

Touche-Touche

Berlin, March 2021

I

In French, to be “à *touche-touche*” means to be very close to one another in such a way that everybody is touching. The doubling of the word is faithful to the reciprocity or the movement of contact in a dense crowd, or, in another sense, to the proximity of two persons who, very close to one another, are closer than what decorum would allow. Furthermore, the expression “à *touche-touche*” has an erotic connotation which is particularly applicable when it references human beings and not merely vehicles in a traffic jam. English uses an expression, *to be on top of the other*, that is more acrobatic than erotic, depending, of course, on the manner in which you interpret the word “top” (the French also say “*être les uns sur les autres*,” which, despite the literal proximity, has far less erotic resonance). While one can also say *bumper to bumper* which contains the notion of collision and of a fender, colloquial and familiar forms of English also use *touchy touchy* which carries a significantly more erotic and emotive value. German too plays with doubling, *dicht an dicht* which literally means tightly together.

How is one to understand the doubling of French, English and German – all of which have an approximative correlation to the Xhosa expression *pata pata*, first popularised by Miriam Makeba in the ubiquitous song (and which Angelique Kidjo recently reprised, singing, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, of the interdiction against *pata pata*)? It is possible that there are further equivalents in other languages.

We are quite familiar with expressions which repeat the name of a part of the body where touching occurs (side to side, cheek to cheek, etc.) and this is taken to mean two people who are touching each other. However, the doubling of “*touche-touche*” redoubles the contact itself. In fact, it duplicates or replicates what in and of itself englobes or engages in a redoubling. One cannot touch without being touched; as soon as this act of touch concerns living beings, there is reciprocity which can be either attractive (a caress) or repulsive (to recoil). This duality concentrates, or rather, puts into play, the ambivalence of contact, that is to say of proximity and distancing, of attraction and repulsion. Of this ambivalence, the most intimate expression is the duality of absorption and rejection which characterises the most elementary behaviour of a living organism, behaviour which is identical to that of life itself: the absorption of that which sustains it, and the rejection of that which threatens it.

Touch is different to the other senses – all while exposing their common ground – in so far as we ourselves are touched. Sight does not feel seen, at least at first blush, because in the image, or in the spectacle that I see, I can see myself seeing, and I know, or I can tangentially feel that I, myself, am seen or at the very least exposed to the sight of others. With touch, there is, in a way, an immediate reversibility: I touch a stone and its coarseness touches me. Were I to touch a living being, its life itself is what touches me in turn, and not merely its biological life, but life in all the fullness of the concept, touching me with all the magnitude and scope of possibility to either accept or to refuse the touch.

If we are to learn more about this duplication, in which, evidently, the relationship between the self and the other is at stake, we merely have to consider the importance of the taboos

which surround touching. A single phrase from Freud will suffice: “The sacred is obviously something that must not be touched.”¹ Whether or not “the sacred” seems to be a hollow notion, we are nevertheless bound to recognise the existence of various taboos regarding touch which testify, at the very least, to the rules regulating courtesy across all cultures.

Of course, when faced with an interdiction, we are also faced with the possibility of transgression, and of desirous transgression at that. For transgression cannot merely be reduced to a violent gesture; the attraction that touch holds is not merely sexual and can be reproduced in many divergent behaviours. That which eternally characterises touch, or that which, in French, we call “*une touche*” (an artist’s touch, a pianist’s touch, or a writer’s touch, for example, among other meanings in both a figurative and a more vulgarly seductive sense), is an impact – *albeit* slight – and an upheaval. To touch is also to move, to stir, to agitate. “*Touche-touche*” is the call and the response to a thrust, a jolt, a disturbance, a disruption.

II

In order to broach what this touches on, we’re going to turn to some German words.

Rühren, Berühren, Aufruhr: German is able to assemble in the same semantic family (*ruhr*) three notions which correspond in French to *bouger* (move), or to *agiter* (agitate), *toucher* (touch) and *soulèvement* (upheaval), encompassing each of these terms according to the diversity of their possible meanings. Both *bouger* and *agiter* can be taken in both physical and moral terms, as can *toucher* and *soulèvement* where the latter term is particularly orientated, in its moral sense, towards a more socio-political meaning. (It should be mentioned here that *dicht an dicht*, to which I made an earlier reference, does not contain in and of itself the idea of touch but rather that of density or compression which is, of course, the result of touch).

This semantic family is that of movement which is neither localised (*Bewegung* in German signifying movement or shift), nor transformational (*Verwandlung* in German signifies metamorphosis, being indicative of creation and corruption, growth and decline), but rather movement which we can, at the very least, designate as being “emotional,” deploying and drawing on the word *motion* which is the closest transcription of the Latin *motus*, drawn from the verb *movere* and from which the French words *mouvoir* (propel) and *émouvoir* (affect) stem.

Touch, in French, seems to be a stranger to the semantic terms of movement, whereas, in German, it shares a much greater proximity. *Toucher, tact* (feeling in English), or *contact* seem to arise out of a more static than dynamic order. While we are, of course, aware that movement is required in order to touch, that one needs to “come into contact” so to speak, touch itself nevertheless seems to be indicative of a state of being rather than a movement, and the contact it evokes is indicative of a firm adhesion rather than a mobile process.

Yet French is also well aware of the mobile, motile, and dynamic notion that is inherent in touch: this notion is present when we speak of a person or a work of art that “touches” us, or

¹ Moses and Monotheism (1939, 154) [SE 23:120].

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when we evoke, as I already have, a pianist's or a painter's "touch," or even that of divine grace itself.

Touch upends and moves. As soon as my body approaches that of another – whether the other is inert, of wood, of stone or of metal – I move the other – even if it is to an infinitesimal degree – and I move away from it, in a sense I withdraw. Touch acts and reacts at once. Touch attracts and rejects. Touch pushes and pushes back, impulse and repulse, interior and exterior rhythm, ingestion and rejection, of what is fit and unfit.

Touch beings when two bodies diverge and are distinguished one from the other. The child leaves the belly of his mother and becomes, in turn, a belly himself, capable of consuming and discharging. He suckles on the breast of his mother, or on his thumb. Suckling is the first act of touch. And while suckling admittedly imbibes the maternal milk, it also does so much more; it encloses the body of the other in the mouth of the child. It establishes or re-establishes a contact that reverses the roles of mother and child: the infant that was once contained in the womb now, in turn, envelops the body wherein it once lay. But the child does not enclose the body of the mother, holding, on the contrary, the body before it. The movement of the child's lips ceaselessly renew the alternation between proximity and distance, of penetration and of withdrawal, that preceded the descent of the child out of the womb and into the world, a new body at last ready to separate itself.

In separating itself, he apprehends the new possibility of which he knew only the outline: the possibility of interactions and of contact. When he is born, the child separates himself. But he remains that which floats in an element, in a world within which everything is in relation to everything else, wherein everything leans toward and leans away from everything else – but now in accordance with the multiple conceits of all of the within/without of disparate bodies.

III

Only a distinct body can touch. Only such a body can separate, in its entirety, its touch from its other senses, that is to say that it can construe touch as an autonomous sense that, while traversing all of the other senses, is nevertheless distinguished from, in the guise of a certain common sense, of logic, or of passion, impulse, and motion.

Where he was once immersed, floating and enveloped in every sense, in the relative indistinction of his within and his without, tendentially confused in the common balance of two bodies, where he once suckled on his own thumb, and from whence he detached himself, emerging outside, he now finds himself faced with the exterior. That is to say that he is no longer inside the inside, in a plane of immanence. In the truest sense of the word, he has transcended: he has moved beyond the being in itself.

His mobility departs from his suspension, the nearly zero gravity and viscous indifference to direction. It becomes true movement, in accordance with the distanciation of other bodies. This mobility opens him up to contact, contact which does not seek to restore an indistinction,

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rather it celebrates difference, proclaiming the advent of the encounter, that is to say, more precisely, of contact.

Contact does not revoke separation, and indeed works to the contrary. All of the forms of logic – metaphysical or psychological – that lay the groundwork of the primordial attraction to a supposedly lost unity and the necessity to resolve oneself to the consequently forced separation – of subdivision, of gender divisions, of the plurality of senses, of allures and of aspects – are logics that arise out of a form of monotheism or out of a morbid monoideism. They are *patho-logical*, but they are neither the logic of *pathos* nor of *dunamis tou pathein*, which is the ability to receive, the capacity to be affected. Yet affection is above all passion and the movement of passion. Of which the nature is, itself, “to touch”: to be touched, to touch in turn, to reflexively feel the touch that comes from outside, from the one who touches me and the one through whom I touch.

To be affected does not mean that an erstwhile subject comes, in a given circumstance, to receive an affection. How can one receive without being capable of doing so? But this capacity itself has to be a capacity in the full sense of the word: the power to receive. To be capable of reception means to have already received, to be affectable. To be affected requires one to have already been affected, to always already have been affected. This is why the outside has always already existed and why an opening towards it has, in turn, always already existed. An opening that is outstretched, straining towards the outside; a desire for the exterior such that it can only have been preceded by the outside, without which it would be unable to desire. The subject is neither prior nor exterior to the outside, it – if, at the very least we wish to speak of the subject – is rather, as we would say in French, “subject to the outside”: subject to the other, subject to the other’s touch. What begins as a flotation, which becomes, in this vase that is the amnion wherein the homunculus bathes, a friction, is the touch of the outside.

When the vase allows its contents to be poured out, water is spilt, and the little one emerges, drenched. His whole body – detached and entire for the first time – carries the imprint that becomes his skin, which melts away into the outline of his skin, but which renders his skin eternally capable of receiving from outside, to be bathed and cradled, rocked by the swells of the outside.

Thus, touch is first and foremost this rocking, this flotation and this friction, which suckling repeats, reviving and putting once again into play the desire to feel oneself touched and to touch, the desire to experience oneself in contact with the outside. More than “in contact” but contact itself. My whole being is contact. My whole being is touched/touching – and this is what “*touche-touche*” says in a playful manner. That is to say, at once enclosed in myself and open to the outside, open through my orifices, my ears, my eyes, my mouth, my nostrils – and, of course, through all of the ingestive and digestive channels, like those of my humours, my sweat and my sexual juices. The skin, however, sets out to extend an envelope around these openings, these entries-and-exits, an envelope which, at the same time in which it locates and specifies them, develops for itself the capacity to be affected and to desire affect. Each sense specialises affection in accordance with a distinct mode of organisation – seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting – but the skin ceaselessly connects the other senses among

themselves without confusing them. The skin which envelops is itself merely the development of the general exposition of the entire circumscription of the body (of its detachment as a whole) which has been brought into play. In French, one can say *ex-peau-sition* by way of a play on words. In German one could playfully say *Aus-sein/Haut-sein*.

Yet, in any language, the exposition (or exhibition) is what matters most, the *Ausstellen* that is the body as well as its *Ausdehnen* ("Psyche is extended [*Psyche ist ausgedehnt*]," wrote Freud) does not consist of a fixed span, laid out as on the picture railing of an art gallery. On the contrary, the exhibition can only be understood as permanent movement, an undulation, an unfurling and refolding, an eternally changing allure in contact with all the other bodies – that is to say, in contact with all who approach and to whom we approach.

IV

Since Aristotle, we have known that the identity of the sensible and of sensing in feeling (which is also thus a being-sensed), similar to the identity of the thinkable and of thought in the act of thinking, implies, at the focal point of the sensation – in vision, audition, olfaction, gustation and contact – a form of counter-penetration of both in the act and as an act. There is a *touche touche* of the senses. The act of sensation, that is to say, the Aristotelian concept of the act – *energeia* – constitutes actual effectiveness, the event being produced by the sensation. The soul which feels is itself sensible, and thus can feel itself as it feels. Nowhere is this clearer, nowhere is this more tangible, than in the sense of touch: neither the eye, nor the ear, nor the nose, or the mouth feel themselves feeling with the intensity and the precision of the skin. Image, sound, odour, and taste remain, in some sense, distinct from the sensory organs even if they fully occupy them. This is, no doubt, true for touch as well when I represent the touched substance to myself (by thinking, "this fabric is rough" or "this skin is cool"). But, and despite the fact that this is nearly impossible to determine, we could say that representation is less immediate when we touch. With the other senses, representation is presented more immediately, although in a different manner according to the particular instance (an image is concurrent with its vision, a melody and a timbre with their audition, or perhaps a bit less, flavour is even further removed from the sense of taste and smell even more from the sense of smell such that it is of the order of the sense of touch).

This identity of touching and touched can only be understood as the identity of a movement, a motion and an emotion. This is precisely in so far as it is not the identity of a representation and the object that it represents, it is closer to sameness than to an identity itself. Cool skin is not truly that – "cool skin" – without the gesture of my touching hand. But it "is" my gesture, it is my hand, and my hand comes across because it is my hand that is its contact or caress (in reality, and given the exception of medical contact, no contact with the skin is exempt from a potential caress). Motion and emotion – which are themselves a single thing – envelop the act, the sensitive *energeia*. And this *energeia* is nothing less than the effectiveness of the contact, which is the effectiveness of a coming towards and a reception, a double trait which is exchanged: I come towards the skin that welcomes me, my skin welcomes the arrival that the welcoming reception of the other is for itself. The comings of one and of the other converge in a point of quasi confusion, and this point is not immobile: it is merely the image of a "point" and its reality is motion and emotion, traction and attraction, while at the same time being uninterrupted variation, fluctuation. It is at once vibration, a palpation of one

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against the other, swaying to and fro, one against another. And for this reason, it is an “identity” which doesn’t identify itself even though it gathers one to another and shares their presence in a common coming.

Such is the *rühren* of touch. The liquid movement of a rhythm, a swell, an undertow of *existence*, which is “being outside” because the outside is the inflection, the curve, the conceit of this flotation and this friction by which my body submerges itself among all the other bodies and my skin alongside all other skins. Touch is to seek to be touched and to be touched: *touche-touche*.

The movement of touch is thus not that which is designated by another term – *tasten* in German, *tâter* in French (which also has *palper*) – which might seem more appropriate. *Tâter* [pat down, examination by touch, palpate], is, in fact, a cognitive behaviour and not an affective behaviour. We palpate [*tâte*] in order to recognise or to appraise a surface, a consistency, to estimate a density or a flexibility. But in doing so, we do not caress. Touch caresses, it is fundamentally a caress, which is to say that it reflects the desire and the pleasure to come as close as possible to a skin – human, animal, textile, or mineral, etc. – and to make use of this proximity (this superlative or extreme approach), to play one skin against another.

This game resumes the rhythm that is quite essentially and originally the game of the outside/inside – the only game there is, perhaps, if all games consist of taking and of leaving a space, of opening up breaches, filling and emptying sectors, boxes and schedules. Touch is a movement in so far as it is rhythmic and not a procedure or an exploratory process. Here, “approach” does not amount to the entry into a given area, and “contact” does not amount to the establishment of an exchange (of signs, signals, information, objects or services). Approach should be taken as a superlative movement of proximity that cannot cancel itself out in an identity given that the “closest” must nevertheless remain distant, infinitesimally distant, in order to remain what it is. Contact should be taken as an upheaval – which itself is superlative, extreme – of sensitivity, that is to say of the very thing that gives us the capacity to receive, to be touched. (*Rühren* can also mean to play an instrument, as in French, we used to say “*toucher le piano*” [touch the piano]: it’s always a question of waking, upheaval and animation).

This game and this tactile rhythm are the *rühen* of a desire. Perhaps of desire itself, for is there a desire that does not desire to be touched if touching gives the pleasure of desire itself, the pleasure of desire which reaches out towards the proximity of relations in so far as relations are nothing other than the sharing of an inside and an outside which are put into play?

The first, and what was once the most widespread meaning of *ruhr* was that of sexual pleasure in love and sex. The rhythmic movement and overflow, the gushing forth that is not only of sexual fluids but of entire bodies spilling one against another, one into another, one moving away from the other only to resume and to return once more to each other in a succession of waves that they become through one another, does not belong to any process of action or of cognition (let us not speak here of the finality that is creation or generation – which opens

another body; for pleasure is without finality or rather has none other than that which suspends it unto itself in the overflow which exhausts and opens it to the beyond).

We understand that touch corresponds, as we have said, to the most widespread of taboos. We know quite well until where we are permitted to touch, even if it is merely the hand of the other, to say nothing of the rest of his body and up until where and how we are free to kiss, to squeeze, to caress; until where the *touche-touche* is admissible, a game before it begins to affect and trouble use.

We have quite solid knowledge of the degree to which touch engages one's whole being – and how, in consequence, being is strictly indissociable from relations. There is not – absolutely not – a “being” followed by contact. There is “to be,” the verb whose act and transitivity are formed in relation(s) and can only be formed in this manner. Descartes’ “I am” does not contravene this necessity, no more than Kant’s “I,” or that of Fichte or Husserl, or Heidegger’s “*Jemein*.” Each and every “I” is and is none other than the act of its relation reaching out into the world – towards that which we name the “other” and whose alterity is revealed in touch or as touch.

For touch – which did not merely accidentally give its name to a mode of divine intervention in the soul – as motion and emotion of the other consists at once of a point of contact and in the reception or the acceptation of its pressure and its reach. It grazes and pricks, pierces and seizes, indiscernibly and in a vibration within which it immediately withdraws. Touch is already its own trace, that is to say that touch erases itself as a mark, a punctual imprint all while propagating its effects of motion and emotion. *Touche-touche*: it touches and moves away in touching itself.

Saint John of the Cross speaks of “these touches [that] are all touches of union, which is wrought passively in the soul” and he specifies “understanding, with its activity, would very easily disturb and ruin the effect of these delicate manifestations of knowledge, which are a delectable supernatural intelligence that human nature cannot attain or apprehend by its own efforts, but only by remaining in a state of receptivity.” An understanding that is not “active” is a passive understanding, the taste of a flavour, the feeling of a touch. Mystics do not have the monopoly regarding these metaphors - if at the very least they are metaphors. A painter’s “touch,” a pianist’s “touch” (and the keys [*touches*] of a piano and why not those of a computer keyboard), the “touch” that we can add (“of fantasy,” “of melancholy” etc.) to a décor or to a text, as well as the erotic “touch”² all share the same punctual and vibratory qualities.

For it is never merely a metaphor. It is always a sensible reality, thus material and vibratory. When the soul quivers, it truly is quivering, as we could say of water at boiling point. What we call the “soul” in everyday language is nothing more than the waking and welcoming – both mixed – of motion/emotion. The soul is the body that has been touched, vibrating receptive and responsive. Its response is the sharing of touch, its rise towards it. It rises up, reflecting as the German *Aufbruch* suggests, and as I pointed out, a socio-political uprising.

² In French “*touche moi [touch me]*,” “*tu te touches [you are touching yourself]*,” taken in an absolute sense are erotic words.

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There is an insurrection, in fact – and sometimes an erection – in the motions of touch. A body rebels against its own enclosure, against being locked up within itself, and against its own entropy. It rises up against its death. Perhaps it is not impossible that touch, even the touch of death, triggers a last upheaval, at once heartrending and abandoning.

Whether it concerns the arrival of the other (whether him or her), or the absolute alterity of death, it is the body that opens itself up to the outside. This is its pure act: just as Aristotle's prime mover is pure *energeia* in which no "potency" (*dunamis*) remains, that is to say that there is nothing to expect, nothing that could come from the outside, similarly, when I am *touched*, I have nothing to expect: touch is all act in its mobile vibratory and sudden nature. Likewise, for Aristotle's god, this act is accompanied by its own excess which is its climax, the pleasure which is the flower within which the act bursts forth – light or darkness, always an abyss towards which the *ruhr* and the *berühren* – the touch of the touch – gushes or flows forth.

Jean Luc Nancy