantom breezes, shivering, tingling, *frigors*, *frissons*, or the sense of physical presence. The

shivers we may get listening to music are perhaps thin vestiges of the terrified quivering of the sacrificial goat that was thought to signify the imminence of the god. We should not be surprised at these intimations of imaginary or proleptic touch, touch without contact. It is, we may say, a characteristic of touch that it reaches beyond itself, beyond the actuality, and the here and now of its own contingencies.

So not only are there many forms of touching, touching also seems to include its own opposite or negation within itself. This can be seen in the tendency to identify the essence of touching as a kind of minimal touch. We refer, after all, to the sense of 'touch', not the sense of 'reach' or the sense of 'grip'. This is indicated in the use of the word 'touch' to indicate a particular kind of delicacy or finesse, in painting or in playing an instrument, for example, or in sport. It is obvious that sport depends upon very obvious or emphatic kinds of physical contact, both with other players, and, more notably, with objects. A player who exhibits 'touch' – a tennis player gifted with so-called 'soft hands', for example – is one who is able to exhibit both economy and subtle control. We can think of this touch as a kind of balancing of the two opposite dimensions of touch, the one active and executive, and involving reaching, holding, grasping, pulling, prodding and probing, and the other passive or receptive, and involving sensing, suffering and what we tellingly call 'feeling'.

So we may say of touch that it includes a sort of limiting of its own action. It may seem as though a similar thing might be imputed to other senses: vision, one might think, includes the possibility of negative vision, in the idea of visual void or invisibility, just as hearing involves the capacity to apprehend silence or the absence of sound. But these are different from the duality of touch to which I am drawing attention. For seeing nothingness or hearing silence do not involve the sense of not-seeing or not-hearing, do not therefore involve the sense of the diminution or remission of the sense itself. They relate, then, to the object rather than the action of the sense. We may even perhaps say that whenever the possibility of this kind of remission of a sense is involved, it will be modelled on the particular kind of withdrawn or commuted action, the incipient or unperfected touch that holds back from itself, but which we nevertheless seem to know mostly through touch itself. Touch is essentially less, or more than itself. Touch is an advancing towards the world, but there is at the heart of touch, or of touch considered in its most essential form, a shyness, a reserve, a precaution.

This self-withdrawing, the discreet shrinking of touch from itself, comes to the fore in the history of the word 'tact'. Up until the eighteenth century, this word

meant, as it does in Latin, simply the sense of touch. It was not until the early years of the eighteenth century that, influenced by the French usage of the word, tact started to be used in the sense of a particularly sensitive or discriminating kind of touch, that was as receptive as it was active, and was itself a metaphor for a kind of refined expertise in social relations. In a lecture of around 1805, Sydney Smith wrote ‘We have begun, though of late years, to use the word tact; we say of such a man that he has a good tact in manners, that he has a fine tact, exactly as we would say he has a good taste’ (Smith 1854, 148-9). In 1810, Anna Letitia Barbauld praised French novelists ‘[f]or the expression of sentiment in all its various shades, for the most delicate tact, and a refinement and polish, the fruit of high cultivation’ (Barbauld 1810, 21). The word ‘tactful’ is not recorded in print until 1864. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the pairing of the word ‘tact’ with words like ‘nice’ and ‘delicate’ gave way to the use of the word tact to mean delicate or discriminating touch, the noun becoming self-modifying. The smoothness of tact is, by an odd little swirl of verbal logic, the inversion of the idea of the ‘tacky’, meaning slightly sticky, that which clings to the fingers, though this word derives from the French tache, which also gives us words like ‘attach’ and ‘detach’, and has no direct etymological relation to tactility.

In fact, this diminution or attenuation of tactility in the word tact may be anticipated by a seventeenth-century use of the word to refer to the downward stroke of the hand in beating musical time. Thomas Ravenscroft explained that ‘*Tact, Touch or Time*, is, a certaine *Motion* of the hand (whereby the Quantity of *Notes* and *Rests* are directed) by an equall *Measure*’ (Ravenscroft 1614, 20). Ravenscroft was particularly concerned with specifying the particular kinds of prolations and diminutions brought about through conducting, an action which mimes an instrumentality from which it itself holds back. Conducting is close to various kinds of imaginary touching, most notably in ceremonies of imaginary or inductive healing – for example in the elaborate system of passes invented by Mesmer to act out his theory of animal magnetism, or in the manipulations of aura effected by chiropractors and other practitioners of fantasy healing. Tact, we may say, is the particular kind of touch that leaves, or strains to leave, the things it touches intact.

## Gleam

You can begin to get a feel for this self-inhibition of touch if you think about shine. Glitter and lustre suggest more than anything the reflectiveness of the

eye, the most intimate and the moistest part of the body that is visible. Given that the eye catches and returns the light most particularly when it moves, shininess or glitter may always seem to hint at some animation, some potential for soul, or soul of potential. And yet, most of the things that possess or are capable of being burnished to a high sheen – brassware, buttons, boots and shoes, tables, cars, fingernails – are in fact dry to the touch. Shiny things are in fact tactile paradoxes. They are slippery, inviting and allowing the fingers to glide deliciously unopposed over their surface, but, in the dimension perpendicular to that slide, they are also hard and resistant. They have in them something of the quality of snakes and reptiles, whose bodies are not, as they seem to be, slimy but unexpectedly dry. Shiny things solicit and reward the very touch that their shine prohibits, the prohibition itself intensifying the solicitation. Gloss paint exhibits a variation of this paradox. Gloss paint is designed to look permanently wet, the condition in which unwary fingers can be smirched, but nevertheless to be dry and hard. Gloss finish attracts the attentions of fingers and exhibits the evidence of them, through greasy smears and streaks, just as it magnifies every dot and dimple in the surface to which it has been applied; but it also repels, remaining impermeable to spots and streaks, and is easily restored to its condition of shine. It is as renewable as it is soilable. Shiny things have the look of their feel; we see them feelingly and, when we feel them, we feel them seeingly. Looking at them includes the touch they deprecate and reprimand.

Shine yields the quality of what is often called finish to a painting. But, identified as it is with the condition of shine, this quality of finish also renders the work pristine, as though it were at the beginning of its existence, issued from the hand of its maker, new-laid, freshly-minted. The work of painting brings into being an image that ends with its beginning, its virgin lustrousness. The ceremony known as vernissage, the limited preview, occurs just before the painting is given consummation, by being given up to the world via a passage from touching to looking; the opportunity to add some final touches to the painting, also seals it off from touchability or from modifying manipulation.

The buffed, varnished or burnished object is therefore a prime example of the power of (the dream of) the intact. Shiny objects may give the impression of being new, but the most important covenant to which shine gives witness is that of redemption. An object which shines is an object that can be renewed by having its shine restored; it is a negentropic promise, and the promise of future rescindings. The process of polishing is an undoing of the undoings of time. The very process whereby one polishes shoes, floors or silverware enacts this complex reversibility. For, to attain to this ideal form of intactness, one must in

fact begin by subjecting the scuffed or sullied surface to even more vitiation and disgrace, in the glaucous cataract of the polish that temporarily eclipses any remaining gleam, like the gout of cloud smeared over a silver moon. You must then work this slather of polish deep into the surface of the shoe, dimming and soiling it even further, until it feels damp, sticky and heavy, like a clod of earth. But application is then followed by its reversal, for the real work of polishing is performed in the ceremony of subtraction, in the removal of the excessive or clouding touch with which it begins. You begin with violent and abrasive scrubbing, cuffing the shoe sideways, but, as the soiling layer of polish begins to diminish, and the leather begins to glow, so the touch of the brush must become lighter and faster, pressure giving way to speed, so that at the end it seems to do no more than skim the surface, at the most infinitesimal of tangents. Finally, the brush itself, its bristles now too abrasive, must yield to the softer cloth, which glides frictionlessly over the mirrored surface of the shoe, seeming to distil glow from pure motion, Erosion, one of the most insidious and destructive of the actions of time, is here used to reverse its effects. It is no surprise that the action of polishing should be associated in Aladdin's lamp with the making and granting of wishes, for polishing seems to bear witness to the possibility of magical redemption, the undoing of the contingency of fact. Gaston Bachelard regards the action of polishing as deeply creative:

The minute we apply a glimmer of consciousness to a mechanical gesture, or practice phenomenology while polishing a piece of old furniture, we sense new impressions coming into being beneath this familiar domestic duty. For consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a quality of beginning to the most everyday actions... The housewife awakens furniture that was asleep. (Bachelard 1994, 67, 68)

The uncertain reference of the 'glimmer of consciousness' that begins this passage (the glimmer of consciousness in the polisher, or a kind of consciousness in the object awoken in the gleam imparted to it?) alerts us to Bachelard's customary animism. The care displayed in housework is, Bachelard proposes, in opposition to outside in, geometrical architecture, a kind of female, inside-out archi-texture:

A house that shines from the care it receives appears to have been rebuilt from the inside; it is as though it were new inside. In the intimate harmony of walls and furniture, it may be said that we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside, and they know little or nothing of the "wax" civilization...The phenomenologist who follows women's construction of the house through daily polishing must

go beyond the psychoanalyst's interpretations...we can sense how a human being can devote himself to things and make them his own by perfecting their beauty. (Bachelard 1994, 68, 69)

So intactness is temporally complex. A person or thing is intact, not only when it is brand-new, but when it is, as we seem always to be saying, 'still intact', undamaged, having the appearance of newness despite the buffetings and accidents of time. Something intact is something that might or by rights should be more marked, eroded or damaged than it actually is. Intactness is therefore always anomaly.

The intact shimmers with the desire of what it discourages. It conserves itself from the jeopardy to which its conspicuous self-reservation opens it. It is secreted in its exposure, exposed in its discreteness. It has the quality of distance, a little perhaps like that of Benjamin's aura, in that it is a distance experienced in literal proximity. This is in fact precisely the message of the polished surface, which deflects and repels as it invites.

## **Acheiropoietos**

The most striking example of the veneration of the untouched is the tradition of the *acheiropoietos*, or the image supposed to be miraculously formed without the intervening touch of human hand. There are many such images, which are almost always pictures of the face of Christ or of the Virgin. One of the earliest traditions is that of the Image of Edessa, also known in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the Mandylion. The story is that King Abgar applied to Jesus for healing from a disease, perhaps leprosy: according to one account of the story, Jesus sent him instead an image of his face, which possessed magical properties. There is a later story that, after the inhabitants of Edessa had reverted to paganism, the bishop of the city sealed the image up inside a wall with a tile, and with a burning candle in front of it. When the tile was removed the image was found to have magically transferred itself to the tile. The Holy Mandylion vanished in the seventh century, but there are many later images which are either claimed to be it or to be directly copied from it. One is the Holy Face of Genoa, another the Holy Face of Alicante, and yet another the Holy Face of Jaén. Another *acheiropoietos* involves the Virgin Mary, who was asked by the Apostles Peter and John to come to a church in Lydda near Jerusalem that they were consecrating. She was unable to come, but, when they arrived, they found an image of her imprinted miraculously on a pillar. The

Great Church of the Mother of God, an early Christian basilica in the centre of Thessaloniki is named 'Acheiropoietos' after the devotional icon of the Virgin at prayer it contains, which is believed to have been formed miraculously (Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou 1989, 11)). There is another miraculous image of the Virgin known as the image of Guadalupe, a depiction of the Mother of God that was imprinted on the cloak of a sixteenth-century Aztec convert.

The acheiropoietos tradition interests with the tradition of the Veronica, the name of a young woman who took pity on Christ on the via dolorosa and wiped his face with a cloth, the sudarium, on which Christ's features were left miraculously impressed. The Vatican still displays an image on cloth of this kind on the fifth Sunday in Lent, though no detailed image of it seems to be available. Artists such as Hans Memmling and Domenico Fetti responded to the strange drama of the idea of an image forced on to a canvas by the force of passion alone. The Shroud of Turin obviously also belongs to this tradition of belief and iconology.

The legends of the acheiropoietia combine the idea that mortal touching is a kind of corruption or contamination (*noli me tangere* being the words that the risen Christ says to Mary in the Garden) with the idea of a spiritual touch that is the effect and expression of a kind of higher touch exercised at a distance, yet immediately. Another intriguing aspect of the tradition is that these intact or virginal images were themselves capable of propagating themselves (this also helped to explain the large numbers of Veils of Veronica that sprang up all over Europe. There is, one might say, a principle of iconocopia that answers the threats of iconoclasm. Indeed, in 1629, Pope Urban VIII prohibited all further copies, and ordered existing copies of the Veronica to be destroyed. The current Wikipedia entry on the Veil of Veronica affirms of one such image of the Holy Face, with superb, if slightly insane even-handedness, that 'despite claims of divine origin, the face on the veil...conforms in appearance to the characteristics of a man-made image' (Oh really?) The magical logic, perhaps, was that, even if human touch intervened in the making of such an image, its iconocopic power meant that in some sense the process was being undertaken through a kind of automatic painting, which therefore lent to the image some of the autonomy of the higher touch. Another way of participating in this magical touch is illustrated by a remarkable virtuoso engraving by Claude Mellan in 1649 of the Sudarium of Saint Veronica, which consists of a single line, which begins at the tip of Christ's nose. The continuous touch of the pen that does not leave the page until the image is complete approximates to the absolute or immediate touch of magical imprinting. It joins with the logic of the Holy Coat of Trier, a tunic which is said to have been worn by Christ, and

to have been woven continuously without a seam – as well as with the tradition that if one wishes to ensure that a witch is unable to escape from prison, she should be forced to wear a garment woven in this way. Touching is here thought of as rupture or discontinuity, with a line or thread that never breaks off from itself constituting a perfect intactness or entirety. All these examples indicate strongly that, although it is a feature of acheiropoietic artefacts that they are untouched by the hand of Christ or God, they are nevertheless touchings rather than any other form of contact and thus invoke the hand they surpass.

There are many forms of the vernacular sacred, in which things are made untouchable in order that they be subject to a special kind of destructive touch. The plumply-folded, fluffy towel, the sharply-creased handkerchief, the immaculate newspaper, all signify to a fragile interval of entirety, the power and rapture of which derive from the awareness of its very tenuousness, and the certainty of the ultimate ruin.

There is no form of the vernacular sacred more familiar than that of the various kinds of screen which with which we nowadays interact. Intactness is like the inaugural whiteness repeatedly evoked in the work of Michel Serres, the whiteness of complete openness, of absolute and undetermined possibility. As life goes on, our skin is marked, by the history of its choices and accidents, as the open and immaculate fan of possibility funnels and fractures into the indeterminable determinations of what happens to happen. The computer screen is like the Wunderblock that so fascinated Sigmund Freud, since it seems to possess the capacity of self-renewal, the capacity to expunge all the accidental markings and return to its default blankness and readiness to operate. It is an ideal skin, a sort of Dorian Gray complexion. But this is true only of the screen considered as a carrier or displayer of forms. There is always also a material screen, which is the near-identical twin of this ideal screen. Where the ideal screen inhabits and makes available an absolutely reversible time, the material screen is subject to the many accidents of ordinary, irreversible time – scratches, smears, cracks, erosions, warping, individual pixel apoptosis. We strive to preserve the interface between these two screens that are always tightly sandwiched together, the atemporal ideal screen and the temporal actual screen.

I am an early adopter of technologies, but I combine this with a kind of long-term fidelity to certain devices. I recently traded in my perfectly effective but rather battered Samsung phone for a smart phone (it was stolen within days of course, but I was able to replace it rapidly, in a perfect reduplication of the self-



reconstitutive powers that are characteristic of the individual devices themselves). The first thing I did was to purchase a screen protector. Almost everybody seems to employ this kind of prophylactic, a sheath that bonds tightly and imperceptibly to the front of the device. Everybody knows the terrible flaw in this arrangement, however. For it is almost impossible to apply the screen protector without introducing wrinkles or blisters that are subsequently impossible to smooth out. The very effort to preserve the screen immaculate in perpetuity, to keep the store of its potential blissfully in store, actually risks accelerating its slide into damage and defilement. I asked the sleek young salesman who had done such a good job of selling me to the device if he would consider applying the screen protector for me, but he refused, insisting on his incapacity. But he did whisper of a small phone accessories shop somewhere in Wood Green, where there was rumoured to be a man who could apply a screen protector to any phone without adding a single crease or bobble. My son and I spent the morning raking up and down Wood Green High Street, and eventually found the shop, where we purchased a screen protector for 59p, which the man, Ahmad by name, applied to my phone, apparently by acheiropoietic means, for nothing. I refrained from telling him that, were he to set up in business, he could easily earn several hundred pounds an hour from the exercise of his sublime mystery.

History is full of such failed or imprudent attempts at preservation. In my youth, immediately after I had purchased a paperback book, I would coat it in a sticky plastic laminate that I believed would keep it in its immaculate condition through all my readings and rereadings. In fact, as librarians the world over soon discovered, this attempt at preservation was in fact the worst kind of vandalism, for it rapidly (more rapidly than the cover of the book itself) grew yellow and sclerotic. Similar kinds of damage have been done to sculptures and paintings through over-scrupulous and ill-advised attempts to seal them off from erosion and accident, the most notable being the Elgin Marbles. When I take a book to read while I grind through my imaginary miles on the exercise bike, cross-trainer or other modes of stationary transport in the gym, I carefully remove the dustjacket, thereby preserving the thing that was originally intended to preserve the book itself from damage.

## **Untouchable**

That which is not to be touched is consecrated, solemnised. But the profane or the contaminated is also untouchable. Naturally, the two kinds of untouchability are governed by opposite motives. The sacred object is untouchable in order to preserve it from my contamination; the profane object is untouchable to protect me from its malignity. The two come together in the strange duality of the sacred. Something sacred is something removed from ordinary life, or reserved for special purposes – its original meaning being dedicated to consecrated to the god. However, that purpose is often sacrifice, meaning that the sacred is protected in order to be destroyed, kept entire in order to be brought to naught. The central ambivalence of the sacred is that it is protected from all human despoliation because it is marked out as the spoils of the divine. Marking is very often the literal vehicle of this sacralising. The homicidal Cain was the original ‘marked man’; but the mark of Cain was unlike the many other stigmatisations that have been applied to human groups and individuals, in that it was not the equivalent of the ‘Kick Me’ notice beloved of schoolboys, not a sign that he could be assaulted with impunity, since he was not subject to the normal protections. Rather it was a sign that he was reserved for the special vengeance of God alone. Cain had to be kept intact so that he could be permanently on hand for special destruction.

And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the ground; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that whosoever findeth me shall slay me.

And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain, lest any finding him should smite him. (Genesis 4.13-15)

Cain is often associated with the criminal designated under Roman law as *sacer*. It is certainly true that *sacer* means both sacred, dedicated, set apart and also unclean, untouchable, defiled. However, the passage from religious to secular law in Roman civilisation introduces an extra complication. For the man said to be *sacer*, for example, in the Valerio-Horatian law of 449BC that states of a malefactor that ‘eius caput Jovi sacrum esset’ (Bennett 1930, 6), was also felt to be unable or unworthy to be sacrificed; as a result, any citizen could kill him with impunity. The 2nd century Roman grammarian Festus, summarising the prescription of Valerius Flaccus, explained that ‘Sacer homo est quem populus iudicavit ob maleficium; neque fas est eum immolari, sed qui occidit parricidii non damnatur’ (Bennett 1930, 6) [The sacred man is one judged by the people

to be wicked; yet he is not to be destroyed by ritual, but any man who kills him will not be condemned]. This is therefore the precise opposite to the protective marking of Cain, on whose attackers extra sanctions will fall, though in both cases cursing and consecration, defilement and a special kind of dedication, are associated. A similar logic applies to the *morbus sacer*, or sacred disease, the name given to epilepsy and associated conditions. The one who is set apart by his malady has been touched by untouchability.

Something of the same ambivalence attaches to the figure of the virgin, who has traditionally been considered, not just as a prompt to desire, but also as dangerous, with specially trained stand-ins being used in some cultures to deflower virgin brides to protect husbands from the danger of the act, an ambivalence considered in Freud's essay 'The Taboo of Virginity' (Lederer 1968, 44-8; Freud 1995a). The virgin is not all vulnerable or passive: the unicorn, with which virgins are associated was a spirited and spiky beast, untouchable in the same way as a hedgehog (Moore 1982, 52). It was thought that only a virgin could tame a unicorn, an action shown in the tapestry showing the sense of touch in the Cluny tapestries known as *The Lady and the Unicorn*.

The miraculous intactness of virgins is associated in many medieval saints' tales with remarkable fortitude; virgins are able to withstand enthusiastic and repeated tortures and dismemberments, including, in the case of one Juliana, having molten brass poured over her, which felt simply like warm water (d'Ardenne 1961, 27). Repeatedly, the bodies of such virgins are revealed to be 'unashamed, impenetrable, miraculously self-healing' (Salih 1999, 109)

But there was another kind of virginity, which remained chaste, not through being absolutely resistant, but through offering no resistance of any kind. Giulia Sissa writes of the Pythian priestess of Apollo that she was required to be virginal in order to be able to offer herself for the possession of the god in 'the emptiest, most available, most passive state that a human being can attain. Every obstacle and every encumbrance must be abolished in order to prevent enthusiasm from turning into struggle or strangulation...The prophetess remains intact, untouchable, and illiterate for no other reason than to offer Apollo a more perfect welcome' (Sissa 1990, 169-70). The parthenos maintained her intactness not by being sternly impregnable, but by being as permeable as water; it is as if there were nothing there to violate or contaminate.

## Délire du Toucher

Why should touch be the subject of such intense and systematic inhibition? Freud argues that the ‘touch-phobia’, or ‘*délire du toucher*’ (Freud 1995b, 27), which is a feature of the mental life both of primitive peoples and of obsessional neurotics, derives from the conflict between, on the one hand, the erotic and aggressive instincts, both of which require what Freud calls ‘a coming to grips’ and a striving ‘to abolish all spatial barriers’ (Freud 1995c, 122) and, on the other hand, the need to inhibit these desires. Desire and aggression require touch, inhibition demands distance.

nothing is so strongly prescribed in that illness [obsessional neurosis] as touching nor so well suited to become the central point of a system of prohibitions. But isolating is removing the possibility of contact; it is a method of withdrawing a thing from being touched in any way. And when a neurotic isolates an impression or an activity by interpolating an interval, he is letting it be understood symbolically that he will not allow his thoughts about that impression or activity to come into associative contact with other thoughts. (Freud 1995c, 122)

There is thus a double distancing in what Freud calls the ‘magical acts of isolation’ involved in the prohibition of touch (Freud 1995c, 121). The subject isolates itself from the prohibited object, and also internally quarantines its own unacknowledged desire for contact. The fact that the desire is said to be ‘persecuted’ indicates that the desire to come to grips has not in fact been entirely isolated, since that internal aggression must repeat the *délire du toucher* in the way in which it advances upon and closes with what it persecutes, even as it seeks to drive it away. Following Freud, psychoanalysis has often viewed touching phobias as having their origin in the repression of self-touching involved in masturbation; Melanie Klein wrote that ‘the excessive sense of guilt which masturbatory activities arouse in children is really aimed at the destructive tendencies residing in the phantasies that accompany masturbation. It is this sense of guilt which urges children to stop masturbating altogether and which, if it has been successful in doing so, often leads them on to a phobia of touching’ (Klein 1932, 163-4).

Michel Serres’s arguments in *Le Mal-Propre* suggest that the logic behind this is that marking is seen as a certain kind of defiling touch that removes something from the sphere of the common, thereby appropriating it. Thus the making of something unclean, or its marking as unclean, the *mal-propre*, is the beginning of private property, the privation of place, and therefore the beginning of place itself. Serres makes all the linked associations of the word ‘propre’, which in

French means clean, proper, and relating to oneself, since in his formula ‘The clean [*propre*] is acquired and conserved by the dirty. Or, even better: the clean is the dirty’ (Serres 2008, 7; my translation).

As many philosophers have suggested, touch is the most reflexive of the senses. When we touch something, we simultaneously feel the object, and feel ourselves feeling it, this being most emphatically the case when we touch ourselves. Touch gives us the reflexive form of our being-in-the-world, the way in which we feel ourselves feeling that we are in the world. In the repeatedly-enacted dream of the intact, we act out a perplexed relation to our own reflexivity. To be sure, it is touch that leads us out into the world and lends the world to us. But touch always also contains an aggressive desire for appropriation. For Jean-Paul Sartre, to touch is always in part the expression of a desire to own, to devour or assimilate. It is not so much the force of repression which causes the conflict between touching and its inhibition as the desire to maximise the power and gratification of the subject who actually dreads the annihilation of the object that is consequent upon its assimilation. For Sartre, therefore, the mitigation of touch is a way of continuing in one’s imaginary possession of an object, even as one consumes it, a way of eating one’s cake and having it. Sartre finds, in the relation to certain kinds of objects, such as snow, the promise of the ‘digested indigestible...the dream of the non-destructive assimilation’ (Sartre 1984, 579). For Sartre, this ideal assimilation which leaves everything intact is to be found in knowledge:

The known is transformed into me; it becomes my thought and thereby consents to receive its existence from me alone. But the movement of dissolution is fixed by the fact that the known remains in the same place, indefinitely absorbed, devoured, and yet indefinitely intact, wholly digested and yet wholly outside, as indigestible as a stone. (Sartre 1984: 579)

Intactness is touch’s self-limit, its recoil from its own appetitive and injurious appropriations. Intactness is the most important form of the tactful tactics whereby we have begun to learn to keep the world immune from us. It is for this reason that Michel Serres articulates, in the final chapter of his book *Le Tiers-Instauré*, an ethics of the touch that holds back, defined in contrast to a principle of evil that is, he proposes, to be identified simply that which spreads into space, uniformly, indifferently, unopposably:

The gentle man holds back. He reserves some strength to retain his strength, refuses in himself and around him the brute power that is propagated. The sage thus disobeys the single law of expansion, does not always persevere in his

being and thinks that elevating his own conduct to a universal law is the definition of evil as much as madness. (Serres 1997, 119)

Where most things in nature accumulate touches and attachments during the course of their existence, human culture seems recently to have begun to move in the other direction, reducing the occasions of direct contact, and multiplying the forms of teletactility. The story of the move from a regime of handling to one of looking has frequently been told in the history of museum display, often with a rueful or melancholy note. Visitors to cabinets of curiosities would be invited to heft, caress and palpate the object in the collection. As such collections became progressively more likely to be the property, not of individual collectors, but of public institutions, and their visitors tended therefore no longer to be the trusted members of a small and homogeneous social circle, the opportunity to handle the relics and curiosities in the collection was progressively withdrawn, with the objects themselves withdrawing in a more literal way from the attentions of the hand. The sign and vehicle of this unavailability to the hand and correspondingly enhanced exposure to the possibility of visual inspection, now amplified into a parched, avaricious touching at a distance, was the screen of glass that came commonly to interpose between the object and the viewer. The object is simultaneously secreted within and exposed by the condition of shine of the glass. Soon, the *noli me tangere* extended even to the glass itself, the sacred and consecrating second skin of the object, the readily legible shininess of the glass acting as a kind of tactile image, or visible quasi-taction of the intact – or perhaps we should call it the newly *intacted* – object itself.

We may say that, as collectives become larger and more inclusive, so touch must diminish, or, more precisely, must ramify into more complexly diminutive forms. Touch is social, it forms, it renews and sustains bonds of association and solidarity. But when touching is simultaneously multiplied and intensified, solidarity can harden into solidity. Touch is appropriative and also privative. To belong to a group is to be more-or-less voluntarily appropriated by, or possessed of it. At its extreme stage, this intensified contact turns solidarity into solidity, a state of dense, rigid compaction, in which there are no spaces for internal detachment and dissociation. The state of maximised, unmitigated contact is one asphyxiating self-identity. Groups formed into such dense blocks of self-identification may in fact be very unstable, because they do not have the spaces into which to discharge internal stresses, and so may need to discharge them outwards. Such groups may therefore be strongly adversarial in relation to other blocks.

If large and complex human associations are to survive and flourish, which is to say, to avoid violence, social associations must simultaneously reduce distance and maximise connectibility without increasing rigidity and friction,. A crowded beach or train provides an image of this kind of fluid homeostasis. As the spaces between people contract, so the inhibitions intensify. Increased contact produces higher levels of tactful and tactical sensitivity to the need to respect the minor and local zones of intactness. The ‘civilising process’ described by Norbert Elias involves just such a development; table manners, sexual conventions, bodily protocols and codes of politeness open up numberless internal intervals and spacings in social life in response to the densifying of populations, with the correspondingly increased probability and increased heat of social contacts, collisions and interactions. Michel Serres speculates that ‘one of the first forms of conduct, and one of the first signals, might both equate to this: keep me warm. Homeothermy induces tact and contact, erotic communication and language’ (Serres 1977, 264 n.1; my translation). If it is true that communication creates warmth among homeothermic creatures who have to maintain their temperatures much higher than that of their surrounding environments, then perhaps inhibitory codes amount to a kind of social air conditioning. Civil and metropolitan societies must constitute themselves not as homogeneous blocks, but as liquid lattices, or, better still, perhaps what Peter Sloterdijk has described as ‘foams’ (Sloterdijk 2004).

Intactness is therefore not the simple condition of the pristine or the primitive, prior to any kind of touch, of that which is held suspended in what comes before time’s complicating mixtures and contingencies . It is rather that which is produced as a reflex of increased and diversified touches of all kinds, all the hurly-burly, hustle, bustle and jostle of congested collectivity. The sense of the intact is not the opposite of touch, but an intimate detachment, or intactility, which has passed through touching and borrows its shape from it. It is in this sense that human associations and, even beyond this, human associations with the nonhuman world, may be thought to depend upon intactness and the active principle of intactility that sustains it. The purpose of this abstaining is the sustaining of the world, a world that can only be for us if it is not for us alone. It is a principle of reserve that pulls against the logic and demand of the illimitable that roars both through the worst and most unrestrainedly expansive forms of capitalism and the politics of absolute and ultimate emancipation that employ exactly the same rhetoric of the illimitable. It is an action of sparing from which there is no reason to withhold the fair name of mercy.

## References

- Bachelard, Gaston (1994). *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bennett, Harold (1930). 'Sacer Esto.' *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 61 (1930), 5-18.
- Barbault, Anna Letitia (1810). 'On The Origin And Progress Of Novel-Writing.' In *The British Novelists*, 50 Vols. (London, York, Edinburgh: for F. C. and J. Rivington et. al.), Vol 1, 1-19.
- d'Ardenne, S.R.T.O., ed. (1961). *De Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund (1995a). 'The Taboo of Virginity.' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey et, al. Vol. XI. London: Hogarth Press, 191-208.
- (1995b). Totem and Taboo, *Standard Edition*, Vol. XIII, 1-162.
- (1995c). 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety.' *Standard Edition*, Vol. XX, 75-175.
- Klein, Melanie (1932). *The Psychoanalysis of Children*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, Eftychia (1989). *Acheiropoietos: The Great Church of the Mother of God*. Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies.
- Lederer, Wolfgang (1968). *The Fear of Women*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- Moore, Tom (1982). 'The Virgin and the Unicorn.' In Joanne Stroud and Gail Thomas, eds., *Images of the Untouched: Virginity in Psyche, Myth and Community* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture).
- Ravenscroft, Thomas (1614). *A briefe discourse of the true (but neglected) vse of charact'ring the degrees, by their perfection, imperfection, and diminution in measurable musicke, against the common practise and custome of these times*. London: for Thomas Adams.
- Salih, Sarah (1999). 'Performing Virginity: Sex and Violence in the Katherine Group.' In Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, eds., *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke: Macmillan), 95-112.



- Sartre, Jean-Paul (1984). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. London: Methuen.
- Serres, Michel (1977). *Hermès IV: La Distribution*. Paris: Minuit.  
 ----- (1997). *The Troubadour of Knowledge*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser and William Paulson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.  
 ----- (2008). *Le Mal-propre: Polluer pour s'approprier?* Paris: Le Pommier.
- Sissa, Giulia (1990). *Greek Virginity*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 2004. *Schäume: Sphären, Vol. 3: Plurale Sphärologie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Smith, Rev. Sydney (1854). *Elementary Sketches of Moral Philosophy, Delivered at the Royal Institution, in the Years 1804, 1805, and 1806*. London: Longman, Green, Brown and Longmans.