

A black and white photograph of a person's face and hand. The person's head is tilted back, and their hand is resting on their neck. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of the face and hand against a dark background.

OXFORD

Feeling Pleasures

The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England

JOE MOSHENSKA

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For Chana, Raf, Ruby, and Gabe

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Corpus of tact: to touch lightly, to brush against, to squeeze, to penetrate, to hold tight, to polish, to scratch, to rub, to stroke, to palpitate, to handle, to knead, to rub, to embrace, to strike, to pinch, to bite, to suck, to hold, to let go, to lick, to carry, to weigh . . .

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*¹

Touch was given to [beasts] in order to produce offspring and multiply: to us, just like them, to expand, preserve and maintain the human species, and so that we might have varied, many-sided and continuous pleasure.

Mario Equicola, *Libro di natura* (1536)²

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 198.

² Mario Equicola, *Di Natura d'Amore* (Venice, 1536), 116. My translation: 'Il tatto è dato a quelli per generare Prole, & in quella moltiplicare. A noi sì come loro per aumentare, conservare, & mantenere la humana specie, & che havessemo vario moltiplice, et continuo piacere.'

Introduction: Touching the Past

I.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon of Easter Day 1538, John Goodall, the zealous under-bailiff of the city, strode into Salisbury Cathedral. He saw the congregation crowding around the image of Christ that stood on the altar, jostling for the right to bestow a pious kiss upon its feet. For Goodall, such behaviour was a flagrant violation of the recently-issued injunctions for the diocese of Salisbury, in which Bishop Nicholas Shaxton, following the orders of Thomas Cromwell, proscribed any 'wandering to pilgrimages, offering of money, candles or tapers to images or relics, or kissing or licking the same'.¹ In fact, however, the injunctions left a loophole: creeping to the cross and kissing it was still to be permitted on Good Friday and 'Estyru morow' (Easter morning). Goodall, though, insisted that it was afternoon already, and such kissing must therefore come to an end. He ordered the priest to remove the image, and, when the priest hesitated, Goodall had his servant confiscate it. Unfortunately, and apparently unbeknownst to him, a piece of the consecrated Host had been lodged within the image. In the squabble that ensued, each side insisted that the other had committed an act of gross impiety. Goodall was accused of dishonouring the sacrament by having his servant lay violent hands upon it, and his unfortunate servant was imprisoned. In response, Goodall insisted to Cromwell that he acted not against 'the blessed Sacrament' but only 'against the abuse of the image in true obedience to the King's injunctions and proclamations'. It was his opponent who was 'most worthy of punishment for his idolatry in kissing the foot of the image in honour of the sacrament enclosed therein'.²

What is perhaps most remarkable about this confrontation is that, had the congregation restricted their kissing to the morning, Goodall could have had no complaint. At this point in the early stages of the English Reformation, it seems, the same act of reverent touch might mean one thing before lunch, and another after.

¹ The words are cited, and the context of the 1538 injunctions discussed, by Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 406–7. For other attacks on pious kissing see Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1988), 113–14, 244, 428, 431.

² *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII, Preserved in the Public Record Office, the British Museum, and Elsewhere in England*, ed. James Gairdner and R.H. Brodie (London: Her Majesty's Stationer's Office, 1884), vol. 14, part I, nos. 777–8. See the accounts by Geoffrey Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 101, 105–6; Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 230–2; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 421–2.

The scene from Salisbury presents us not with a traditionalist congregation determined to hang on to older forms of devotional practice and confronted by the rigid impositions of an authoritarian minority who seek to ban pious touching altogether. Rather, we witness the ambiguities for which even official proclamations left room. The official injunction with its doubled verbs—‘kissing or licking’—subtly suggested that these actions were equivalent, the pious kiss no different from a servile and sensual lap of the tongue. This formulation was influential, and became a stock component in reformed polemic: Thomas Becon denounced traditional priests with ‘their crossings and knockings, their kissings and lickings, their noddings and nosings’, while William Salesbury, the distinguished Welsh humanist, recalled that in his wayward youth he ‘kissed and devoutly licked saints’ feet’, distancing himself from the unreformed self-abasement of both his personal history, and that of the nation.³ The dispute instigated by Goodall’s actions, however, suggests that in 1538 not all devotional kissing was obviously servile and debased: if conducted at the right time and in the right fashion, it might still be defended as pious. Both parties in this dispute claimed merely to act as orthodox English Christians, defending the dignity of the Sacrament or the spirit of the royal injunctions. The attempt to reshape English worship in the 1530s led not to pious touch simply being banned, but rather ensured that specific acts of touch, and the time and manner in which they transpired, would be subjected to unprecedented scrutiny and debate.

This book is about the sense of touch in Renaissance England, beginning roughly in the moment and the milieu in which this dispute took place. Goodall’s actions and the righteous indignation that they provoked capture in microcosm several of my central concerns and contentions. If Goodall’s objection to pious kissing, and his violent removal of the image, locate him within the context of English iconoclasm, this would seem to support Margaret Aston’s claim that the ‘several phases’ of image breaking in the sixteenth century ‘might be read in terms of progressive reduction of the role of the sensuous in worship . . . Worship through touch was targeted when Henry VIII abolished the pilgrim shrines, which were premised on the ability of worshippers to come close to and make physical contact with the holy through relics and images of the saints’.⁴ The targeting of touch and the ‘progressive reduction’ of its role in worship were, however, ideals at best, which rarely reflected the reality of religious practice. Even those who claimed that pious touch should be abolished, as we shall see, tended in the end to doubt whether this could or should be done.

This pattern, in which touch is both denounced and retained, anxiously proscribed and tenaciously defended, is repeated throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, and not only in primarily theological contexts. Touch was not eliminated, and it did not become progressively less important. In making

³ *Prayers and Other Pieces of Thomas Becon*, ed. John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), 385; Salesbury quoted by Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts*, 152.n.91.

⁴ Margaret Aston, ‘Public Worship and Iconoclasm’, in *The Archaeology of Reformation 1480–1580*, ed. David Gaimster and Roberta Gilchrist (Leeds: Maney, 2003), 9–28; 9.

this negative argument, however, I am not claiming in response that it was the most valued of the senses in this period, or that Renaissance England was an age of touch. The sense of touch did assume a unique and distinctive prominence during this period, but this was precisely because it attracted such wildly contrasting interpretations and valuations, as the responses to the pious kissing in Salisbury Cathedral suggest. To debate the nature and value of touch was to engage with many of the most important and contested questions that arose in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England. What was the proper role for the body in worship? Could there be bodily or sensory access to God, and in what precise manner could this be achieved? Could the senses offer reliable access to the physical world, and did the senses of all humans—or all sentient creatures—function alike? Did the soul have senses, and did angels? What were the limits of the meaning and value that could be found by investigating and shaping the material world? Considering the sense of touch was far from the only way in which such concerns might be raised, but it had the potential to raise all these questions and more, and to connect them with one another, in uniquely rich and intertwined ways. If the English Renaissance was an age of touch, this was true only in the sense that the problems raised by touch epitomized the deepest and most productive ambivalences of the age.

Ambivalence towards touch is itself not distinctive to the English Renaissance, as attention to the history of the particular form of contact to which Goodall objected—the kiss—suggests. There were long-standing anxieties in Christian thought surrounding the status of the kiss as a powerful but fraught form of pious touch. As early as the second century CE, Clement of Alexandria indicated that one could kiss with ‘a chaste and closed mouth, by which chiefly gentle manners are expressed’ but warned that there was ‘another, unholy, kiss, full of poison, counterfeiting sanctity’ which ‘occasions foul suspicious and evil reports’.⁵ The second kind of kiss is doubly dangerous—both poisonous, and prone to suspicion and misconstrual. It is most dangerous precisely because it can appear pure. Christians were urged by Paul to ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss’: but how were such holy kisses to be differentiated from the impure sort, especially if ‘counterfeiting sanctity’ were possible?⁶ What if two Christians exchanged what was ostensibly a kiss of peace, but used this ritual to conceal a more intense and proscribed form of desire? Or what if the kiss meant one thing to one participant, who aimed only to express ‘gentle manners’, and was an intensely erotic experience for the other? As we will see in subsequent chapters, it was poets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—particularly Edmund Spenser and John Milton—who

⁵ Quoted and translated by Nicolas J. Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane: An Interpretative History of Kiss Symbolism and Related Religio-Erotic Themes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 30.

⁶ Paul: Romans 16.16; 1 Corinthians 16.20; 2 Corinthians 13.12; 1 Thessalonians 5.26. See also Peter’s similar command: 1 Peter 5.14. The risks of the kiss of peace affected its later history: it continued to be exchanged among congregations immediately before communion, but ecclesiastical nervousness led to the substitution of a ‘paxboard’, an ornamental disk or tablet to be kissed in the place of one’s fellow congregants, and the kiss was eventually phased out altogether. See John Bossy, ‘The Mass as a Social Institution’, *Past and Present* 100 (1983), 29–61: 55, and Craig Koslofsky, ‘The Kiss of Peace in Reformation Germany’, in *The Kiss in History*, ed. Karen Harvey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 18–35.

explored these long-standing ambiguities with new and unparalleled perspicacity, and were persistently intrigued by the various forms and intensities of human relationship that a single act of touch might express. The dispute at Salisbury substantiates W. Richard Comstock's claim that 'the sacred can be understood primarily in terms of what people externally do, not in terms of what they internally feel', but external actions might always accrue multiple and conflicting interpretations.⁷ The 1538 injunctions against improper worship were characterized by a profound indifference to such forms of ambiguity: *all* kissing was to be assimilated to servile licking, and thereby discredited. But the dispute prompted by John Goodall's activities suggests how incomplete and uneven the putting into effect of this proscription proved to be. Pious touch proved hard to eliminate in practice, and touch assumed a lingering but ceaselessly contested importance.

II.

Each of the chapters that follow takes as its focus a particular area of Renaissance culture in which the sense of touch came to the fore, and was debated, denounced, or celebrated. It is not only because of the variety of debates that it provoked and in which it featured, however, that the sense of touch assumed a distinctive importance in England in this period. As it assumed a prominent role in debates concerning the nature and worth of human sensory experience and the possibility of accessing the material and divine realms, discussions of touch tended, implicitly or explicitly, to lead back towards a fundamental question: to what extent does the language that we use adequately capture the experiences of our bodies? What unites the diverse discussions of touch in this period is, I will argue, not an overriding theological or philosophical position, but a distinctive concern with the relationship between touch and language. It is this concern that justifies my emphasis on literary accounts of touch, but even when I am dealing with texts traditionally placed beyond the bounds of the literary, I return to the connections between touch and language, and especially figurative language.

What were the connections between touch and figurative language in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? On the one hand, the vocabulary of touch remains pervasive in our everyday speech. The English language features a wealth of phrases that use the word 'touch' itself or its cognates, and the lengthy entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests the range of meanings that the word can assume. On the other hand, against the diffuseness of the language of touch must be set the persistent conviction that actual experiences of touch resist full linguistic expression. These two facts—the ubiquity of touch *in* language and the resistance of

⁷ W. Richard Comstock, 'A Behavioral Approach to the Sacred: Category Formation in Religious Studies', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49.4 (1981), 625–43: 632. See the similar approach by Talal Asad, who seeks to understand religious practices through the 'assemblage of embodied aptitudes' that they involve (*Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993], 75).

touch *to* language—do not conflict with one another so much as they establish two rich sets of connections between touch and metaphorical expression. Touch serves as a ready metaphor for manifold forms of human relationship that do not necessarily involve actual physical contact: staying in touch, being in touch, touching on a subject; a person who is touchy, or touchy-feely, or out of touch, or a bit touched—to choose only a few of the most obvious phrases. Conversely, when we try to express our experiences of touch, we can employ a wide variety of tactile adjectives—sharp, smooth, hot, bumpy, sleek, sticky, and so on—but, here too, metaphor plays a central role.⁸ We often have no choice but to say ‘*it feels like . . .*’ and insert a comparison chosen from elsewhere in our experience.

The close connections between touch and metaphorical expression for which I am arguing were recognized in English rhetorical theory in this period. It came to the fore in *The Garden of Eloquence*, written by the clergyman Henry Peacham and published in 1577.⁹ In this work, Peacham argues that while there are potentially an ‘infinite number’ of tropes, ‘certaine are chosen out, as most apt, most usual, and most commendable’.¹⁰ The first such category that he discusses are tropes drawn ‘From man him selfe, and first from his senses’, and though he discusses all of the senses in this context, Peacham recognizes the manifold traces of touch in everyday language, writing that ‘From this sense are sundrie Metaphors taken’.¹¹

Peacham turns tellingly for his examples of these ‘sundrie Metaphors’ not to the classical rhetoricians, but to the Bible, which he treats (not atypically) as a vast storehouse for the varieties of metaphorical expression. Referring first to the Book of Job, Peacham discusses Job’s statement that ‘the hand of God hath touched me’ (Job 19.21), and argues that the word is used to ‘signifie another thing then it doth in the proper signification’, meaning in fact that God ‘hath grievously stricken and wounded me’.¹² His statement assumes that there is a ‘proper’ use for this language of touch, from which the scriptural verse represents an apt divergence for the sake of rhetorical effect. Peacham proceeds to list the proliferation of metaphorical expressions from scripture in which touch is involved, which suggests the diverse forms of human experience, both physical and mental, which tactile language can be used to express:

Briefly by this place these translations are used, by touching is understood provoking, by feeling understanding, by nipping taunting or privie mocking, by wounding confusion, by pricking remorse of conscience, by renting extreame griefe, by smoothnesse faire speech or flatterie, by coldnesse want of affection, by heate vehement displeasure or fervent zeale . . . by embracing love or possession of pleasure.¹³

⁸ I am following Renaissance practice in considering simile and metaphor as interconnected strategies for figurative utterance rather than as distinct phenomena, though the distinction and ambiguity between the two will eventually become significant.

⁹ It subsequently appeared in revised and expanded form in 1593; references are to this latter edition.

¹⁰ Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1593), 4.

¹¹ Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence*, 6.

¹² Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence*, 6–7.

¹³ Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence*, 7.

The mental act of understanding; the emotions of grief and remorse; various ways of using language, from the nipping bite of mockery to the seductive smoothness of flattery: all of these can be expressed, as Peacham observes, in tactile terms. Peacham does not, however, explore the basis for this fact: it is simply assumed as self-evident that we will routinely employ the language of touch at certain moments in order to express the qualities and activities of the passions, the intellect, and the language we use. His discussion encapsulates the paradox of metaphors of touch: on the one hand they are often improper insofar as they make language mean 'another thing then it doth in the proper signification'; on the other hand they are natural and inevitable, 'most apt, most usual, and most commendable', springing as they do from 'man him self'. Metaphors of touch bend language from its everyday expressiveness, but do so in a manner that is entirely everyday. Peacham's discussion is unusual only in terms of the directness and perspicuity with which he treats these questions: his attitude to the connections between touch and language is, I shall argue, representative of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century assumptions. While recognizing that the relationship between tactile experience and metaphorical expression is integral, and that the language of touch is everywhere, he does not enquire after the reasons for its ubiquity. In a manner characteristic of linguistic practice in this period, Peacham oscillates between seeing the figurative deployment of the language of touch as proper and improper. The language of touch is both necessary for human expressiveness, and represents a departure from literal meaning. He cannot and does not specify where the boundaries of proper or literal usage lie.

Nowhere is this potential ambiguity between literal and figurative language more apparent than in the word that appears in my title—'feeling'. Peacham simply notes in passing that 'by feeling [we understand] understanding', and in doing so he glosses over the extraordinary semantic richness of the verb. There are many contexts in which 'touch' and 'feel' were used synonymously, in the sixteenth century and before. The Samaritan in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, for example, includes in his remarkable description of the Trinity as a human hand a reference to 'Al þat þe fyngres and þe fust . . . felen and touchen', and the doubled verbs function as an emphatic hendiadys.¹⁴ My titular phrase 'feeling pleasures' is itself taken, as we shall see, from Spenser's description of the temptations aimed at the sense of touch, in which the physical sense of the word predominates. The entry for 'feel' in the *OED* is remarkably long and varied, and a large number of the definitions refer directly to acts or experiences of touch. The earliest citation of the word to mean 'to handle (an object) in order to experience a tactual sensation; to examine by touching with the hand or finger', is from as early as the year 893 in

¹⁴ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (London: Arnold, 1978), Passus XX, l.145. This passage, in which the Father is compared to a clenched fist, the Son to the fingers, and the Holy Spirit to the palm, makes use of traditional exegetical material but transforms it in unique ways: see Frederick M. Biggs, "'For God is After an Hand": *Piers Plowman* B.17.138–205', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991), 17–30. The doubling of 'felen and touchen' is part of a wider proliferation of tactile verbs in the passage, which is, as we shall see, characteristic too of later accounts. Langland describes the fingers' ability 'To clucche oper to clawe, to cluppe oper to holde' (l.156).

its Old English form, 'gefelan'. The *OED* entry suggests that this is the primary meaning of the word, and that it is by transitive use that 'to feel' came to assume a much wider range of meanings: 'to perceive, be conscious'; 'to be conscious of one's powers; to be at one's ease'; 'to perceive mentally, become aware of'; 'to be conscious of (a subjective fact); to be the subject of, experience (a sensation, emotion), entertain (a conviction)'; 'to have the sensation of being; to be consciously; to regard oneself as'; 'to entertain a certain sentiment, be in a particular frame of mind'; 'to believe, think, hold as an opinion'. Peacham's account compresses into a confined space the extraordinary range of human capabilities and tendencies to which this single word can refer. He takes as obvious the fact that a language originating in experiences of touch will donate its meaning in this fashion, as physical 'feeling' comes to mean 'understanding'.

The relevant point for discussions of touch in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England is not that the physical, tactile meaning of 'to feel' is primary, with these other meanings emerging as its belated, metaphorical derivations. The point is rather that this single word can refer to an extraordinarily wide range of experiences, and the result is that a given use of the word will often hover between the definitions which the *OED* separates with necessarily heuristic neatness. It is this fluctuation between meanings, not only a refusal to specify just how literal one is being but an attempt to continue availing oneself of conflicting sets of implications rather than specifying the figurative extent of one's words, that distinguishes accounts of touch in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. A famous example of this fluctuation can be found in *An Answere unto Sir Thomas Mores Dialogue* (1531), where William Tyndale takes issue with his traditionalist opponent's account of 'historical faith', predicated upon the unbroken traditions of the established church, and offers an alternative analogy for the source of certainty and devotion:

Even likewise, if my mother had blown on her finger, and told me that the fire would burn me, I should have believed her with an historical faith . . . but as soon as I had put my finger in the fire, I should have believed, not by the reason of her, but with a feeling faith, so that she could not have persuaded me afterward to the contrary.¹⁵

Tyndale's notion of a 'feeling faith' suggests a degree of certainty for which only immediate and tactile experience will suffice: both the intensity and the privacy of the experience that he describes call forth the analogy of the finger in the flame. Tyndale's description has become something of a *locus classicus* for discussions of the rise in the sixteenth century of a distinctively Protestant form of affective inwardness.¹⁶ By claiming that his is a 'feeling faith', however, Tyndale's description in fact hovers between internal and external. Is the presence of God actually

¹⁵ William Tyndale, *An Answere unto Sir Thomas Mores Dialogue*, ed. Anne M. O'Donnell and Jared Wicks (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 49.

¹⁶ James Simpson has made much of the 'metaphors of bodily pain' that Tyndale employs, and his choice of the image of the flame, which resonates with the contorted violence that Simpson locates at the heart of the English Reformation: see *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 174–6.

felt like a flame? Or is faith rather an emotion, not a tactile sensation, for which the heat of a fire provides merely a convenient metaphor? If God can be felt in this way, what does it imply about the physical nature and accessibility of the divine? It is studiously unclear whether faith truly is a physical sensation akin to tactile feeling, or whether such externality merely provides a convenient illustration of an inward state that resists full explication. It is as if, just as Peacham later says, the language of touch is simply the most apt and readily available that we have, a language that we have no need to justify.

III.

It is certainly no longer possible to refer, as Carlo Ginzburg did in 1980, to 'the still unwritten history of the senses'.¹⁷ Touch and the other components of the human sensorium have been subjected to increased scrutiny by psychologists, historians, anthropologists and literary critics.¹⁸ Forums on the five senses in the *Journal of Social History* and *The American Historical Review*, as well as numerous conferences and symposia on sensory topics, suggest that enquiries of this sort can both add fruitfully to our understanding of the past, and change the way that we approach the past from the vantage point of the present. Although my own work has benefited from this upsurge of interest in the senses in numerous ways, this book differs from previous work in both scope and approach. There have been monographs devoted to vision, aurality and olfaction in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, as well as broader discussions of the senses in the medieval period and during the Reformation, but this is the first book-length treatment of touch in this period.¹⁹ Previous scholarship on the senses has tended implicitly towards one of two extremes. Either touch is assumed to be common to all people in all places

¹⁷ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Titian, Ovid, and Sixteenth-Century Codes for Erotic Illustration', in *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 77–95; 93.

¹⁸ The bibliography is large and growing: for the anthropology of the senses in general see the work of David Howes, especially *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), and Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1993). Historians' interest is suggested by Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History* (Oxford: Berg, 2007). An excellent overview of the current state of sensory history as a sub-discipline is offered by Martin Jay, 'In the Realm of the Senses: An Introduction', *The American Historical Review* 116.2 (2011), 307–15.

¹⁹ Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Holly Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), and especially Sophie Read, 'Ambergris and Early Modern Languages of Scent', *The Seventeenth Century* 28.2 (2013), 221–37. Despite its promising title and rich erudition, Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle's *Senses of Touch: Human Dignity and Deformity from Michelangelo to Calvin* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) is not about touch *per se* but explores an eclectic cluster of loosely related areas—human uprightness, discussions of the torpedo fish, etc.—and overlaps only occasionally with my account. On the senses in general see C.M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

and times, and therefore unsuited to investigation in a specific historical moment, or it is seen as so historically contingent that it can only be studied in highly local contexts.²⁰ Hence some writers allow their enquiries to meander eclectically between historical periods and geographical realms, creating a kaleidoscopic account of touch, while others pay attention to the historical specificity of particular understandings of the sense, and limit their work to an extremely specific time and place.²¹ In contrast to these previous approaches, my account of touch will be broad and exploratory, but this exploration will take place largely within a demarcated time and place—England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I do not adhere too rigidly to this chronological or geographical framework—my final chapters extend this investigation into the opening decades of the eighteenth century, and I give space to European writers whose influence in England was pronounced, including Montaigne, Galileo, and Descartes. Nonetheless, the specific confluence of interpretations of touch that I describe, and the particular connections between touch and language to which they gave rise, are distinctive to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. My approach is therefore specific without being narrow, exploratory without losing sight of historical particularity, and this scope enables me to explore, rather than take for granted, what it means to take something as ubiquitous and elusive as the sense of touch as a topic for literary-historical study.²²

It is not only because of its prominence within the period, however, that touch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries merits consideration. Discussions of the changing importance of touch in relation to the other senses have played a recurrent role in later attempts to characterize this period and the nature of the historical and cultural shifts that it featured. To discuss touch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is, therefore, both to seek an altered understanding of this era, and to reassess the role of the senses in the way that historical epochs and the shifts between them are construed. We have already encountered Margaret Aston's claim that Reformation iconoclasm involved the progressive expulsion of the tactile

²⁰ For an unusual and acute discussion of the temptation to view touch as a biological fact not subject to historical change see Sander Gilman, *Goethe's Touch: Touching, Seeing and Sexuality* (New Orleans: Graduate School of Tulane University, 1988), 2–3.

²¹ Wide-ranging, essayistic accounts on or relating to touch include Diana Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Random House, 1990), 65–123; Gabriel Josipovici, *Touch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 145–95; Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). More historically focused studies include the essays collected in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), and Santanu Das's excellent *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), the only book-length literary-historical study of touch in a specific period, though one more tightly focused than my own.

²² The most obvious omission in the chapters that follow is a lack of treatment of dramatic writing. This is partly because touch on the stage has been well treated by Carla Mazzio, *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), Ch.5, and partly because the theatrical staging of touch brings with it a set of interpretative questions sufficiently distinctive that their inclusion would have required expanding and reshaping my linguistic and conceptual focus.

from devotion, and I argued that this imperfectly described the tensions revealed by John Goodall's actions at Salisbury. Aston's is only one version of a widespread tendency to describe the gradually reduced importance of touch as a privileged instance of the 'disenchantment of the world' that was the supposed outcome of the Reformation. As Robert Scribner helpfully summarizes them, such accounts claim that the Reformation 'involved a radical separation of the natural from the supernatural world by repudiating the pre-Reformation sacramental system, the notion that the material world would be the bearer of sacrality, the transmitter of effective grace and of a *virtus* or power which had physical as well as spiritual and moral effects'.²³ Touch as a way of accessing the sacrality immanent in the material world was supposedly rejected as part of such processes. Such narratives focus not only on the Reformation, but on other large-scale historical shifts often identified with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the 'Scientific Revolution', and the rise of a new form of subjectivity associated with the new prominence of optics and visibility, and with Cartesian philosophy. Jacques Lacan, for example, describes the sixteenth century as 'the period in which the subject emerged and geometrical optics was a subject of research'.²⁴ With remarkable frequency, such narratives have taken the form of an argument for a cultural shift away from an affectively charged, enchanted and immediately accessible world available to touch, and towards a rationalized, distanced world, sapped of immanent meaning and defined by a modern 'hegemony of vision'.²⁵ In a prominent recent example, Charles Taylor describes 'the withdrawal from promiscuous intimacy which is part of the modern disciplined stance', in which 'You keep the multifarious functions of the body, its fluids and secretions, very much to yourself, you keep a respectful distance, and you relate to others through voice and visage, via sight and sound, reserving touch for intimates, or for certain ritually permitted moments, like shaking hands'.²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu has written in more general but similar terms of the rise of a 'scholastic' view which 'is accompanied by a distancing from the pleasures of the senses of proximity' and has, he claims, contributed to 'an intellectualist divorce, without equivalent in any of the great civilizations: a divorce between the intellect, seen as

²³ R.W. Scribner, 'Reformation and Desacralisation: from Sacramental World to Moralized Universe', in *Problems in the Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Europe*, ed. R. Po-chia Hsia and R.W. Scribner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 75–92; 75. This is an outline of the positions that Scribner judiciously criticizes. See also Scribner, 'The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the "Disenchantment of the World"', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23.3 (1993), 475–94; Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and "The Disenchantment of the World" Reassessed', *Historical Journal* 51.2 (2008), 497–528. 'Disenchantment' as a translation of the German term, *Entzauberung*, owes its broad currency to the work of Max Weber: see *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. 61.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994), 88. The context of this remark is a discussion of Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*. Lacan's privileging of the visual to the exclusion of the other senses is well discussed by Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (London: Routledge, 2004), 116.

²⁵ See the essays collected in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 140.

superior, and the body, seen as inferior; between the most abstract senses, sight and hearing . . . and the most sensuous senses'.²⁷

An elegiac tone easily creeps into these accounts, which implicitly posit a mythical earlier era: a time of 'promiscuous intimacy' from which we have woefully withdrawn, an age when 'the pleasures of the senses of proximity' were readily available. As Talal Asad observes, accounts of disenchantment frequently involve a nostalgic narrative according to which 'images of a "premodern" past acquire in retrospect a quality of enchantment'—an enchantment which takes the form, in these cases, of an imagined world rich with touch.²⁸ Varieties of this nostalgia emerge in different forms in a number of critical methodologies that, rather than lamenting the loss of touch in an enchanted past, suggest touch as a critical model for accessing that past. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt explain that, in pursuing the anecdotal thick description central to their new historicist method, 'We wanted the touch of the real in the way that in an earlier period people wanted the touch of the transcendent'.²⁹ Similarly, in her account of medieval religion and sexuality, Carolyn Dinshaw is drawn repeatedly towards examples of touch in medieval culture, but the 'queer' history which she pursues is not only concerned with moments of touch, but itself 'works sensibly. It is a history of things touching . . . I speak of the tactile, "touch," because I feel queerness work by contiguity and displacement . . . ungrounding bodies, making them strange, working in this way to provoke conceptual shifts and subsequent corporeal response in those touched'.³⁰ For her too, touch becomes a figure for the critical attempt to force past and present jarringly to meet, in a manner which productively unsettles both. Touch is what is lost, but it also offers the promise of recapturing the past, vaulting momentarily across historical distance. If touch has served as a model for these theoretical approaches, it has been no less tempting for those who would reject theory altogether: Valentine Cunningham, for example, criticizes deconstruction for 'showing far less touch, far less tact, for what is actually happening' in the texts that it considers, and suggests as an antidote to these techniques, 'Close reading. Person to Person. Human, tactile, tactful'.³¹

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 22–3. Bourdieu is echoing here the history of mentalities practised by Annales School historians such as Lucien Febvre and Robert Mandrou. The latter writes that 'Until the eighteenth century at least, touch remained one of the master senses . . . It verified perception, giving solidity to the impressions provided by other senses, which were not as reliable' (*Introduction to Modern France, 1500–1640: An Essay in Historical Psychology*, trans. R.E. Hallmark [New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976], 53). See the valid criticisms by Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 34–5, though he is too quick to assert in opposition a modern hegemony of vision.

²⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13–14.

²⁹ Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 31.

³⁰ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 39–40, 151.

³¹ Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 163–4. See the cogent criticisms in the review of Cunningham's book by John Kerrigan, 'Touching and Being Touched', *London Review of Books* 24/18 (2002), 19–22.

I would take issue less with the desire to touch the past that Gallagher and Dinshaw and Greenblatt express—it is a widespread desire, prominent no less in the Renaissance than in our own age—than with the assumption that, in hoping to do so, they are aiming to recapture lost forms of action and understanding. There was no single way in which people in the past sought the touch of the transcendent, and it is necessary to appreciate the unstable and fluctuating status of touch during or prior to the Renaissance before seeking to adopt it as a model either for the course of historical change or the specifics of critical method. It is not my intention simply to dismiss these accounts, however. These narratives of historical change as sensory transformation—which we will encounter again in various forms—matter because they suggest the important role that the senses, and the sense of touch in particular, can play in the narratives by which we understand the modern world and the way in which it came about. There seems to be a distinctive form of anxiety concerning the sense of touch: it is the sense we fear losing, or worry that we have already lost. Touch seems always to be located somewhere else, in an earlier epoch of solidity and enchantment that has receded beyond reach. We will encounter such narratives in differing forms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the rich satisfactions of touch are sometimes placed before the Fall, or before the Resurrection, or on the other side of some other insurmountable epochal divide. The enduring importance of touch is suggested not least by the persistent and anxious conviction that it is in the process of disappearing, or has already been lost.

While such narratives are important as revealing symptoms of this anxiety, they remain problematic insofar as they talk of touch in general terms—as if society as a whole could relinquish ‘the pleasures of the senses of proximity’, in Bourdieu’s phrase. As I have already stressed, it is the uniquely diverse range of assessments that touch attracted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that set it apart, as well as the variety of experiences which the language of touch seemed aptly to express. Only by appreciating this historically specific variety can we properly identify the attitude most characteristic of the English Renaissance: neither the wholesale endorsement of an enchanted world of touch nor its rejection in favour of a proto-modern subjectivity founded in vision, but the employment of a language of touch that shifts restlessly between literal and metaphorical, and that thereby refuses either to reject or embrace the pleasures and vexations of the sense.

It is for this reason that I choose in the subtitle of this book to specify my focus as ‘Renaissance England’ rather than the alternative, ‘Early Modern England’, even though my discussion takes me somewhat later than the period typically designated by the former term. This is partly because, even when considering touch in early eighteenth-century writings in my closing chapters, we will find writers striving to reconcile their own theories with writings from the distant past, whether these be the poetry of Lucretius, the medical writings of Galen, or the tenets of ancient Chinese medicine. Largely, however, I avoid the term ‘Early Modern’ because, as I have intimated, I want to extract touch from narratives which too quickly identify the onset of modernity with the rise of vision and the decline of the tactile. This does not mean that I seek in this book to dissolve touch into history, or to deny that an investigation of the sense in a past era has anything to tell us about the

present: quite the contrary. Writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries looked back into the past in order to understand the sense of touch, but they also focused on the minutiae of their present experiences. They were as interested in the potentially deep significance invested in the most quotidian of itches and tingles, strokes and prods, as they were in the sensory theories of Aristotle or in the touching of Christ's body. Or rather, they insisted that one could not be understood in isolation from the other. By departing from previous work on the senses in taking two centuries of English culture as my scope, I am not arguing that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were an 'age of touch' any more than I would argue that we now live in an age of vision. Touch is not of interest because it was the most important sense in the period, but precisely because it can persistently unsettle our sense of which human experiences are central, and which are marginal. Exploring past interpretations of touch allows us to question, rather than taking for granted, not just the historical importance of the sense but its importance to our sense of history.

IV.

The chapters that follow consider various regions in which the sense of touch was discussed, interpreted and represented in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. I take a roughly chronological route through these centuries, with some notable departures. I begin in Chapter 1 by returning to some of the questions raised by John Goodall's actions at Salisbury, and consider the ambiguous responses in the early English Reformation to earlier forms of pious touch. I discuss the English translation of Desiderius Erasmus's colloquy *Peregrinatio religionis ergo*, in which relics are transformed from objects of devotion to untouchable objects of disgust, and the account of sacramental feeling developed by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, which exemplifies the tendency in this period to hover between literal and metaphorical accounts of pious touch. In Chapter 2, I explore the afterlife of such ambiguous metaphors in two sermons delivered by Lancelot Andrewes, who employed his knowledge of Latin and Hebrew grammar in extensively probing the manifold meanings of the word 'touch' itself. For him, the very variety of these linguistic resonances indicates the richness and coherence of the divinely created world.

In Chapter 3, I move from Christian to classical accounts of the touchability of the divine, beginning with the epic poems of Lucretius and Virgil. Lucretius places the gods beyond all human touch in his atomistic world, while Virgil's gods fluctuate between human contact and distance. I argue for the influence of these accounts on Montaigne's *Essais* through his reading of both poets, and suggest an analogous treatment of fluctuating divine presence in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. In Chapter 4, I suggest that these Christian and classical traditions, in which determining the tangibility of the gods becomes inseparable from exploring the role of touch in human experience more generally, converge in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The second book of this poem features an alarmed depiction of the threat of 'feeling pleasures', which endanger the temperate self, but this is not the poem's final word on the matter. Spenser, I argue, was persistently concerned with touch as an integral part of human interaction and

sociability, and used moments of contact in *The Faerie Queene* to explore the varied topography and textures of the allegorical world that he creates, and the range of bodies that populate it.

In Chapter 5, I argue that these poetic and theological debates also bore upon the contested relationship between touch and the experience of the visual arts. Discussions of both painting and sculpture repeatedly turned to the language of tactility in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Touch in this period is often seen as irrelevant to the appreciation of art, even inimical to it, but it also proves indispensable to a proper response to beauty. Chapter 6 moves from discussions of touching sculptures to a curious description of what it would mean to tickle a sculpture, written by Galileo Galilei. I argue in this chapter that tickling, while apparently a marginal and everyday experience, became a vehicle for Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, and other thinkers to explore the extent to which touch is truly common to all people. Chapter 7 pursues this investigation of some of the figures central to the 'Scientific Revolution' in Europe into a specifically English context, and considers the role of touch in the work of natural philosophers including Thomas Hobbes, Margaret Cavendish, Kenelm Digby, and particularly Robert Boyle. Boyle was fascinated by preternatural tactile abilities such as those of Jan Vermaasen, a blind Dutchman who could distinguish colours through touch, and especially the Irish 'Stroker', Valentine Greatrakes, whose touch was wonderfully, perhaps even miraculously, curative.

In Chapter 8, I turn to *Paradise Lost*, and argue that in his poem Milton seeks to identify a distinctively human mode of touch, resembling neither the vapid airiness of angels nor the clotted brutality of devils. Milton allows contrasting but intertwined valuations of the sense to emerge, and to be explicitly contested: it produces intense and inadvertent pleasures, and forms of devastating and mundane suffering. I also argue that Milton had a direct impact upon later discussions of the limits of what we can and should feel, in the work of Richard Bentley, Alexander Pope, and Thomas Gray. Finally, in Chapter 9, I discuss the early reception of Chinese medicine, and especially the feeling of the pulse, in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England. The knowledge that Chinese doctors claimed to be able to derive from the pulse baffled and intrigued English intellectuals: touch appeared in this context not to be common to all people, but to vary wildly between both individuals and cultures. In the writings of the Dutch émigré Isaac Vossius and the physician John Floyer, the attempt to reconcile these divergent accounts led to explorations of the relationship between the sense of touch, poetic metre, and the expressive capacities of metaphorical language.

My conclusion returns to a consideration of the role that touch has played in some recent theoretical accounts of human experience, which look different when read as responses to discussions of touch from the Renaissance. The distinctions between forms of feeling, and between their literal and metaphorical description, with which writers from the English Renaissance wrestled, have the potential to contribute to the ways in which we understand the senses today. Modern anxieties about losing touch with one another and with the world, of being too distracted from our bodily feelings to notice them fully, have a long history; but it is one which allows us to reassess the place that the most fleeting and seemingly trivial experiences might have in considering the nature and worth of human activity.

1

‘A Sensible Touching, Feeling and Groping’ Metaphor and Sensory Experience in the English Reformation

A man strides boldly into the innermost sanctum of a Benedictine abbey. Hidden away in this small chamber, carefully guarded and protected, is the holiest relic that the monks possess: a shrivelled, desiccated human arm, its gnarled fingers curled in on themselves and the preserved sinews poking through the layer of papery skin. This is the limb of Mary Magdalene, miraculously preserved through the centuries: having been granted the privilege of washing Christ’s feet, her sanctified hand lingers to be touched by pious believers with awe and care. The man who enters, though, shows none of this reverence. He boldly approaches and takes hold of the relic. The gathered monks were, we are told, ‘overcome with horror, then became exceedingly enraged’, and they ‘cried out, “What terrible profanity!”’¹ Undeterred, the man seizes one of the brittle fingers, and tries to wrench it loose. When it proves resistant to his grip, the onlookers are horrified further still as he seizes the digit between his teeth, and twists until it breaks free. He raises the broken fragment in triumph.

This scene sounds strongly reminiscent of the dispute played out in Salisbury Cathedral with which I began. Like the overzealous John Goodall, this man lays aggressive hands upon a holy thing to the outrage of those who had gathered to revere it. In fact, this act goes even further, for Goodall only had his servant remove the offending image, whereas here the relic is assaulted and broken. Nonetheless, this scene does not belong to the iconoclasm of the 1530s, nor did the perpetrator of this act intend to demean the object that he handled in this brutal fashion. The scene took place at Fécamp in Normandy in the late twelfth century, and the intruder was Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln, who would later be beatified for his godliness. When Hugh grasped and snapped the relic, he did so, he insisted, not as a violent affront to its holiness, but as a manifestation of the piety for which he was later celebrated. Turning to the gathered monks who were horrified by his behaviour, he explained:

‘Si,’ inquit, ‘ipsius Sancti sanctorum paulo ante corpus sanctissimum digitis licet indignis contrectavimus, dentibus quoque vel labiis atrectatum ad interiora nostra transmisimus, quare non etiam sanctorum eius membra ad nostri munimen et ipsorum venerationem

¹ *Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis: The Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. and trans. Decima L. Douie and David Hugh Farmer (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1985), 2.170: ‘Cernentes uero hec abbas et monachi, iampridem stupentes et pauidi, nunc uero seuiantes et irati, exclamant, “O, o, proh nefas!”’

atque memoriam nobis impensius conciliandam, fiducialiter attractamus et debito cum honore servanda, nobis cum facultas datur adquirimus?²

If a little while ago I handled the sacred body of the Lord with my fingers in spite of my unworthiness, and partook of it with my lips and my teeth, why should I not treat the bones of the saints in the same way . . . and without profanity acquire them whenever I can?³

Hugh argues that one form of touch anticipates and validates another: the touching of the sacrament permits the rending of the relic. I argued in my introduction that we should not be too quick to understand the English Reformation as involving the progressive reduction of pious touch, but Hugh's actions suggest another troubling possibility. Even in an age when pious touch was emphasized, it might take startlingly brutal forms. The breaking of an object for the sake of future reverence might uncomfortably resemble its deliberate destruction: piety and impiety might both involve violent touch. This curious possibility, that iconoclasm might echo rather than simply repudiate traditional religious practice, suggests a further way in which the Reformation involved a tangled combination of continuity and change, rather than an absolute epochal shift. The fact that traditional practice ranged from the reverent to the violent allowed acts of touch to remain prominent among the pious repertoire of English reform, and it became both important and difficult to distinguish such acts from earlier forms of tactile devotion. The early stages of English reform were marked by an acute and burgeoning historical consciousness, not simply a forgetting but an intense reinterpreting of the medieval past: saints who had cured people through touch, or whose relics effected cures after their deaths, could be depicted as sorcerers or necromancers.⁴ Touch could not easily be eliminated as a pious act, but its prominent place in the medieval forms of piety that were under attack meant that it was difficult to justify. In the early stages of the English Reformation pious touch was neither entirely promoted as a viable pious and liturgical practice, nor was it dismissed: instead, as English reformers struggled with a continuing impulse to handle and feel the divine, accounts of devotional touch justified its covert continuation through a language that drifted repeatedly into a realm between literal and figurative expression.

The first section of this chapter returns to 1538, the year of Goodall's actions, which was a turning point in the speed and aggression of English reform, and focuses on the translation of Erasmus's colloquy against pilgrimage, which construes previously sacred items as objects worthy of disgust. I then argue in the second section that, just as Hugh of Lincoln's actions seemed to resemble iconoclasm more than piety, the medieval traditions to which Erasmus responded were in

² *Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis*, 2.170.

³ *Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis*, trans. Douie and Farmer, 2.170–1. See the brief discussions of this event by R.C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London: J. M. Dent, 1977), 28; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 255; and G.J.C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety From Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 28.

⁴ See the useful account by Helen L. Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic: Reformation Representations of the Medieval Church* (London: Routledge, 2005), esp. 85.

fact characterized by a strikingly varied repertoire of touch, which inflected both Erasmus's own scriptural hermeneutics, and attitudes towards holy objects—notably printed bibles—in the English Reformation. In the final section of this chapter, I explore the relationship between devotional touch and metaphorical expression. Beginning with the fifteenth-century anti-Lollard writings of Reginald Pecock, I then consider the touching of Christ through the sacraments in the work of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and his chaplain, the controversialist Thomas Becon. Becon's work attacks the medieval church for allowing the average believer too little opportunity to participate through touch. It is Cranmer's writings that reveal most richly the ways in which the careful deployment of ambiguously figurative language shaped the possible role of pious sacramental touch in reformed piety—a role that hinges upon the use of a stock English turn of phrase: 'as it were'.

I. 'HE ABHORRYD TO KYSSSE IT': RELICS OF DISGUST IN THE 1530S

Shaxton's 1538 injunctions for Salisbury not only proscribed the 'kissing and licking' of relics, but sought to discredit any veneration of these previously holy objects as 'intolerable superstition and abominable idolatry'. He described some of the relics which had come to his attention as 'stinking boots, mucky combs, ragged rochets, rotten girdles, pyld purses, great bullocks' horns, locks of hair, and filthy rags, gobbets of wood, under the name of the holy cross, and such pelfry beyond estimation'.⁵ This catalogue sought to rid these objects of any possible worthiness that they might once have possessed, and the listing of items in this helter-skelter fashion was a common tactic among English reformers: the holy singularity of such objects was to be abolished as they were dissolved into an indistinguishable stream of garbage.⁶ Shaxton sought not only to denounce relics, but to render them actively repulsive.

By dismissing these items as self-evidently worthless, Shaxton is suggesting that many relics previously subjected to reverent and tentative touch were in fact too disgusting to handle at all. There were several great relic collections in medieval England, notably the vial of Christ's blood at the Abbey of Hailes in Gloucestershire, and the vast collection housed at Reading Abbey, which housed the hand of Saint James, renowned for its ability to cure suffering through touch.⁷ Hand relics

⁵ Quoted by Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1988), 233.

⁶ See the discussion of this tactic, as employed by Tyndale, in James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 121–2.

⁷ On the relic of Christ's blood at Hailes, see Nicholas Vincent, *The Holy Blood: King Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 137–51; on its destruction, see Ethan H. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 162–96. The relics at Reading Abbey are explored by Denis Bethell, 'The Making of a Twelfth-Century Relic Collection', in *Popular Belief and Practice*, ed. G.J. Cuming and Derek Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 61–72. He describes the tactile veneration of the relics of St. Petroc there by King Henry I: 'he venerated the body, fondled the shrine, and kissed it . . . ' (66).

like the one snapped by Hugh of Lincoln, as well as hand-shaped reliquaries, seem to have been popular in the Middle Ages, partly due to their connection to touch as a pious and curative act.⁸ Shaxton's injunctions sought to sweep away this entire world of holy objects: 'To see 1538 as a reforming landmark', Margaret Aston observes, 'is to see it as some people did at the time'.⁹ As part of this accelerated program, an English translation of Erasmus's colloquy *Peregrinatio religionis ergo* appeared as *Ye Pylgremage of Pure Deuotyon*, almost certainly through the sponsorship of Thomas Cromwell. Erasmus's work contributed significantly to this wider attempt to construe relics as objects meriting not devotion, but disgust.¹⁰

The *Pylgremage* focuses on an attempt to visit and venerate the greatest of all the medieval collections, the relics of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury, which had proven able to cure those who touched them since the days immediately following the martyr's violent death in 1170, when monks and other bystanders pressed their fingers into his blood at the place of his murder, and carried away fragments of his brain and shattered skull.¹¹ The proliferation of relics in Canterbury Cathedral that pilgrims sought to approach, handle and kiss made the attack on Becket's shrine an assault not only on remains and on his reputation, but on the very notion of pious touch.¹² The destruction of the shrine and of the proliferating relics began 'in a desultory way' earlier in the decade, but the definitive dismantling occurred in September 1538, when twenty-six cartloads of gold and silver left Canterbury, an index of both the shrine's immense success and the financial motivations behind its destruction.¹³

Erasmus was certainly no iconoclast: in the original Latin version of the *Peregrinatio*, his fictional alter-ego, Ogygius, distances himself from those 'qui templa suis opibus spoliunt' ('who rob churches of their wealth'), such that the holy spaces 'sunt quaedam, nuda, sordida, stabulis equorum similiora quam templis' ('are bare and dirty . . . and more like stables than churches').¹⁴ This passage was silently excised from the 1538 translation of the colloquy, characteristic of the manner in

⁸ On hand relics and reliquaries see Cynthia Hahn, 'The Voices of Saints: Speaking Reliquaries', *Gesta* 37.1 (1997), 20–31.

⁹ Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 234.

¹⁰ Helen C. White, *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), 77–82, and Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 195–203, explore the emergence of this translation of Erasmus's work.

¹¹ See Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event, 1000–1215* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), Ch.5; Barrie Dobson, 'The Monks of Canterbury in the Later Middle Ages, 1220–1540', in *A History of Canterbury Cathedral*, ed. Patrick Collinson, Nigel Ramsay, and Margaret Sparks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 69–153; 69–70.

¹² On the management of sacred space in the medieval cathedral see M.F. Hearn, 'Canterbury Cathedral and the Cult of Becket', *The Art Bulletin* 76.1 (1994), 19–52.

¹³ Dobson, 'The Monks of Canterbury', 150.

¹⁴ Erasmus, Desiderius. *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera omnia emendatiora et avctiora, ad optimas editiones praecipue quas ipse Erasmus postremo curavit summa fide exacta, doctorumque virorum notis illustrata* (Lyon, 1703–6), 1.785 (henceforth abbreviated to *Opera Omnia*); *Collected Works of Erasmus*, general editor Manfred Hoffman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 40.644–5 (henceforth abbreviated to *CWE*). See Erwin Panofsky, 'Erasmus and the Visual Arts', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969), 200–27, on the range and variation of Erasmus's engagement with visual materials, esp. 207–8 on his opposition to iconoclasm.

which early English reformers adapted and appropriated the work of those who, like Erasmus, strove to remain within the bounds of orthodoxy even while criticizing the Church.¹⁵ Ogygius, accordingly, is no fiery iconoclast but rather a gentle and good natured sceptic, his doubts about the veracity of certain relics not preventing him from piously touching them: on an earlier visit to the shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham, one of England's most prominent pilgrimage sites, he was shown the bone of a human finger, 'whiche I kyssyd, & askyd whose relyques thay were'.¹⁶ The pious pilgrim kisses first and asks questions later. Only afterwards did he comment wryly that it seemed a little large to be the bone of Saint Peter, causing the other pilgrims to laugh, and the attendant to deny them access to the other relics.

Ogygius ultimately kisses various holy objects without cheeky comment of this sort, and is allowed to carry away a piece of a beam on which the Virgin stood, using it to cure a blind man on his journey home. When visiting Canterbury Ogygius once again goes about his osculatory business, kissing the sword point with which Becket was killed, the top of his silver-covered skull, and a plethora of sacred fragments: 'what a sort of bones be broght forthe, skulles, iawes, thethe, handes, fyngres, hole armes, whan we had worshipyd thaym all, we kyssyd thaym' (*Pylgremage* 170). Writing to Fausto Andrelini following his arrival in England in 1499, Erasmus described his surprise at the affection he received:

There is, besides, one custom, which cannot be praised enough. When you arrive anywhere, you are received with kisses on all sides, and when you take your leave they speed you on your way with kisses. The kisses are renewed when you come back . . . In a word, wherever you turn, the world is full of kisses.¹⁷

Est praeterea mos nunquam satis laudatus. Siue quo venias, omnium osculis excipieris; siue discedas aliquo, osculis dimitteris; redis, redduntur suauias . . . denique quocunque te moueas, suauiorum plena sunt omnia.¹⁸

The reserve for which the English eventually became famous was clearly yet to develop.¹⁹ In Canterbury Cathedral, Erasmus, in the figure of Ogygius, found

¹⁵ See John K. Yost, 'Taverner's Use of Erasmus and the Protestantization of English Humanism', *Renaissance Quarterly* 23.3 (1970), 266–76. Erasmus was not the only figure to be adapted for reformed purposes in this fashion: the description of false relics by Chaucer's Pardoner made its way into the reformist sermons of Hugh Latimer, and pseudo-Chaucerian works were printed as evidence of his proto-Protestantism. See Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 173; Daniel Knapp, 'The Relyk of a Seint: A Gloss on Chaucer's Pilgrimage', *English Literary History* 39.1 (1972), 1–26; John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 50.

¹⁶ Erasmus, *Ye Pylgremage of Pure Deuotyon*, in *The Earliest English Translations of Erasmus's Colloquia, 1536–1566*, ed. Henry de Vocht (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, Uystpruyst, 1928), 135. All further references to this work are to this edition and will appear parenthetically as *Pylgremage*.

¹⁷ *CWE*, 1.193.

¹⁸ *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906–58), 1.239.

¹⁹ See Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 163–4 for a discussion of increasingly alarmed attitudes to kissing in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including responses to Erasmus's description.

himself bestowing kisses scarcely less indiscriminate than those he had received from his English hosts on the bones of long-dead saints.

The subsequent pilgrimage to Canterbury that Ogygius describes is rendered less comfortable by the presence of one Gratian Pullus, almost certainly a representation of Erasmus's friend, the English humanist John Colet. It is Pullus who displays the rampant disgust for the touching of relics that Shaxton and other reformers hoped to inculcate in their congregations. 'Than was there broght forthe an arme whiche had yet the redde fleshe apon it', Ogygius states, but when it is offered to Pullus, 'he abhorryd to kysse it, a man myght se by hys countenance that he was nothyng well pleasyd' (*Pylgremage* 170–1). The fact that the arm still bears 'redde fleshe' is a sign of its miraculous longevity and thus proves its sacred status: but the very characteristic that should impress Pullus is what repulses him, producing disgust rather than wonder. Tellingly, the custodian swiftly removes the relics rather than trying to argue for their holiness. He seems aware that sacrality cannot be proven, or even argued for, in the face of a scepticism that insists upon seeing only rotting flesh. Ogygius, by contrast, continues to kiss even vile things unabated, including 'a napkyn full of swette bloody, wher with saynt Thomas wyped bothe hys nose and hys face, these thynges as monumentes of aunicyent sobernes we kissed gladly' (*Pylgremage* 172). He recognizes not only the sanctity of this potentially disgusting object but the 'aunicyent sobernes', the entire form of saintly life, to which it attests. Similarly, Ogygius's interlocutor Mendemus claims that he can understand pious people touching mundane and even disgusting objects 'by there owne fre wyll, or of a certene affection of holynes', if they take them as 'a token of sobre luyngye' (*Pylgremage*, 188). But this veneer of respect can scarcely survive Pullus's presence, and the response to these holy objects once again threatens to collapse into revulsion when the pilgrims are shown the next lot of relics:

Certayne torne ragges of linnen clothe, many hauynge yet remaynyng in them the token of the fylthe of the holy mannes nose. With thes (as they say) saynt Thomas dyd wype a way the swett of hys face or hys neke, ye fylthe of hys nose, or other lyke fylthynes with whiche mannes body dothe abownde. Then my companyon Gratian, yet ones agayn, got hym but smalle fauour. Unto hym an Englyshe man and of famylyare acquayntenance and besyde that, a man of no smalle authorite, the Prior gaff gentlyly one of the linnen ragges, thynkyng to haue gyven a gyfte very acceptable & pleasaunt. But Gratian there with lyttle pleasede and content, not with out an euydent synge of dyspleasure, toke one of them betwene hys fingers, and dysdaynyngly layd it down agayne, made a mock and a mow at it, after the maner of puppettes, for thys was his maner, if an thing lykede hym not, yt he thought worthy to be dyspysede. (*Pylgremage* 182–3)

William Ian Miller has claimed that 'The qualities of consistency and feel provide the bulk of our lexicon of disgust': it is the touching of disgusting things that locates us within 'the realm of the slimy, oozy, sticky, squishy, wiggly, and slithery'.²⁰ This

²⁰ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 60, 62. This is despite the fact that the etymology of disgust relates it more closely to the sense of taste, *gustus*. As we will see, taste was often grouped with touch as a sense relying upon immediate contact.

is the realm in which Pullus insists upon finding himself, precisely when he is invited to celebrate his immediate access to the very holiest things. Becket's relics did indeed include such grisly items as the hair-breeches that he wore at all times, creating open wounds which became infested with maggots: their very vileness was supposed to impress as proof of his holiness.²¹ Pullus, though, behaves as 'dysday-nyngly' as he would towards any other foul object that he 'thought worthy to be despysede'—it is no more or less disgusting because it is supposedly a sacred relic. He holds the filthy but holy rag 'betwene hys fingers' as if it were a dead rodent that could be handled only with the utmost distaste.²² Pullus's actions suggest that any reasonable person would be reluctant to touch disgusting relics at all, let alone handle them with even tentative piety. His attack continues on the journey back from Canterbury, when the pilgrims encounter poor men at the roadside offering a shoe, supposedly that of the saint, to be kissed in return for a small contribution. Pullus rejects the proffered shoe, asking 'Why doo they not lyke wyse gyue vs to kysse the spottel [spittle], & other fylthe & dyrt of the body?' (*Pylgremage*, 182). The Prior who guides them round the cathedral is well aware of the danger posed by this insistent disgust: rather than addressing Pullus's scepticism directly, 'as he is a man not at all dull wytted, [he] dyd dyssemble that matter', protecting both the decorum of the conversation and the sanctity of the relics. His carefully maintained silence tacitly acknowledges the deep fragility of this form of reverent touch, which depends upon the willingness of the congregation of believers to accept that the highest holiness can inhere in the lowest and the most debased objects. Once this communal willingness dissolves, that which was previously touched and kissed with reverence comes to be pinched and held at a distance between disdainful fingers.

II. 'HAS AMPLECTAMUR, HAS EXOSCULEMUR': ERASMUS AND THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE ORDINARY

This reading of Erasmus's translated colloquy might seem to support the narratives of Reformation disenchantment that I sketched in my introduction, according to which iconoclasm was a prominent way in which immanent significance was expunged from material objects: Joseph Leo Koerner writes that 'Protestant iconoclasm sought disenchantment—mere wood and nothing else'.²³ It is important to

²¹ See Knapp, 'The Relyk of a Seint', 6.

²² Moreover, the fact that it is Pullus's Englishness that makes him seem an appropriate recipient of the gift that he rejects indicates that his repugnance does not only threaten the power and validity of the shrine itself, but the broader network of relations of which it was a part. Becket's renown, and the fact that such a holy man, whose relics were so eagerly sought, came from England, were sources of enormous national pride. In the same way, as Vincent notes, earlier defenders of the blood of Christ housed in Westminster Abbey sought 'to emphasise the relic's patriotic English credentials' (*Holy Blood*, 91).

²³ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 104. Koerner persuasively argues that this was an impossible ideal and that the desired disenchantment remained necessarily incomplete.

remember, however, that this colloquy was translated as propaganda, to support the programme of reform implemented in 1538. Gratian Pullus's disgust was useful for this purpose precisely because it was such an extreme response to the relics with which he was presented. Disgust suggested the total inversion of the system of values within which relics were embedded, and from which they derived their meaning: where touching them had been deemed a privilege, it was now to be nauseously avoided. A disgusted refusal to touch was not simply a disenchanting attack on relics as objects, but a denial of the context and the history that granted them their meaning. This disenchanting disgust and disinclination piously to touch could not, though, be straightforwardly adopted as a reformed attitude. The mocking lists of 'unchristian pelfe' compiled by writers such as Shaxton, and the disgust of Gratian Pullus, may have tended towards the denial of any immanent holiness accessible to touch, but it was dangerous to carry this tendency to an extreme precisely because pious touch was so deeply woven into the fabric of Christian doctrine and practice. No one was more alert to this tension than Erasmus himself, whose writings both acknowledged the risks of sanctifying objects indiscriminately, and recognized the enduring importance of the pious handling of holy things. His writings were not only co-opted by English reformers, but bequeathed to them a sense of the difficulty—and perhaps the undesirability—of eliminating pious touch altogether.

By suggesting that many relics could prompt only disgust and revulsion, Gratian Pullus was taking aim at a central aspect, and a traditional strength, of the cult of relics. These relics were frequently identified as fragments of Christ himself, or of the Virgin Mary, or of the many saints. The early strictures against the *dismembratio* of holy bodies were gradually relaxed in the era of the early Church, as it became increasingly important for Christian communities to possess relics as sacred objects around which they could cohere and develop.²⁴ Theodoret of Cyprus, among others, argued that the power of sanctity was in no way mitigated by this process of fragmentation, proclaiming that 'in the divided body the grace survives undivided and the fragments, however small, have the same efficacy as the whole body'.²⁵ This, of course, was the basis on which Hugh of Lincoln could justify his act of violent fragmentation as pious. Not only could the bodies of these holy luminaries be fragmented *ad infinitum*, but holiness was understood as highly contagious, leaking from the sacred personage either in life or after death to affect any object with which he or she had come into contact. Any object which Christ or the Virgin Mary had supposedly touched, even in the most fleeting and incidental fashion,

²⁴ On the gradual rise of *dismembratio* in the early medieval period, see Snoek, *Medieval Piety From Relics to the Eucharist*, 13–17. For the importance of relics for forming Christian communities, see Peter R.L. Brown, *Relics and Social Status in the Age of Gregory of Tours* (Reading: University of Reading, 1977). On their social functions in Early Modern Europe, see Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Sacred and the Body Social in Sixteenth-Century Lyon', *Past and Present* 90 (1981), 40–70, esp. 52–4, and Simon Ditchfield, 'Martyrs on the Move: Relics as Vindicators of Local Diversity in the Tridentine Church', in *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 283–94.

²⁵ Quoted by Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 28.

could be venerated, and the traces that this contact had left behind frequently became sites of pilgrimage: 'Their impressions, which could be touched, signified that they had been physically present', Hans Belting observes, and in this way Christianity 'constantly affirmed the physical reality of its own beginnings'.²⁶ The pious believer could access through his or her own touch the traces which fleeting divine contact had left behind. As Peter Brown stresses, 'the experience of pilgrimage activates a yearning for intimate closeness', a yearning which was realized in what Georgia Frank calls 'a new tactile piety' among Christian pilgrims, who sought to touch statues, gather dirt from the holy places, and rub their fingers over inscriptions.²⁷ Early Christians frequently emphasized that a direct sensory encounter with the Holy Land was irreplaceable. Cyril, fourth-century Bishop of Jerusalem, scoffed at the power of narrative accounts compared with the experience itself: 'Others only hear, but we both see and touch'.²⁸

Historically, the contagiousness of the holy was one of the central ways in which the Church had spread and buttressed its authority. The potency of relics was such that any object, even the most revolting, might be imbued with sanctity if it came into contact with a holy body. In some cases, as with the hair trousers of Thomas Becket mentioned above, the vileness of an object was proof of its sanctity rather than a reason to reject it: even here holiness might be found, and this testified both to the humility of the saint, and to the magnificence of a God whose presence might be sought even in the lowest places. Disgust was far from foreign to the cult of relics: it was partly through the conscious overcoming of revulsion, the demand that the believer find value amidst the lowly and the horrible, that the power of the cult lay. This power—and the difficulty that early English reformers had in rejecting its logic altogether—lay in the fact that it reproduced *in nuce* the logic of the Incarnation. The fact that Christ assumed a human body, a body able to touch and be touched, seemed to validate physical contact as a way of accessing the presence of the divine.

As Erich Auerbach observes, the ordinariness of the Incarnation as a physical fact had significant implications not only for theology, but for literary and artistic

²⁶ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 57; 49–57 on this process of reaffirmation more broadly.

²⁷ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 87; Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 118–20. As Brown argues, however, this yearning was fulfilled with a deliberate ambiguity in which the divine was made concretely accessible without being fully attainable, remaining 'an art of closed surfaces': a pilgrimage involved a 'therapy of distance' in which the separation of the believer from the sacred was gradually lessened but never fully overcome, even in the moment of touch (*The Cult of the Saints*, 87).

²⁸ Cited by Robert Louis Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 119. Cyril's 'both see and touch' might seem to suggest, as Frank claims, that 'To see and touch were not exclusive activities but rather convergent senses' (*Memory of the Eyes*, 131–2). As Wilken notes, however, seeing could in some circumstances be taken to offer as intimate a contact with the holy as touch, but it could also seem insufficient: 'Seeing, however, is not enough: the pilgrim must touch, even kiss, the object of devotion' (Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, 231). I will resist throughout this book the hasty conflation of touch and sight: they seemed at different moments to be convergent, and utterly distinct.

representation. The New Testament, he suggests, shattered classical notions of the decorous division of styles, and involved 'entering into the random everyday depths of popular life, as well as readiness to take seriously whatever is encountered there'.²⁹ The Incarnation made possible what I propose to call, loosely adapting a phrase from St. Augustine, 'the sanctification of the ordinary'.³⁰ This sanctification potentially transformed the world of physical objects, any of which, as in the case of relics, might become a vessel for holiness: 'in the Christian context', Auerbach observes elsewhere, 'humble everyday things, money matters or a cup of cold water, lose their baseness and become compatible with the lofty style; and conversely . . . the highest mysteries of the faith may be set forth in the words of the lowly style which everyone can understand'.³¹ This implicated human actions as well as objects: even vulgar verbs such as *manducare* ('to gobble with much chewing') and *eructare* ('to belch'), Auerbach observes, 'entered into another sphere and took on a new dignity'.³² The logic of the Incarnation made possible a similar dignifying of the simple act of touching. Even the lowest object might become imbued with a contagious holiness derived ultimately from contact with Christ; even the simplest, most mundane or fleeting act of human touch might potentially grant access to this holiness. Though they would surely have resisted this conclusion fiercely, when early reformers took aim at the supposedly disgusting items comprising the 'universe of pious objects' and at the servile acts of kissing and touching that contributed to traditional forms of worship, they risked assaulting the humble and humbling logic of the Incarnation itself.³³

No one was more attuned to this problem than Erasmus, to whose colloquy the reformers turned for ammunition. Even the *Peregrinatio Religionis Ergo*, as we have seen, balanced Gratian Pullus's disgusted mockery with Ogygius's tolerant and amused scepticism. Erasmus was an ambiguous forbear for proponents of reform because he laid bare the abuses to which the cult of relics was open, while insisting too upon the sanctification of the ordinary and the possible validity of pious touch. The difficulty that faced reformers as they attacked the pious touching of relics was acutely observed by Erasmus's friend and collaborator, Thomas More, in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. More, like Erasmus, was only too willing to denounce the faults and excesses of the established Church and sought to restrain and reduce

²⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 44.

³⁰ In *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione et de Baptismo Parvulorum*, 2.42, Augustine refers to 'ista ciborum sanctificatio' (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* vol. 60, ed. Carolus F. Urba and Josephus Zycha [Leipzig: F. Tempsky, 1913], 113). This is rendered by a modern translator as 'the sanctification of ordinary food' in the Mass (*Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff [New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1887], 61). While Augustine does not refer explicitly to the food's ordinariness, 'cibus' brings strong connotations of the everyday—it often denotes rations or sustenance, food that is necessary for life rather than pleasure—and so retaining this translation does not seem opposed to his original meaning.

³¹ Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 37.

³² Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public*, trans. Manheim, 58.

³³ I borrow this phrase from Jean Pirotte, 'The Universe of Pious Objects: Use and Evolution of the Pious Object from the 16th to the 20th Century', *Lumen Vitae* 41.4 (1986), 410–25.

them from within, but he considered the reformers' desire for massive and immediate change to be not only objectionable but self-contradictory. Reformers might dismiss pious touch, but they continued to venerate the book of scripture as a holy object, much as relics of the saints and images of Christ had hitherto been venerated:

And then if it be, as it is, in deed well and virtuously done devoutly to kiss a book in which Christ's life, and his death, is expressed by writing, why should it be evil done reverently to kiss the images by which Christ's life and his passion be represented by scripture and painting?³⁴

The reformers might claim that they sought to replace previous emphases upon holy objects and images with a religion of the Word, but the Word too needed to be encapsulated in physical form, and the English bibles which had begun to appear and circulate remained objects of reverent touch, not only inward devotion. As Alexandra Walsham has shown, the widespread care and attention lavished upon printed bibles frequently blurred the distinction between the traditional forms of worship that had supposedly been repudiated, and the emergent religion of the Word, which proved persistently tricky to disembodify.³⁵ In some instances, the scriptures seemed directly to replace relics and to assume their role. In Germany, as Robert Scribner observes, bibles were often used for protective purposes, being placed under a bed or pillow, while a recommended cure for a palsy sufferer in Protestant Baden was to lay a bible face down on the sufferer, open at the page describing Christ's cure of an epileptic.³⁶ Contact with these printed pages takes on the power of the curative divine touch that they describe.

Erasmus developed a sophisticated and ambivalent treatment of pious touch elsewhere in his writings, which recognized the risk of indiscriminate and disgusting touch that he anatomized in the *Peregrinatio* while acknowledging the necessary centrality of touch to the logic of the Incarnation. Erasmus claimed that the existence of scripture obviated the need to touch Christ himself, but he tacitly acknowledged that the *desire* for such touch, while misplaced, is inevitable and even laudable. In the letter to William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, that appeared as the dedicatory preface to his magnificent edition of the works of Jerome in 1516, Erasmus writes,

³⁴ Thomas More, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, vol. 6f, ed. Thomas M.C. Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour and Richard C. Marius (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 359.

³⁵ Walsham, 'Jewels for Gentlewomen: Religious Books as Artifacts in Late Medieval and Early Modern England', in *The Church and the Book*, ed. R.N. Swanson (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), 123–42. 'Protestant Bibles and Prayer Books', Walsham notes, 'came close to being regarded as sacred artifacts' ('Jewels for Gentlewomen', 124; see also her discussion in 'Skeletons in the Cupboard: Relics after the English Reformation', in *Relics and Remains*, ed. Alexandra Walsham [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 121–44). Robert Scribner acknowledges in passing the importance of 'touching the prayer-book, which as a sacral object had a tactile quality of its own' (*Religion and Culture in Germany (1400–1800)* [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 93). See also the excellent account by Brian Cummings, 'Iconoclasm and Bibliophilia in the English Reformations, 1521–1558', in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 185–206, esp. 191–4, 202, and Lucy Razzall, 'A Good Booke is the Pretious Life-Blood of a Master-Spirit': Recollecting Relics in Post-Reformation English Writing', *Journal of the Northern Renaissance* 2.1 (2010), 93–110.

³⁶ See R.W. Scribner, 'The Impact of the Reformation on Daily Life', in *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), 328.

Equidem vt non aspernor simplicem vulgi pietatem, ita non possum non mirari tam praeposterum multitudinis iudicium. Calceos sanctorum et sudariola mucco sordentia exosculamur, et eorumdem libros, sanctissimas et efficacissimas diuorum reliquias, neglectos iacere patimur.³⁷

For my part, far as I am from despising the simple piety of common folk, I cannot but wonder at the absurd judgment of the multitude. The slippers of the saints and their drivell-stained napkins we put to our lips, and the books they wrote, the most sacred and most powerful relics of those holy men, we leave to lie neglected.³⁸

This could be the voice of Gratian Pullus, denouncing relics as objects of untouchable disgust—they are ‘sudariola mucco sordentia’—and Erasmus makes clear the close relationship between printed books and holy fragments with which reformers were later to struggle: books are ‘sanctissimas et efficacissimas diuorum reliquias’, perhaps holier even than fragments of the saints themselves, and more worthy of our reverent kissing. A similar polemical voice can be heard in the fifth Canon of his earlier *Enchiridion militis christiani* (1503), where Erasmus specifically and extensively insists that reverent acts of touch are insufficient and empty when they occur in isolation from inner transformation. ‘You venerate the saints, and you take great pleasure in touching their relics’, he writes, ‘But you disregard their greatest legacy, the example of a blameless life’.³⁹ (‘Veneraris Divos, gaudes eorum reliquias contingere. Sed contemnis, quod illi reliquerunt optimum, puta, vitae purae exempla.’)⁴⁰ Later in the same work, reverent touch comes close to being disavowed altogether: ‘Maximo majus esse credis’, Erasmus writes,

quod crucis portiunculam domi possides. At illud nihil est prae illo, si mysterium crucis in pectore conditum gestes. Alioqui si ista faciunt religiosum, quid religiosius Judaeis? quorum impiissimi plerique Jesum tamen in carne viventem oculis viderunt, auribus audierunt, manibus conrectarunt: quid Juda felicius, qui ore os divinum pressit?⁴¹

You think it an immense privilege to have a tiny particle of the cross in your home. But that is nothing compared to carrying about in your heart the mystery of the cross. If such things constitute religion, who could be more religious than the Jews? Even the most impious among them saw Jesus living in the flesh with their own eyes, heard him with their own ears and touched him with their own hands. Who is more fortunate than Judas, who pressed his lips upon the divine mouth?⁴²

The connection between mechanically ritualistic touch and Renaissance conceptions of Jewishness—which we will encounter again in the next chapter—allows Erasmus to turn on its head the fact that Christ was routinely accessible to touch prior to his crucifixion. According to the logic of the contagiousness of the holy, the most fleeting and inadvertent touch from the incarnated Christ could render even a base object worthy of veneration. Here, however, Erasmus uses the fact that Christ was touched indiscriminately to argue for the insignificance of this sort of contact. He focuses upon Judas’s kiss of betrayal—the moment in which the kiss of peace

³⁷ *Opus Epistolarum*, ed. Allen, 2.213.

³⁸ *CWE*, 3.257.

³⁹ *CWE*, 66.71.

⁴⁰ *Opera Omnia*, 5.31.

⁴¹ *Opera Omnia*, 5.32.

⁴² *CWE*, 66.73.

mandated by Christ was forever opened to corruption—as evidence that the touching of the divine is not a sufficient spiritual good in and of itself.

For all these forceful denouncements, however, it is possible to identify in these Erasmian texts a persistent uncertainty, which he bequeathed to English reformers, regarding the extent to which pious touch can simply be dismissed or abolished. In the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus states that

Summa veneratione complecteris cineres Pauli, non damno, si sibi constat tua Religio. Si veneraris cinerem mutum & mortuum, & vivam illius imaginem adhuc loquentem, ac tamquam spirantem, quae in illius litteris superest, negligis, nonne praepostera est tua Religio? Adoras ossa Pauli in loculis condita, non adoras mentem Pauli, in scriptis latentem?⁴³

With great veneration you revere the ashes of Paul, which I do not condemn, if your religion is consistent with your devotion. If you venerate mute and dead ashes and ignore his living image still speaking and breathing, as it were, in his writings, is not your religion utterly absurd? You worship the bones of Paul preserved in a relic casket, but do not worship the mind of Paul hidden away in his writings?⁴⁴

Here, Erasmus's denunciation of these absurdities is mitigated by his interjection, 'non damno, si sibi constat tua Religio'. This suggests that tactile devotion is not necessarily or intrinsically worthless, but is worthy only when it gives expression to a transformed inner state—that is, when pious touch gives physical embodiment to a reverent attentiveness to the content of scripture. Erasmus calls not for the abandonment of external devotion expressed through touch, but for the concord of inner and outer. The language in which Erasmus frames his advice to a 'man of faith' is telling: 'embrace his writings, so that with the firm belief that God can do all things you may learn to love him above all else'⁴⁵ ('tu fidelis libros illius amplectere, ut qui non diffidis Deum omnia posse, discas illum super omnia diligere').⁴⁶ Such a believer is to leave the physical embracing of relics, and only 'amplectere' the writings of Paul—it is deliberately unclear whether this means that a believer should embrace Pauline teachings through pious actions, or actually clasp and revere the printed body of scripture. As long as the first occurs, then the second might legitimately follow.

It was in the *Paraclesis* or 'Exhortation' that he prefaced to his translation of the New Testament in 1516 that Erasmus made his most sophisticated attempt to intertwine various forms of tactile devotion—those that were to be denounced, and those which might piously be retained.⁴⁷ As in the *Enchiridion*, he contrasts the reverence for relics and the remaining traces of the divine presence on Earth with the relative neglect of the scriptures themselves:

⁴³ *Opera Omnia*, 5.31. ⁴⁴ *CWE*, 66.72.

⁴⁵ *CWE*, 66.72. ⁴⁶ *Opera Omnia*, 5.31.

⁴⁷ I am indebted throughout this discussion to James Kearney, *The Incarnate Text: Imagining the Book in Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 54–63, who discusses several of these texts, though I differ from him in denying that Erasmus finally rests comfortably with the displacement of physical by textual presence.

Si quis ostendat Christi pedibus impressum vestigium, quam procumbimus christiani, quam adoremus? At cur non potius vivam illius et spirantem imaginem in hisce veneramur libris? Si quis Christi tunicam exhibeat, quo non terrarum provolaturi simus, ut eam osculari liceat? Atqui ut totam illius supellectilem proferas, nihil erit, quod Christum expressius ac verius repraesentet, quam evangelicae literae?⁴⁸

If anyone shows us the footprints of Christ, in what manner, as Christians, do we prostrate ourselves, how we adore them! But why do we not venerate instead the living and breathing likeness of Him in these books? If anyone displays the tunic of Christ, to what corner of the earth shall we not hasten that we may kiss it? Yet were you to bring forth His entire wardrobe, it would contain not manifest Christ more clearly and truly than the Gospel writings.⁴⁹

The inclusive use of the first person plural suggests that Erasmus includes himself with those who would rush to kiss the relics of Christ: ‘provolaturi *simus*’, ‘we would hurry to the ends of the earth to kiss it’. His reluctance entirely to reject such modes of devotion emerges from his intense awareness of the incarnational sanctification of the ordinary: it is because Christ was available to be touched routinely in his lifetime, because the highest divinity deigned to be handled in this fashion, that pious Christians cannot entirely disregard ordinary touch. The everyday gestures with which believers seek to revere God—the kissing and touching of relics, images, holy books—are not rejected by Erasmus, but he does insist that they cannot be viable unless they form only one component of an integrated and transformed form of piety, based on the congruence of inner and outer. The embracing of Pauline teaching with the mind can justifiably be accompanied by the actual embracing of scripture, but the latter is meaningless without the former. As Brian Cummings and James Kearney have discussed, Erasmus comes startlingly close in this text to disavowing the corporeal and sensory presence of Christ altogether in favour of his scriptural presence: he claims of Christ’s presence in the scriptures that ‘totum ita praesentem reddunt, ut minus visurus sis, si coram oculis conspicias’—he is ‘so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon him with your very eyes’.⁵⁰ This is indeed, as Cummings states, a ‘startling principle’, a dazzling and even dangerous claim, in which textual presence seems not to accompany but entirely to supplant physical presence.⁵¹ This apparent textualization of Christ must, however, be balanced against the language which Erasmus employs in the *Paraclesis* to describe the ideal ongoing relationship of the individual believer to the scriptures, and to God: ‘felix ille’, he claims,

⁴⁸ Erasmus, ‘Paraclesis’, in *Les Préfaces au Novum Testamentum (1516)*, ed. Yves Delègue and J.P. Gillet (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1990), 88.

⁴⁹ Erasmus, ‘Paraclesis’, in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 105–6.

⁵⁰ Erasmus, ‘Paraclesis’, ed. Delègue and Gillet, 88; ‘Paraclesis’, ed. Olin, 106.

⁵¹ Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 105–6; see also Kearney, *The Incarnate Text*, 56.