Touch, Not Sight: Touch Perception in Aristotle's De Anima and Touch Imagery in Forrest Gander's Poetry

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Abstract
In this paper, I use Rebecca Goldner’s “Touch and Flesh in Aristotle’s De Anima” (2010) as a tool to further understand Aristotle’s discussion of the senses. After establishing the idea that sight was never necessary privileged over touch in Aristotle’s philosophy of the senses, I will then apply this idea to poetry, keeping in mind that poetry has always tended to emphasize sight over touch in the crafting of image. Essentially, I will demonstrate how images that are typically thought of as sight images (to go along with the prescriptive phrase of “show, don’t tell”) can be better considered as touch images in Ecopoetics. I will define tactile images as images that allow the reader to experience the third dimension through details that emphasize temperature, weight, mass, the hand, “muscular sensibilities, textures, solidity, shape, and apprehension of space relations,” borrowing terminology from John Bonnell’s “Touch Images in the Poetry of Robert Browning ” (1922). I will show that the consideration of images that are typically thought of as sight images in Forrest Gander’s poetry will better thought of as tactile images if we are to attain a better understanding of what composes an ecopoem. Perhaps, from this discussion, we can create a new awareness in the crafting of images, one that asks you to create “touch, not sight.”
Though Aristotle’s logos of sight has been privileged over his logos of the other senses, we cannot deny the lengths at which he struggles to understand touch as a sensory perception more so than the other senses. Guided by Rebecca Goldner’s “Touch and Flesh in Aristotle’s de Anima (2010),” I will argue that Aristotle emphasizes touch over the other senses, as “there is no world without touching,” (p. 440). My arrival at this conclusion will differ slightly from Goldner’s insofar that I am drawing entirely from de Anima (1995) and Aristotle’s concept of the soul, body, matter and form, while Goldner’s approach focuses more on the proximity and distance as discussed in Aristotle’s Physics and Metaphysics. Both avenues arrive at very similar accounts of touch, which further emphasizes that the common interpretation of Aristotle privileging sight over touch is off target. I will then show how this misreading has caused man to neglect the immediacy of tactile imagery in artistic endeavors, particularly in poetry, and the consequences of such an oversight.

I. Mapping Aristotle’s Preoccupation with Touch Perception

Aristotle’s examination of the senses plays into his overall account of the soul by providing the continuation of the matter and form relationship under which he classifies the soul and the body. The soul is “the substance as a form of a natural body that is potentially alive,” (412a 20-21). The compound is then created when this form, or soul, which is the “first actuality of a natural organic body,” is united with a specific sort of matter, or body, that contains within it the specific faculties to possess the form given form (412b 5). In the same way, the senses take on a hylomorphic mode of interaction: the senses contain the forms, or faculties upon which matter can be perceived. As a result, sensory organs are folded within the object of perception by enforming or “ensouling” the qualities of the perceptible just as the soul is folded within its proper matter, or body. In addition, the sense organs exist for the sake of the soul which enforms matter, or a specific body.

Touch comes into play by way of the fact that it is the perception in which all living things share. As to why this sense takes the most meaning in De Anima can be explained through the central “potentiality of the soul:” nutrition. Aristotle begins by stating that “flavor is an object of touch” and that “thirst are appetites for the dry and hot, the wet and the cold,” (114b 10). If the nourishment of living bodies depends on its capacity to distinguish between wet and dry, hot and cold, while also depending of flavor to keep it away from what is poisonous, or unhealthy, then the sense of touch deserves the special attention Aristotle gives it. For this reason, he states that “each of the other senses requires touch,” (415a 5). Four main principles account for this statement (among many others): (1) for without touch, living bodies cannot perceive the complexities of nourishment, (2) due to the fact that touch is essential to perceive the complexities of nourishment, touch is also responsible for regeneration, (3) because all animals that have touch also have desire, touch is responsible for the manner of all animal action, (4) in Aristotle’s study of the natural world, he finds cases in which living bodies lack sight, hearing and smell, but he does not find any cases in which living bodies are lacking touch. Throughout his studies, Aristotle also alludes to the importance of touch in more subtle ways: its motion and immediacy, its hylomorphism in its perception of the tangible and the intangible.

Since life depends on movement, which takes place through perception, touch is of the highest importance due to the fact that “a certain sort of motion is perceptible by touch,” (418a10-15). Either the sense organ, the skin in this case, must be moving, or the object of perception must be moving and acting upon the sense organ in order to experience touch. Consequently, the sense of touch provides an immediacy that the other senses lack. It is how living bodies most directly perceive pain and pleasure, assuming that the sense organ is a neutral agent that itself is not actually hot or cold, if it was in fact experiencing contraries of temperature from an external object. Aristotle writes, “What is going to perceive the contraries must be neither hot nor cold <due to the fact that they> must have the potentiality to perceive both extremes,” (424a 5). In this case, if the sense organ embodied the contrary to what it was experiencing to the fullest potential, it would “destroy the sense,” (424a 15). For example, if the sense organ were like that of ice and the object of perception was like that of fire, the sense organ would be melted. It would also no longer be able to participate in the knowledge of...
nutrition, but the sense organ itself would be water. Hence, the living body would drown in its inability to perceive the contraries.

The paradox lies within the fact that although touch provides the most immediacy, the object to which it perceives is ambiguous. While sight’s object is color, and hearing’s object is sound, touch does not have a concrete object upon which to attach itself: this fact alone implies its movement discussed above. Touch is not only a sense that depends upon movement of objects of perception, or of the skin, but it also depicts a continual movement between the inner and outer worlds of living bodies, which thereby blur the object to which it perceives. The most direct communication lies within this “chiasm of flesh” that Merleau-Ponty suggests in his discussions of perception. In this way, touch is one of the most active dimensions of the perceptions. Therefore, touch is a world that travels over the ground of pain and pleasure (and thereby uncovering what is just or unjust), all the while being contained within a higher realm of immovability. This is similar to the analogy that Aristotle makes about the stationary passenger of the ship that moves along by way of a movement of the ship. The complexity of its state of motion prevents him from being able to claim an object for which the sense of touch perceives.

Aristotle’s explanations of the sense of touch could in themselves be considered hylomorphic. While the soul is an essential compound for the potentiality of the sense organs, perceptions employ the coincidental attainment of forms that appear external to living bodies. Touch is a “<specific sort of> form, a potentiality of the organ” and in this way, touch, in its movement and in its most threatening mode of awareness, is a compound for the potentiality of the organ to which it ensouls (424a 30). Aristotle seems to be separating the idea, or the form of sense from the organ that produces this perception, making it again revert to a matter and form relationship that reaches actuality only in their compounding.

The reason for this lofty conception of touch in hylomorphic modes partly arises out of Aristotle’s awareness that “touch perceives the tangible and the intangible,” (424a 15). This statement shows the division in what it perceives in its moving; however, touch is unitary. It is whole insofar that it shapes the matter by which a soul enforms, and as a result, it causes the ensouled matter to be in a state that is consistently experiencing touch. It also is never ending in relation to time, or consciousness. For instance, external objects can be felt when asleep. However, when he makes the division between the tangible and the intangible in the objects in which touch can perceive, he is describing the very contraries that exist within the compounds that make up the ensouled, which therefore enables a sense organ to achieve its full potentiality. For example, the compound for both the ensouled body as well as the compound for productive sense organs arise out of matter and form: matter is tangible, while form is intangible. Touch, in the act of perceiving, interacts with both that of matter and that of form, and it is, therefore, moved by a version of matter and form. Although it experiences tangible and intangible, the external objects upon which employ these attributes are of less intentionality; however, the external object’s compound allows a living body to sense both “something that either has altogether very few of the differentiating properties of tangibles—air for instance—or has an excess of tangible qualities—for instance things that destroy the sense,” (424a 15). Again, the reader is lead to understand that the sense of touch enables us to perceive what will be destructive or inconsequential. The perception of touch allows us to identify the threat that will confound the complex and perfect actuality of our matter and form compound.

Aristotle finds congruency in the many tiers of form and matter through his employment hylomorphism: he uses this line of causality to explain the ensoulment of a body, the compound that gives a sensory organ its capacity to function, as well as the make up of the external object that moves the perceptions of touch. Touch is the best example of how perception follows the manifold form and matter relationship on several levels. This is evident because of the immediacy of touch, as well as its role in the desires of animals that keep them alive, nourished, and generating. Although Aristotle seems to be lacking the terminology to reveal the difference between “contact” and “touch,” he seems to rely on this line of causality in order to maintain his argument. Aristotle’s exposition of touch is thus an exposition of the tangible and the intangible, the matter and the form, the immovable and the mobile. The very inability to talk about touch within a cause and effect model, which would
depend on a definitive sense organ and object of which to perceive, unveils his preoccupation with touch above the other senses.

II. Locating the Ecotonal Tension in Aristotle's Touch Between Man and Nature

In my progression towards the analysis of tact and poetics, Goldner's discussion of Jacque Derrida's interpretation (2010) of Aristotle's touch as a function is particularly helpful. This will bring to light the kind of impact relations and sense of immediacy that concern touch as well as Ecopoetics. Goldner states that Derrida highlights Aristotle's moment of bewilderment in touch perception not as a fault but as essential component in understanding our subjective and objective relationship with the world. She writes:

Touch is not only not clear (ouk estin endelon) for Aristotle, “its adelon, inapparent, obscure, secret, nocturnal.” Derrida draws out this doubling of “not-clear” and “unclear” in a way that seems to emphasize both the passive and active occulting of and by touch. Touch is not merely aporetic because of it is difficult for us to understand, but also on account of a willful obscuring of its own nature...Furthermore, as Derrida points out, touch is likewise tied not merely to life, but to living in the world. “That is where, for a finite living being, before and beyond any concept of ‘sensibility’ touching means ‘being in the world,’” (2010, p. 440).

As a result of this interpretation, it becomes clear that not only is touch the venue through which we live, but it is also the way in which we impact the world around us (2010, p.441). Suddenly through the epistemology of touch, we find ourselves between two adjacent systems: the flesh-system and the ecosystem. The negotiation of the tension between these systems is completely dependent upon touch. Touch is the way in which we alter the world around us. This is why it is of particular concern that a majority of philosophers coming after Aristotle disregarded his logos of touch. It wasn’t until the mid 1900s that Merleau-Ponty and Derrida put the body back into philosophy. Reasons for this prolonged neglect are some of the very reasons as to why Aristotle paid so much attention to touch perception in the first place: touch functions largely in a mode preconsciousness that proves for Aristotle our high intellect. Because the body allows us to “forget its operation” in relation to touch, we have dismissed the inarticulate knowledge of our own “space, place, and motion, all of which finds its first expression in the capacity of touch,” (2010, p.441). Although this is one of the reasons for Aristotle's preoccupation with touch, it is also the reason that has enabled philosophers to forget its importance. The fact that the touch is veiled, inapparent, and secret, as Derrida suggests, is the reason that thinkers since Aristotle have privileged the unveiled, apparent, and unsecretive sense of sight. In a visually dominated world, it is no surprise that people have forgotten the importance of touch and the impact that it has on the land.

III. Arrival of Touch, Not Sight

Can poetry be ecological? Can it display or be invested with values that acknowledge the economy of interrelationship between human and non-human realms? Aside from issues of theme and reference, how might syntax, line break, or the shape of the poem on the page express an ecological ethics? If our perceptual experience is mostly palimpsestic or endlessly juxtaposed and fragmented; if events rarely have discreet beginnings or endings but only layers, duration, and transitions; if natural processes are already altered by and responsive to human observation, how does poetry register the complex interdependency that draws us into a dialogue with the world?

- Forrest Gander

Can a poet reach beyond “feeling,” in an emotional sense, to “feeling” in a physical sense? This seems an important question to ask ecopoets now that we have established touch as important above all other senses in Aristotelian thought. This fundamental overstatement of visual dominance has not only distanced the body from the self and internal bodies from exterior bodies, it has consumed the poetics. But as we work to close this gap, we find that ecopoetics is the appropriate venue to introduce tactile images back into the body of poetics.

I am particularly interested in finding one way among many to answer Gander’s question from above: If natural processes are already altered by and responsive to human observation, how does
poetry register the complex interdependency that draws us into a dialogue with the world? I am going to suggest that the poet can register the complex interdependency through the crafting of tactile images. I will demonstrate this truth by evaluating images not by sight but by touch in his book Core Samples from the World (2011), and in particular section two of his book. I will also be borrowing terminology from John Bonnell’s “Images of Touch in the Poetry of Robert Browning” (1922).

Bonnell’s discussion of tactile images in Browning’s poetry brings into question those who “object to touch-images on the ground that the classics do not recognize them,” (1922, p.582). He affirms the notion that literary critics have been obstinately opposed to discussing images outside of the territory of sight. He suggests that the reason for this objection lies largely in the fact that tactile images are “somehow cruder than those of vision, that coming more directly through the flesh, they partake of peculiar frailty of the flesh,” (1922, p.581). However, this “cruder” image seems to be exactly what Gander prescribes in order to get readers to engage in a dialogue with a world that has “discreet beginnings or endings” and is composed of “only layers, duration, and transitions,” (Gander, 2011)). How can the poet convey a palimpsestic experience if they neglect to incorporate all of the senses in their writing, particularly touch with its impactual consequences? Bonnell goes even further to imagine Aristotle’s response to such a discussion when he writes that Aristotle “certainly approves a poet’s identifying himself with his characters,” and that he should not stop at “merely putting his scenes as far as may be before the eyes,” but that he should be engaged in “acting them out,” (2011, p.582). If the poet “acts out” the scenes of his characters then touch images are essential to the scene. How can we see the cold environment of the clinic or the feeling of the spider going down the throat in Gander’s poems? To a large degree, we cannot. We must activate the mental conception of touch to understand these images. In this way, Gander demonstrates his understanding of the consequences of utilizing solely images of sight: he reaches beyond the eye in his poetics.

The very title of Gander’s book sets up his poems for tactility. “Core samples” functions as an image to bring forth a kind of tactility: hands are reaching out from the book to share samples of the earth with which the reader can hold and sculpt into a dialogue with this poems, the figures that populate them, and the land. The reader must hold these core samples before they can enter into the poems. In this way, the title alone brings forth feelings that are more physical than emotional.

In the first poem of the second section of Core Sample from the World, the reader encounters fingers working to activate touch by breath. However, it is not simply the reoccurrence of hands, fingers and mentioning of touch that bring tacticity to his poems. It is the pulse of the finger than enables the reader to feel something that sight cannot account for; it is the finger that has a heart in it, which makes the reader sensitive down to the nerve (lines 11 and 18, 21). The second poem goes on to question the sensory perception of sight when he writes, “Meaning I too/drank from the glass on the night stand, swallowing/the spider before I knew/I’d seen it?” (lines 7-10, 22). It is touch that enables the speaker to know that the spider had been consumed and that sight is only an after thought. It is through the tactile image that the speaker establishes a declarative dialogue with the world. For example, he describes the aguas ardientes, or fiery water, as smooth and the dog’s bark as “cutting” through “fan whir,” (lines 1-5). These tactile images cause the reader to unify the very aspects that make touch stand out from the other senses: the experience of both pleasure (smooth) and pain (cut). The reader can physically feel dawn pushing forth through the smooth cut of alcohol. The speaker’s companion then again cannot find words to express the sight of his eyes, which again calls into the question the dominance of sight over touch. It is touch that has sustained their relations, not sight.

In the third poem of this section, the reader finds themselves in the clinic where children are “taking their mother’s or father’s hand” and “bald children” are “wearing hats and “a bald baby” is “in a mother’s arms,” (lines 9-16, 24). These images cause the reader to feel a cold and sanitary landscape. The reader does not see the cold through theses images: they feel it. This coldness is further emphasized when the speaker feels this drop in temperature and has to “step out into sunlit air,” (line 22). Once again, Gander is utilizing tactile images that provide the reader with the immediacy of touch, thereby addressing concerns of immediacy in ecopoetics.
The reader then finds himself or herself in “Malinalco,” in which Gander begins to pay particular attention to space relations. The speaker finds himself at a wake, where he is not merely present, but “pressed to the coffin in which the dead girl lies,” (lines 2-3). Through the spatial relations present in this poem, the reader comes to know the limited proximity of not only the poem (which is the first and only poem in this section that has a title, but not just any title, a title that narrows the proximity through specificity of place), but the proximity of the speaker to the dead. The reader can feel the smooth sides of the coffin upon their body, which in turn creates a heightened sense of the vulnerability for the speaker by the mere distance been the speaker and the deceased. The image makes the speaker as fragile as flesh, and he is then found at the bar in which his beloved is “eating with their fingers.” This image presents its own outright delicacy through touch by mentioning of the hands in the engagement of nourishment (lines 10-11). However, the more arresting tactile image is when he is contemplating his approaching her: “Your neck, when I kiss it, smells like plantain and oregano,” (lines 11-14). Only when the experience of touch is brought forth, in the form of a kiss, can the speaker’s sense of smell be activated. The impact he has with his touch then prompts a dialogue that is sustained for two poems. In this way, Gander unveils “the complex interdependency” through tactile images, which lead the speaker into dialogue with the world.

In poem eight, “A boy walks the cobbled street/leading a rachitic blind man. Lazarillo,/he calls the boy. But the chatter/pulls in all directions at once,” (lines 15-18). Although it is tempting for the reader to focus their gaze on the boy and the blind man, a more dynamic understanding of this image lies in touch. The speaker is pulled in different directions through the tactility of sound waves physically bouncing off his body and the world around him. This is yet another way that Gander shows the individual in a dialogue with the world: the reader can hear the differing frequencies as the chatter push off of him and onto the objects around him and visa versa. The reader then understands the house in which he dwells and shares with the rest of the world is in a constant state of dialogue. Out of the crafting of these sound waves, there are more deliberate echoes throughout the poems. The image of the woman with “a hand to her throat” is “draw[n] in” directly onto the reader’s sensory organs. They now have a tactile memory of this woman, as the skin (of both the reader and the speaker) rises with the “extigence of our dying for access to our own nakedness,” and looking down, there is the feeling (for both the reader and speaker) of the plastic bags in the wind of the “art installation,” (32-34). Suddenly, it becomes clear that tactile images do the very thing that Aristotle expects out of poets: Gander is presenting “beyond the eye” and “acting out” the scenes of his characters (Bonnell, 1922, 582). He is truly embodying his poetics and as a result, he is blurring the lines between the reader and the speaker, the world and the body.

The evening covers their shadows, your
Eyes cut the evening (40)
Gander succeeds in depicting the palimpsestic or endlessly juxtaposed and fragmented perception of the human experience through tactile images: our eyes “cut,” they do not see.

IV. Conclusion

Because Aristotle never intended to prioritize sight over touch in the body of the senses, we must reconfigure our relationship to touch. To understand the logos of touch, not as an advantage, but as our existence and the existence of all things in nature, is to better understand the implications of our contact with the world. This paper, through its re prioritizing of the senses, serves to call poets to put touch back into the body of poetics. If tactile images are embodied in the creation and criticism of poetry, then we will unveil a new type of awareness that goes beyond the page. Without careful consideration of touch, we have no way to understand the immediacy of our impact, whether it be the impact of our poems or the impact of our bodies on the land, and without this knowledge, we are senseless.

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1 I have taken creative liberties here with the brackets so as to represent the fragmented experience that Gander composes in his poems and to show how the tactility of this images acts within the reader, thereby allowing them to bodily interact with the images of the poem.
References


