

God's Nostrils: The Divine Senses in Early Modern England

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I.

In a sermon on the topic of prayer published in 1611, Lancelot Andrewes expounds on Psalm 141, verse 2, translated in the King James Version as 'Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense'.¹

The analogy, Andrewes explains, is explicable by reference to Hebrew ritual practice:

In the time of the law a speciall part of the service, which the people performed to God, was the offering up of incense, and therefore the Prophet *compareth prayer to incense*... And it is most fitly resembled to incense, for the use of incense was to sweeten those places which are unsavory: Even so the wicked imaginations, and unchast thoughts of our heartes, which yeeld a stinking smell in the nostrils of God, are sweetned by no other meanes then by prayer.²

For Andrewes, the Psalmist's analogy is apt because prayer functions as incense did under the old law, sweetening and purifying the heart of the worshipper. As such, this passage seems to lend support to Holly Dugan's argument that whereas early modern Catholics preserved a medieval tendency to view the senses as a direct route to the divine, Protestant reformers expunged sensation from liturgical experience whilst continuing to exploit its symbolic and figural possibilities in their written works. Focusing on smell, Dugan shows that whilst reformers limited

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¹ Psalm 141:2 (KJV).

² Lancelot Andrewes, *Scala coeli. Nineteen sermons concerning prayer* (London, 1611), E8v. Throughout this essay, I modernise typography in quotations from early modern sources.

the use of incense in ritual, denouncing it as sinfully luxurious, they frequently employed incense ‘as a metaphorical abstraction’, associating sacrifice and prayer with sweet and aromatic scents.³ In this way, Dugan contends, reformers prioritised the symbolic meanings of incense over direct, sensory engagement with it.

Dugan’s argument is rich and persuasive in a number of respects, but it should also give us pause, for it replicates the older historiographical narrative – challenged at a number of points in this volume – that takes the Reformation as precipitating a progressive disembodiment of religious belief.⁴ Protestant metaphoricity is supposed to evacuate sensory language of its physical referents: invocations of the sweet smell of incense are to be taken as abstractions, not as experiential realities. As we have seen, however, this is not always the case, both because Protestant uses of metaphor and other forms of figurative language do not always entail the disembodiment of such language, and because Catholic writers, too, made extensive use of sensory imagery.⁵ Indeed, whilst Andrewes clearly intends the reek of sin and the fragrance of prayer to be taken as metaphorical, they are not unproblematically disembodied: his reference to ‘the nostrils of God’ is strikingly corporeal, associating the apprehension of the smells of sin and prayer with a specific physical organ. As Joe Moshenska has argued, the ways in which reformers employed sensory language was neither purely abstract and metaphorical, nor exclusively corporeal and literal. Rather, it was carefully calculated to ‘hover’ between the two, exploiting the affective force of physical experience whilst circumventing the potentially heretical implications of over-emphasising the

³ Holly Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011), 29. On the ambiguous status of incense, see also Holly Crawford Pickett, ‘The Idolatrous Nose: Incense on the Early Modern Stage’, in *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England*, ed. Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 21-22.

⁴ In recent decades, some historians have preferred the lowercase plural ‘reformations’ to the more traditional ‘the Reformation’. In preferring the latter, I follow Peter Marshall in his ‘(Re)defining the English Reformation’, *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009): 564–86. Notably, Marshall demonstrates that “‘the Reformation’ is... not just an artificial construct of later historians but a central perception and organizing category of contemporaries themselves’. Marshall, ‘(Re)defining the English Reformation’, 569.

⁵ See Abigail Shinn, ‘The Senses and the Seventeenth-Century Conversion Narrative’, in this volume.

literal nature of humankind's sensory apprehension of the divine.⁶ Sensory language does not have to be associated either with objective physical realities, or with abstract, disembodied metaphor, for it can have – so to speak – a foot in both camps.

With this established, what is striking in Andrewes's assertion that prayer and incense are alike is not the precise extent to which we should take the analogy as describing an embodied reality as opposed to a purely figurative, conventional formulation. Instead, I am interested in *where* Andrewes locates sensation in the analogy: not with the worshippers, but with God himself. The sweet incense of prayer, and the stench of wickedness that it displaces, are experienced not by those who pray, but by the deity they venerate. Put another way, what is at stake here is not (as Dugan and others tend to presume in discussions of sensory metaphor) humankind's sensory perception of God; rather, it is God's sensory perception of humankind.

Andrewes's discussion of prayer, then, highlights a gap in the scholarship on early modern religion and the senses. The essays in this volume – and research on religion and the senses in medieval and early modern culture more generally – differ in method, topic, and scope, but they are united in a focus on what premodern men and women thought about, or how they experienced, the role of their senses in apprehending the divine. The question of how humankind perceives God, however, invites the chiasmic reversal of its own terms: how does God perceive humankind? Does God sense us in any recognisable, human way? Is his apprehension of humanity a source of pleasure (as he delights in his creation) or suffering (as he shares in our sorrow and deplors our sin)? Is divine attentiveness a form of intimacy and vehicle of grace, or an expression of power, a form of surveillance? And what of the lower senses? If God can see and hear humankind, might

⁶ Joe Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 30-45.

he also be able to smell, touch, and taste us? If so, how should we understand this kind of anthropomorphism: as accommodation, as error, or as literary flourish?

If these questions seem absurd, then perhaps our discomfort might alert us to the pull that conventional sensory hierarchies – which present vision and hearing as the most dignified and reliable senses, and which associate smell, taste, and touch with vulgar, immoral desires – continue to exert on us.⁷ We are used to thinking of God’s omnipotence and omniscience in terms of the comprehensive scope and penetrating acuity of the divine senses, but usually the focus is on God’s aural and visual supremacy: God is all-seeing and all-hearing. A God who looks and sees us, who listens to and hears us, is clearly easier to stomach than a God who tastes, smells, and touches us, for a God with the full set of senses is a fleshy, corporeal God, unsettlingly subject to physical appetites.

Despite the potential for blasphemy, however, early modern reformed thinkers from a variety of backgrounds were deeply interested in the question of divine sensation. As the Church of England clergyman and theologian Richard Sibbes writes in a sermon published in his *The returning backslider* (1639):

Scripture... attribute[s] senses unto God, of feeling, smelling and touching, &c. So God is said to looke upon his children with delight, and to heare their prayers... And he tastes the fruit that comes from them. So on the contrary, all his senses are annoyed with wicked men and vile persons... As a man that goes by a stinking dung-hill stops his nose and cannot endure the sent. So the blasphemous breath of gracelesse persons, it is abhominable to God... and for his *eyes* he cannot endure iniquity, to looke upon

⁷ There are numerous accounts of this traditional sensory hierarchy in scholarly literature. See, *inter alia*, Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 55-71.

the wicked, and for his *ears*, their prayers are abominable... And so for *feeling*... the Prophet complaineth that God was burthened and loaded under their sinnes, as a cart pressed till it be readie to breake under the sheaves. All his senses are offended with wicked men.⁸

For Sibbes, human virtue and vice are expressed physically, and all of God's senses are deployed in apprehending 'his children'.⁹ In this essay, focusing on the 'lower' senses of smell, touch, and taste, I explore moments where Protestant theologians and authors of different stripes variously hint at, confront, seek, or deny the potentially sacrilegious notion of God's embodied humanity. For sixteenth- and seventeenth-century men and women, God's knowledge of humankind (embodied or otherwise) is both a precondition of and the model for humankind's knowledge of God. Knowing God, these men and women thought, was not just a matter of intellectual apprehension, but neither was it exclusively a matter of feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting, and desiring him, for such affectively-charged apprehension was only perfected when it incorporated a sense of being reciprocally *recognised* by God – that is, of being desired, felt, and touched by Him in return. Taking George Herbert and Guillaume Du Bartas as examples, I propose that poetry offered one way to facilitate such recognition, serving as a means of inviting and directing God's sensory attention. Like Paul in his letters to the Corinthians, early modern men and women longed for a time when the darkness of human vision would clear, and it would be possible to 'see' God 'face to face', and to 'know even as also I am known'.¹⁰ In striving to achieve, or at least emulate, such a state of sensory and epistemic felicity on earth, the question of divine sensation was paramount – and the resources of poetry were indispensable.

⁸ Richard Sibbes, *The returning backslider* (London, 1639), S2v-S3r.

⁹ Susan Ashbrook Harvey discusses the olfactory coding of religious virtue and vice in the context of late antique Christianity in chapter 5 of her *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), but the focus is on humankind's apprehension of the divine, rather than vice versa.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV).

II.

In one instantiation at least, of course, the Christian God does possess the full quota of human senses. Taking on form and flesh in the figure of his own son, the impassable deity lives, loves, and suffers (and eats, sleeps, spits, and weeps) in Christ.¹¹ The book of Isaiah, which is usually taken to prophesy the advent of Christ, is a crux for the problem – or possibility – of divine sensation:

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth...¹²

Here, Christ's divine wisdom is attributed to his repudiation of his human senses: his preternatural ability to know and judge is explicitly *not* dependent on 'the sight of his eyes' or 'the hearing of his ears'. This prophesied rejection of sensory evidence, however, is somewhat complicated by the beginning of verse 3, which in the King James Version reads '[the spirit of the Lord...] shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD', but which can be more literally translated from the Hebrew as 'and his smelling is with the fear of Yahweh'.¹³

¹¹ See, for example, Matthew 9:10 (Christ eating); Mark 4: 38 (Christ sleeping); John 9:6 (Christ spitting); and John 11:35 (Christ weeping); all KJV.

¹² Isaiah 11:1-4 (KJV).

¹³ On the complex textual and translation issues arising from this passage, see Jeremiah Unterman, 'The (Non)sense of Smell in Isaiah 11:3', *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992): 17-23; Ian Ritchie, 'The Nose Knows: Bodily Knowing in Isaiah 11:3', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (2000): 59-73; and Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (New York and London: Continuum, 2012), 105.

Early modern commentators recognised that the King James Version's use of 'quick understanding' represented a departure from this literal meaning. Thus, in his 1682 *Annotations upon... Isaiah*, the Presbyterian clergyman Arthur Jackson writes that:

It is in the original, *And he shall make him sent or smell in the fear of the Lord*; which therefore some expound thus: That by reason of this his being so abundantly anointed with the holy Spirit of God, he should breathe forth nothing but what was sweetly pious and religious; or that in all his courses he should send forth a sweet sent suitable to the precious savour of his spiritual unction. But rather by this figurative expression is only meant that which we have in our Translation, *And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord*. By the smell we discover things more secret, than those things are which appear to the eye or ear; and likewise by the smell we discover things more easily and quickly than any other way; so that when it is said, That the Spirit should make Christ *sent or smell in the fear of the Lord*; This seems to intend, that he should be of a sharp and quick understanding.¹⁴

Jackson acknowledges – only to deny – a tradition according to which Christ is positioned as the object, rather than the subject of smell. According to this interpretation, Christ emits something like the odour of sanctity attributed to saints in the Catholic tradition, and both his words and deeds are perfumed with virtue.¹⁵ Against such readings, Jackson defends the authority of the King James Version: the reference to Christ's sense of smell in the original Hebrew, he argues, serves as a metaphor or 'figurative expression' for his '*quick understanding*'. The association, he explains, is

¹⁴ Arthur Jackson, *Annotations upon the whole book of Isaiah* (London, 1682), S3v.

¹⁵ On the odour of sanctity, see Constance Classen, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London: Routledge, 1994), 52-54; Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*., chapter 5; and Jonathan Reinartz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 38-43.

appropriate, for smell itself is a valuable source of knowledge: ‘by the smell we discover things more secret, than those things are which appear to the eye or ear’.¹⁶ Jackson thus preserves Christ’s autonomy as a sensing and knowing subject by highlighting the figurative associations of smell, which indicate Christ’s exceptional ability to perceive truth.

Other early modern authors – both Catholic and Protestant – evince a deep interest in Christ’s use of his physical senses, as well as his spiritual senses, taking him as an exemplary model in this regard. Robert Southwell, for instance, describes him as ‘the most experienced and perfitt taster’, citing his acceptance of the sour vinegar which he was offered to drink during the crucifixion, as well as his choice of the metaphorical ‘gall’ of death over the ‘honye’ of sensuous pleasure, as evidence of his irreproachable disregard for worldly pleasures.¹⁷ A number of writers and thinkers also suggest, however, that a keen sense of smell and taste also belong to God in his transcendent, paternal manifestation – that is, to God the lawgiver and judge – and it is this phenomenon that I will focus on here.

In suggesting that God possesses the lower senses, early modern authors follow scripture, which itself attributes distinctly human features, sensations, and affects to the father, as well as to the son: the bible refers to God’s hands, face, mouth and breath, eyes, and ears.¹⁸ He is also described as experiencing passions, along with the corresponding physiological responses: at various points, God is said to love us, to feel jealousy, to become angry, to rejoice, to be cheered by wine, to laugh and scoff, and to ‘cry like a travailing woman’.¹⁹ God’s nostrils – singled out in the earlier quotation from Andrewes – are also explicitly invoked elsewhere in scripture, as Moses

¹⁶ Jackson, *Annotations upon... Isaiah*, S3v. On the relation between smell and sagacity, see Dugan, *The Ephemeral History*, 183-84.

¹⁷ Robert Southwell, *An epistle of comfort to the reverend priestes* (Paris [London], 1587), M8r.

¹⁸ See, for example, Exodus 7:5 (God’s hands); Numbers 6:25 (God’s face); Psalm 33:6 (God’s mouth and breath); Deuteronomy 11:12 (God’s eyes), Psalm 34:15 (God’s eyes and ears); all KJV.

¹⁹ See, for example, Exodus 20:5 (God’s jealousy); 1 Kings 11:9 (God’s anger); Deuteronomy 28:63 (God rejoicing); Judges 9:13 (God cheered by wine); Psalm 37:12-13 and Psalm 2:2-4 (God’s laughter); Isaiah 42:14 (God crying); all KJV.

and the Israelites celebrate the parting of the red sea as an effect of God's powerful breath: 'And with the blast of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together'.²⁰ God is said to apprehend sacrifice in terms of smell, and to experience both olfactory pleasure and irritation as a result of human actions. In Genesis, God smells and is pleased by the 'sweet savour' of Noah's burnt offerings; in Isaiah, however, He excoriates the proud Babylonians: 'These are a smoke in my nose', he fulminates, 'a fire that burneth all the day'.²¹

The coming of Christ entailed a wholesale transformation of the notion of sacrifice, and a corresponding shift in divine olfaction. As St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians states, 'Christ... hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour'.²² In offering himself in this way as a substitute for the burnt sacrifices of the old law, Christ internalised sacrifice, which was no longer to be a matter of material burnt offerings, but of continual self-abnegation. Subsequently, God's olfactory pleasure in the sacrifices presented to him must be understood not as physical, but as spiritual or metaphorical. The incarnation, then, was doubly significant for humankind's sensory relationship with the divine: in assuming a body, Christ took on the pleasures and pitfalls of the human senses, but he also reconfigured the sensory relationship between God the father and earthly believers, spiritualising the sacrificial exchange. In the incarnation, the connection between humankind and the divine was *simultaneously* embodied, and spiritualised.

During the Reformation, the sensory dimension of sacrifice – that it is 'sweetsmelling' – became particularly freighted in the context of debates around Socinianism, an unorthodox

²⁰ Exodus 15:8 (KJV). See also Psalm 18:15. God's nostrils are also invoked (and said to smoke) in order to express divine fury: see 2 Samuel 22:9; 2 Samuel 22:16; Job 4:9; Job 41:20; and Psalm 18:8 (all KJV). In Hebrew, the word for 'nose' can also mean 'anger'; see G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978 [revised edition]), 1:351-52.

²¹ Isaiah 65:5 (KJV). On the close relation between sacrifice, smell, and incense, see Jonathan Reinartz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 27-35.

²² Ephesians 5:2 (KJV).

movement originating in the reformed Polish church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Amongst other things, Socinians argued that the crucifixion did not serve a propitiatory function; that is, it did not expiate our sins in the eyes of God. Paul's use in Ephesians of the phrase 'sweetsmelling' to describe Christ's sacrifice was supposed to support this position. As the theologian and bishop of Worcester Edward Stillingfleet notes in his 1673 *A Discourse Concerning the True Reason of the Suffering of Christ*, the Socinian theologian Johann Crell argued that in the Old Testament 'that phrase of a sweet-smelling savour is generally and almost always used of sacrifices which are not expiatory'. Furthermore, Crell contended, if the words *were* ever applied to an expiatory sacrifice, 'they are not applied to that which was properly expiatory in it, *viz.* [namely] the offering up of the blood'. The expiatory part of the burnt offering is the blood, and burning blood, according to the literal-minded Crell, does not produce a smell. 'Sweetsmelling', therefore, must refer to 'the burning of the fat, and the kidneys, which although required to perfect the expiation' were not instrumental to it, and therefore 'hath nothing correspondent to the expiatory Sacrifice of Christ'.²³

Stillingfleet answers Crell's argument, which he calls 'gross' and 'corporeal', by considering Genesis' description of Noah's sacrifice as 'sweet-smelling'. In the Syriac Version of Genesis, Stillingfleet notes, the smell of Noah's sacrifice is described as '*the savour of rest ... and so it imports a rest after some commotion, and in that sense is very proper to Atonement, or that whereby God makes his anger to rest.*'²⁴ In Syriac – a dialect of the Aramaic spoken by Christ, and therefore a language with some authority in such matters – the expiatory dimensions of the phrase 'sweet-smelling savour' are evident. Stillingfleet goes on: 'from whence it follows, that the phrase of a *sweetsmelling savour*, being applied under the Law to *Expiatory Sacrifices*, is very properly used by St.

²³ Edward Stillingfleet, *Sermons preached on several occasions to which a discourse is annexed concerning the true reason of the sufferings of Christ* (London, 1673), Yy2v-Yy3r.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Yy3r.

Paul, concerning Christ's giving up himself for us'.²⁵ Both Crell and Stillingfleet accept that the answer to a key theological question – that is, whether or not Christ's sacrifice should be taken as expiatory – is to be found in scriptural depictions of divine sensation. Both Crell and Stillingfleet, moreover, presume that the exact nature of divine sensation can be accessed via philological analysis. The complexities of theology and the intimate sensuality of smell converge in the technicalities of scriptural translation.

The sweet smell of sacrifice is also invoked when the subject is a contemporary believer acting after the model of Christ himself. Hagiographers often describe the sweet scent supposedly produced by the deaths of martyrs: in his *An exposition of the seven epistles to the seven churches* (1669), for example, the Cambridge Platonist Henry More asserts that 'the Faith, Constancy and devout Sincerity of our blessed Protestant Martyrs went up with the flames and globes of Smoak, sweeter then any Odours or Incense, from the Altar, into the presence of Heaven'.²⁶ Less drastic forms of self-sacrifice are also figured as a means of providing God with olfactory pleasure: 'I will burn with devotion, that He may smell a sweet savour', proclaims Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield John Hacket, in a 1675 sermon on Genesis which offers an extended account of the divine senses, and smell in particular.²⁷

For Hacket, divine sensation is analogous to, but also importantly distinguished from, human sensation. For a start, God's senses are less prone to becoming jaded: 'All sensible smells', Hacket notes, 'be it the *Rose* among the Flowers, or *Cassia* among the Spices, must be often put to the sense, and often taken away to please it; hold them long to the Nostril, and they will prove faint and tedious'. God, however, is 'very tenacious of his mercy, our Sacrifice, our Prayers, our

²⁵ Ibid., *Concerning the true reason*, Zz1r.

²⁶ Henry More, *An exposition of the seven epistles to the seven churches* (London, 1669), G4r.

²⁷ John Hacket, *A century of sermons upon several remarkable subjects* (London, 1675), Iiiii3v.

Alms... their smell stays long with *God*.²⁸ In stressing God's imperviousness to sensory fatigue, Hacket places his senses firmly in the spiritual realm, for – following Augustine – early modern authors often contrasted the enduring nature of spiritual sensation with the ephemerality of physical, worldly sensation.²⁹

Another defining characteristic of divine perception for Hacket and his contemporaries is that it must be not merely receptive, but also dynamic: God's senses work on what they perceive in ways that are variously creative and destructive. In Hacket's formulation, God is the ultimate spectator of the human drama:

the spirit of a Christian would be obtuse, and nothing so well excited to be dutiful, but that we know all the thoughts, words, and works of piety are within the look of *God*... [God's] aspect doth fortify and animate our strength, like Plants that open themselves to the *Sun*, and revive when his light is cast upon them.³⁰

Hacket suggests that divine surveillance is what gives meaning and pleasure to our lives: God's sensory awareness of us is not passive but active, rousing and revitalising us just as the sun's light stimulates and sustains vegetable matter.³¹ Hacket continues, 'the love and complacency of *God* is not a bare affection like mans... Where *God* is said to love, or to smell some sweetness in a thing, this is not to affect it theoretically, but to effect some good for it'.³² God's affects entail effects, acting on and sustaining the objects they apprehend.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, lliiii2v.

²⁹ See Augustine, *Saint Augustines confessions*, trans. William Watts (London, 1631), Cc3v-Cc4r.

³⁰ Hacket, *A century of sermons*, lliiii4v.

³¹ There is precedent for this analogy between God's senses and sunlight: as Augustine notes in his *City of God*, the ancient Roman philosopher and natural theologian Marcus Varro had speculated that 'the stones and the earth which we see in the world... are as the bones and nails of God, while the sun, moon, and the stars which we perceive by our senses and which are his means of sensibility, these represent God's senses; the ether is his mind'. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 281.

³² Hacket, *A century of sermons*, lliiii4v.

There is a similar sense of the generative pleasure of being perceived by God in George Herbert's 'The Glance', although the focus here is on sight, rather than smell.³³ In Herbert's poem, the narrator recalls how God's 'sweet and gracious eye' turned briefly on him 'in the midst of youth and night', making him feel 'a sugred strange delight' and precipitating a conversion experience.³⁴ Here, the experience of grace is not an experience of *seeing* God, but rather of being *seen* by him; it is an awareness that one is being perceived by God. Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, written around December 1623 and published the following year, is similarly invested in the sustaining force of divine perception. Donne addresses God directly, describing him as one 'who art of so pure *eyes*, as that thou canst not look upon *sin*, and we of so unpure constitutions, as that wee can present no object but *sin*, and therefore might justly feare, that thou wouldst turn thine *eyes* for ever from us'.³⁵ This fear, however, is appeased, for the incarnation enables a kind of mediated perception whereby God is able to 'look upon' human sin: 'thogh thou canst not indure *sinne* in us, yet in thy *Sonn* thou canst, and he hath taken upon him selfe, and presented to thee, al those *sins*, which might displease thee in us'.³⁶ In enabling God to see our sins, Christ also enables him to strengthen us against them, for God's eye, as Donne writes, '*nourishes* us by looking upon us'.³⁷ Christ is both sensing *subject*, God looking through human eyes, and *object* of sense, presenting human sin and folly to God's reparative sight in a way that is tolerable to him.

III.

³³ For a brilliant account of the role of the senses, especially taste, in Herbert's poetry, see Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: : Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter four.

³⁴ George Herbert, 'The Glance', *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), G11v.

³⁵ John Donne, *Devotions upon emergent occasions* (London, 1624), L3r-v.

³⁶ Donne, *Devotions*, L3v-L4r.

³⁷ Donne, *Devotions*, L4r.

Divine olfaction and vision, then – distinct as they may be from the human experience of these senses – are vital to the relationship between God and his creation. The other lower senses, however, also had a part to play. In his 1616 collection of sermons *A divine herball*, the clergyman Thomas Adams indicates the importance of taste, as well as smell. Adams attests to God’s olfactory response to sin, noting that whilst ‘man is naturally delighted with pleasant savours, and abhorres noisome and stinking smels’, God is even more susceptible to odours: ‘our God hath purer nostrils, and cannot abide the polluted heapes of iniquities’.³⁸ Smell can also mislead, however. In the third sermon in *A divine herball*, Adams recounts the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican related in Luke, in which the apparently pious Pharisee is revealed to be corrupted by pride, whilst the humble Publican is vindicated as a true believer.³⁹ ‘Many a flower’, writes Adams:

hath a sweet smell, but not so wholesome a taste. Your Pharisicall prayers and almes smelt sweetly in the vulgar nostrils: *taste* them, and they were but rue, or rather worme-wood. When the Pharise sawe the Publican in the lower part of the Temple... he could cry, Foh this Publican: but when they were both *tasted*, by his palate that could judge, the Publican hath an *herbe* in his bosome, and the Pharise but a gay, gorgeous, stinking weede.⁴⁰

In a peculiar departure from scripture, Adams describes God’s arbitration between the Pharisee and the publican as an act of tasting. Taste, traditionally understood as one of the lowest senses, is here apotheosised as divine judgement: whilst the ‘vulgar nostrils’ of the laity may deceive, the divine palate has the capacity to discriminate between adherence to ritual forms, and genuine faith. For Adams, human virtue and vice emerge as sensible to a deity with ‘nostrils’, and palate.

³⁸ Thomas Adams, *A divine herball* (London, 1616), I4r.

³⁹ Luke 18:9-14.

⁴⁰ Adams, *A divine herball*, K1r-v.

In this, Adams is by no means unusual: the notion that God smells and tastes human virtue and vice is ubiquitous in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the religious writer and bishop of Norwich Joseph Hall, for instance, the sins of men who give themselves over to the inclinations of their own will are like ‘wilde grapes for the harshnesse and sownesse of the tast... to the palate of the Almighty’. The pious people of Israel, however, are described by Hall as ‘tastfull... [and] delightfull unto God’.⁴¹ Often, humankind’s unpleasant taste to God was understood as a manifestation of original sin, traceable to Adam and Eve’s tasting of the forbidden fruit. As the poet Edward Benlowes writes in his 1652 devotional epic *Theophilia*, ‘both taste, by tasting, tastelesse *Both* became’.⁴² Benlowes’s use of polyptoton – the repetition of a word in different cases, as ‘taste... tasting... tasteless’ – extends Adam and Eve’s action through history, as the simple present tense of ‘both taste’ is repeated as the present continuous ‘tasting’. In tasting, furthermore, Adam and Eve become ‘tasteless’: a word that indicates both that they become devoid of the capacity to taste, and that they themselves become insipid or flavourless.

Humankind’s inherited tastelessness, however, can be exacerbated or palliated by an individual’s actions in life. Thus, in his exposition on Matthew, included in the 1573 edition of his *Works*, William Tyndale informs those who fast for self-serving reasons such as pride in their own piety that ‘thy sacrifice were cleane without salt, & all together unsavery in the tast of God’.⁴³ Invoking the Sermon on the Mount, in which Christ calls his disciples the salt of the earth, Tyndale

⁴¹ Joseph Hall, *The contemplations upon the history of the New Testament* (London, 1661), Aa1v. Similarly, excoriating the Israelites for apostasy, the independent minister Jeremiah Burroughs explains that ‘God will take no delight in them, they will be but sowre things unto the palate of God... Gods palate is more delicate than to tast such sowre and sapless things, than those are that comes from them’. Burroughs, *An exposition... upon the eighth, ninth, & tenth chapters of the prophesy of Hosea* (London, 1650), Aa2v.

⁴² Edward Benlowes, *Theophila* (London, 1652), E1r.

⁴³ William Tyndale, Robert Barnes, and John Frith, *The whole workes of W. Tyndall, John Frith, and Doct. Barnes* (London, 1573), Ff5r. Tyndale’s emphasis on salt is symbolically significant, for – as a preservative – salt was associated with the safeguarding of purity. ‘The Apostles were not without cause called salte of the earth’, explains Robert Southwell in his *Epistle of Comfort*, ‘for as the salt preserveth flesh from the vermin, stench, and corruption... So doth the true faith give remedies, against all stench and corruption of vice’. Southwell, *Epistle of Comfort*, M6r.

suggests that the individual's vainglorious rejection of the legitimate pleasures of taste deprives him or her of the seasoning of genuine faith.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, it is possible for the individual believer to palliate his or her unpleasantness to God's palate, either by partaking in the Eucharistic sacrament, or through immersion in Gospel.⁴⁵ For the radical Essex minister John Smith, participating in the Lord's Supper effects change for the better in the sensory qualities both of the communicant's body and of his or her soul. As the physical wine sweetens the communicant's breath ('a man having tasted of it', Smith claims, 'it will make his very breath smell the sweeter'), so too will the spiritual blood of Christ sweeten his mind and actions: 'a man having tasted of it by faith, all his actions and all his thoughts will be full of the good taste, and good relish of the same'.⁴⁶ For the Sussex minister George Petter, writing in his 1661 commentary on the gospel according to Mark, reading scripture and listening to 'the Word Preached' serves a similar function. Again making reference to the Sermon on the Mount, Petter advises that 'as salt being put upon the Sacrifices, did... give unto them a good savour and relish; so the Word Preached is a means... to make them savoury and pleasant (as it were) unto Gods own taste'.⁴⁷ As the believer consumes – whether the Eucharistic elements of the word of God – he or she takes on the nature of the objects of his taste, becoming more palatable to God in the process. For Benlowes, Tyndale, Smith, and Petter alike, human and heavenly sensation exist in a reciprocal relation. In sinfully tasting the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve became tasteless to God, and in engaging in pointless and prideful acts of gustatory self-denial, fasters exacerbate this state of insipidness; but in tasting of the licit and redemptive feast of the Eucharist or the Word of God, the believer can regain some of his or her pleasantness to God. In

⁴⁴ For the Sermon on the Mount, see Matthew 5-7.

⁴⁵ As Michael Schoenfeldt writes, 'the intimacy between God and human that was lost because of a dietary transgression – consuming the forbidden fruit – is restored by an act of eating'. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Souls*, 100. Matthew Milner comments on a pervasive belief that the believer must be 'seasoned by the salt of faith. [The Eucharist] was a meal where both God and communicant were both feast and feaster'. Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 152.

⁴⁶ John Smith, *Essex dove* (London, 1629), K5r.

⁴⁷ George Petter, *A learned, pious, and practical commentary, upon the Gospel according to St. Mark* (London, 1661), Vvvv2v.

engaging in active, and religiously significant, acts of tasting, then, believers are also constituted as *subjects* of taste, acquiring the flavour (or insipidness) of the things that they consume. Humankind's perception of God is both predicated on and entails God's perception of humankind.

God, then, was understood to possess acute and frequently exercised (albeit perfectly regulated and benevolent) senses of smell and taste. But what of what was often considered the very lowest of the senses – the sense most intimately entangled with sensuality – namely touch? Here, too, we find a strong emphasis on God's sensitivity. In the first half of the seventeenth century, divine touch took on political significance. In a 1610 sermon preached before the king, Lancelot Andrewes interprets the injunction of Chronicles, 'touch not mine anointed', as referring to the monarch himself.⁴⁸ To be anointed and claimed by God as 'mine', asserts Andrewes, is to be touched by God, a state which prohibits the vicious contact of worldly men: 'His hand hath *touched* them with his *anointing*, that no other hand might *touch* them... the whole race Royall is folded up in this word... that not one of them is to be *touched*'.⁴⁹ Speaking only five years after the Gunpowder Plot, Andrewes is vigilant to aver that indirect contact is still a form of touch, and thus falls under the divine injunction against the touching of kings: 'There is none so simple as to imagine there is no touch', Andrewes declares, 'but that with the finger's end, immediate. The *mediate*, with a *knife* or with a *Pistoll*, that is a *touch*: if wee *touch* that whereby they are *touched*, it is all one'.⁵⁰ Mediated touch, says Andrewes, is still contact: to touch a monarch with a weapon is no less a violation of God's protective, anointing touch than to strangle him or her with one's bare hands.

In contrast to the monarchist Andrewes, later and more radical theologians interpret the Chronicles verse as referring to the elect, thereby effecting a reversal of its political meaning. 'You

⁴⁸ Chronicles 12:22 (KJV).

⁴⁹ Lancelot Andrewes, *A sermon preached before His Majestie* (London, 1610) D3v.

⁵⁰ Andrewes, *A sermon*, F1v.

see how tender he is of them’, writes the nonconformist minister and eventual engineer of the Cromwellian settlement Thomas Goodwin in his sermon *The great interest of states & kingdoms*, preached before the House of Commons in 1645:

TOUCH *them not*. If you would understand the tendernesse of Gods heart expressed in that word, parallel it with that, *He that TOUCHETH them, toucheth the APPLE OF MINE EYE*... there is nothing more deare then the eye... and of the eye, the *pupa*, the *black* of the eye most.⁵¹

God’s tenderness is both an affective solicitude (a tenderness of the heart), and an intensely intimate physical connection, whereby – as Goodwin warns – to touch the elect violently is to touch the very apple or pupil of God’s own eye: the most sensitive part of God. As such, Goodwin’s insistence on God’s sensory connection with his flock contains a pointed political warning, prohibiting violent action against the self-appointed godly.

Turning again to George Herbert, I now want to argue that for some authors the resources of poetry played a vital role in maintaining a rich and authentic sensory relationship with the divine. As Katherine Craik has shown, for early moderns language was conceived ‘as a material system which could literally touch readers – and be touched by them in return’.⁵² For Herbert, I suggest, the sensory exchanges involved in writing, reciting, or reading poetry functioned as a means of inviting divine attention. In Herbert’s ‘Church-Lock and Key’, God’s ears are described in terms which reflect the common Augustinian understanding of the human sense organs as doors or windows which may be open or closed. The narrator’s transgressions are figured as a kind of key:

⁵¹ Thomas Goodwin, *The great interest of states & kingdoms* (London, 1646), F4v. Similarly, see also Thomas Gataker, *Gods eye on His Israel* (London, 1645), F3r; and Richard Baxter, *Directions for weak distempered Christians* (London, 1669), F6v.

⁵² Katherine Craik, *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8.

‘I know it is my sinne’, Herbert writes, ‘which locks thine eares, / And bindes thy hands’.⁵³ If sin is a key, however, it turns both ways: it has the potential to unlock as well as lock up the divine senses. In the final stanza of the poem, the narrator apostrophises God: ‘Yet heare, O God, onely for his blouds sake... For though sinnes plead too, yet like stones they make / His blouds sweet current much more loud to be’.⁵⁴ Sin – which at the beginning of the poem is an obstacle to divine perception – is at the end of the poem understood to contribute to an auditory appeal to the divine senses, functioning as a stony obstruction which amplifies the voluble currents of Christ’s expiatory blood.

It is worth noting, however, that the final lines of ‘Church-Lock and Key’ constitute an appeal to the divine ears that is not, within the scope of the poem itself, answered. This highlights a central feature of humankind’s sensory relation with God, namely the difficulty of perceiving God’s perception of (or conversely, obliviousness to) humankind. In other words, we can never be absolutely sure of divine attention: we cannot see God watching us, or hear him listening to us, or smell him smelling us. The best assurance that we have of divine *attentiveness* is divine *responsiveness*, in whatever form this might take. Herbert explores this difficulty in his poem ‘Deniall’:

When my devotions could not pierce
Thy silent eares;
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse...⁵⁵

The metalepsis of ‘silent ears’ condenses a relatively complex process of reasoning: God’s deafness is inferred from his silence, his lack of response to the narrator’s ‘devotions’. Herbert’s narrator,

⁵³ Herbert, ‘Church-lock and Key’, *The Temple*, C5r.

⁵⁴ Herbert, ‘Church-lock and Key’, C5v.

⁵⁵ Herbert, ‘Deniall’, *The Temple*, C12r.

then, presumes an intimate and immediate relationship between divine audition and divine responsiveness: if God hears us, he will immediately reply; if he does not immediately reply, then he has not heard us. Despite this presumed rift between the narrator and God, however, Herbert retains a sense of the shared quality of human-divine perception. This shared quality is attested by the *failure* of his verse, which becomes ‘broken’, interspersed with silence. God’s presumed deafness is reflected in the collapse of the poet’s own ability to speak out, and the accord of human and divine senses is evident precisely in their simultaneous breakdown.

This sensory and communicative dysfunction is explored further in the third and fourth stanzas of the poem, as the narrator’s ‘knees and heart’ are ‘benumm[ed]’ by supplication:

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue
To crie to thee,
And then not heare it crying! all day long
My heart was in my knee,
But no hearing.⁵⁶

Again, we get a catachrestic disorder of body parts (‘my heart was in my knee’) resulting in sensory deprivation, but despite the narrator’s accusations of divine inattention – or arguably, *because* of them – the implication here is that it is the narrator himself who is not listening to God, rather than vice versa. This is suggested initially by the assertion that the narrator’s knee, and by extension his heart, are numb from genuflecting; his over-zealous, relentless attempts to make contact with God have resulted in a state of anaesthesia, a lack of responsiveness in his own body. This notion is reinforced by the elliptical, subject-less last line of this verse, which is presumably intended to

⁵⁶ Herbert, ‘Deniall’, C12v.

bemoan God's lack of hearing, but which is ambiguous enough to refer to the narrator himself. The narrator's voluble pleas to be *heard* forestall the possibility that he might himself *bear* God's own voice: his 'crying' drowns it out. Again, the poem ends on a note of supplication. This time, however, the outlook is brighter. 'O cheer and tune my heartlesse breast', the narrator pleads:

Deferre no time
That so thy favours granting my request,
They and my minde may chime,
And mend my ryme.⁵⁷

The request to God to 'defer no time' draws the reader's attention to a shift of tense, for whilst the poem describes the breakdown of sensory communion between man and God in the past tense ('*could not* pierce... *Then* was my heart broken...' and so on), the final verse shifts into a present tense imperative ('Deferre no time') and then into the future conditional ('They and my minde might chime'). The possibility of an incipient restoration of the channels of communication is confirmed by the final rhyming couplet – unique in the poem – which fulfils the narrator's appeal to God to 'mend my ryme' in the very act of making that appeal: the request is granted even as it is made, instantaneously. The poem itself, that is, becomes a vehicle of atonement, restoring the sensory communion between the narrator and his God.

IV.

Early modern authors, then, placed a high premium on God's senses: to offer sensory pleasure to God, and to know that one was nourished and sustained by his perceptual attention, was a form

⁵⁷ Ibid.

of grace, the highest spiritual honour. The notion of a deity who sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches, and who feels affects of love, jealousy, compassion, anger and so on, is, however, also problematic, conflicting with a broader insistence on God's transcendence.⁵⁸ The first of the Church of England's thirty-nine articles of 1563 specifies that 'there is but one living & true God, and he is everlasting, without bodye, partes, or passions'.⁵⁹ And whilst, as I commented earlier, scripture frequently anthropomorphises God, it also contains numerous warnings *against* anthropomorphising God. Sometimes, indeed, God is described in scripture in precisely the terms that scripture elsewhere prohibits: Exodus, for example, describes how 'the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people', whilst Numbers states that 'God is not a man... that he should repent'.⁶⁰

What are believers supposed to make of this conflict? The question comes to the fore in debates about the value or dangers of religious imagery. In answer to the prominence which reformers gave to the second commandment – 'thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above' – Catholic apologists often pointed out that scripture attributes recognisable – and therefore representable – human features to God, arguing that there cannot therefore be any harm in representing the divine in human form.⁶¹ Frequently mentioned, for example, was the prophet Daniel's description of 'the ancient of days... [whose] garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like clean wool'.⁶² As the convert John Nicholls – who embraced Catholicism whilst on the continent then subsequently returned to England and re-converted to Protestantism – puts it in his 1581 *Recantation*, parroting the Roman Catholic church he has just left, 'seeing these things nowe uttered were scene of the Prophets, why then is

⁵⁸ Paul Gavriluk explores how the Church Fathers negotiated the paradox of an impassable God who nonetheless suffers in *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵⁹ Church of England, *Articles* (London, 1563), A2r.

⁶⁰ Exodus 32:14 and Numbers 23:19; see also 1 Samuel 15:29: 'the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent' (all KJV).

⁶¹ Exodus 20:4 (DV).

⁶² Daniel 7:9 (DV).

it unlawful for us to paint God with colours and karving?⁶³ Additionally, many Catholic defences of devotional images cited Genesis's avowal that 'God said, Let us make man in our image' in order to argue that, in making man 'after our likeness', God implicitly sanctioned reciprocal acts of image-making *by* man: because human beings were made in the likeness of God, to represent God as something 'like' us, in physical form, is not irreverent.⁶⁴ Reformed writers are scathing about these arguments, which they take to indicate an arrogant presumption of equality between man and God: 'because God made man according to his Image', as Thomas Adams writes, 'therfore they, by way of recompence, will make God according to mans Image'.⁶⁵ Adams' sarcasm is pointed: in making God subject to human representation – in attempting in some sense to 'make God' as he was supposed to have 'made' us – Catholics sacrilegiously claim equality with God, an ability to requite the unpayable debt of gratitude owed for our creation.

Nonetheless, in citing this verse of Genesis, defenders of religious images reminded Protestant thinkers that if we are something like God, then – conversely and troublingly – God must logically be something like us.⁶⁶ How can this be, when we are mortal and finite, but God is immortal and infinite; when we wander in the mazes of our own error, but God is omniscient; when we are entrenched in sin, but God is immaculately good; when we are feeble, but God is omnipotent? In other words, by foregrounding both the abundance of anthropomorphic depictions of God in scripture, and Genesis' assertion that man was made in God's image, Catholic defences of devotional images forced reformers to confront a central enigma of Christian faith: how can it be that we are like God, and yet God is not like us?

⁶³ John Nicholls, *A declaration of the recantation of John Nichols* (London, 1581), G2v.

⁶⁴ Genesis 1:26 (KJV).

⁶⁵ Thomas Adams, *Five sermons* (London, 1626), D2v.

⁶⁶ Philip C. Almond comments on the potential for anthropomorphism inherent in Genesis 1:26 in his *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9.

John Calvin offers a two-pronged response to this question. Firstly, in his commentary on Genesis, he makes it clear that humankind's likeness to God is not physical: 'the Anthropomorphites were too gross in seeking this resemblance in the human body'. God, Calvin insists, is totally incorporeal, and humankind's resemblance to God – insofar as this image has escaped the defacement of the Fall at all – is purely 'spiritual'.⁶⁷ Secondly, Calvin posits the doctrine of accommodation as a resolution to the embarrassment of scriptural anthropomorphism.⁶⁸ As he writes in Volume 1 of *The institution of Christian religion*, translated by Thomas Norton in 1561:

the Anthropomorphites are... easily confuted which have imagined God to consist of a bodye, because oftentimes the scripture ascribeth unto him a mouthe, eares, eyes, handes, and feete. For what man yea though he be sclderly witted dooth not understande that God dooth so with us speake as it were childishly, as nurses doo with their babes? Therefore suche maners of speche doo not so plainely expresse what God is, as they do apply the understanding of him to our sclender capacitie.⁶⁹

From this perspective, the scriptural attribution of human senses and affects to God is simply an accommodation to our weakness, a concession to the human inability to comprehend the spiritual purity of the divine nature. Scriptural descriptions of God in terms which imply his embodiment, therefore, cannot be used to neutralise the second commandment's injunction against devotional images, because these scriptural descriptions are not representative of God's nature, but rather are indicative of human limitations.

⁶⁷ John Calvin, *A commentarie of John Calvine, upon the first booke of Moses called Genesis* (London, 1578), C6r-v.

⁶⁸ On Calvin's doctrine of accommodation, see Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

⁶⁹ John Calvin, *The institution of Christian religion*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1561), D6r.

There is, then, a tension here. On the one hand, as we have seen, Protestant writers such as Andrewes and Herbert place heavy emphasis on divine sensation, figuring God's perceptual attentiveness to us as central to the experience of grace. On the other hand, Protestant authorities insist strenuously on God's immateriality: God is a spiritual being, and scriptural invocations of his members, senses, and affects are mere accommodation to our human weakness. This tension is also inherent in Protestant discussions of devotional imagery. In such works, reformers accentuate God's physical and affective responsiveness in order to define the divine against the dead, corporeal images of Catholic iconography: paradoxically, Protestant polemic against idolatry insists on God's disembodiment by insisting on his sensitivity.

Reformist iconoclasm is often considered as a response to the (supposedly) hazardous sensuousness of devotional art. As Matthew Milner puts it, 'one of the most enduring stereotypes of the Reformation is the casting of idolatry as the epitome of sensory transgression, sensuality, and sensual excess. Reformers attacked the sensuality of late-medieval religious life'.⁷⁰ I do not intend to challenge this pervasive notion: reformers did clearly consider idolatry a sin of the senses, an over-investment in the corporeal. But by focusing so much on worshippers' uses (or rejection) of their senses, I want to suggest, scholars have ignored an equally pervasive conviction that the devotional use of images skews the sensory relation between humankind and God in the other direction, too: even as religious images compel a dangerous, intensely sensuous response from worshippers, they also erect as a deity an insensitive image, anaesthetised to the appeals of believers. Reformers' dread and loathing of the human tendency to sensuality, in other words, has a counterpart in an answering antipathy to – even a terror of – divine *insensitivity*. Reformist iconoclasts fought against the human propensity to sensory self-indulgence, but they also battled the idea of an impassable, oblivious God.

⁷⁰ Matthew Milner, 'To Captivate the Senses: Sensory Governance, Heresy, and Idolatry in Mid-Tudor England', in *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 307.

The convert John Nicholls, for example, asserts that ‘God is altogether wisdom and knowledge: whereas your images feel nothing, and understand as much’.⁷¹ The idol is feared and reviled as a *dead* image, a divinity which is incapable of responding – sensorially, affectively, or intellectually – to the embodied devotion it elicits. Psalm 115, which Nicholls cites, is an important source here:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not.⁷²

Idols are to be doubly despised, as the products of embodied human labour (they are ‘the work of men’s hands’), and as insensible matter. In his commentary on this psalm, Calvin describes how:

Therefore as they list not too seeke God spiritually, they [idolaters] pluck him down out of his throne, and thrust him under dead elementes. Whereupon it commeth to passe that they direct their prayers to images, because they think that in them gods eares, ye & his eyes and hands are neere unto them.⁷³

The desire to *perceive* the divine materially – to lodge him in or under ‘dead elements’ – segues into a desire to be *perceived by* the divine. The longing to be physically close to God is, specifically, a longing to be close to his ears, eyes, and hands: that is, his organs of sense. The idolatrous error, then, lies not only in believing that images facilitate human apprehension of God, but also in believing that they facilitate God’s apprehension of humankind.

⁷¹ Nicholls, *A declaration*, G1v.

⁷² Psalm 115:4-7 (KJV). The Geneva translation is not substantively different.

⁷³ John Calvin, *The Psalmes of David and others. With M. John Calvins commentaries* (London, 1571), Sss9r.

Following Calvin, Protestant thinkers and writers also foreground another threat: namely that in making and worshipping idols, men and women will become *like* idols, numb to grace. In the words of the clergyman William Bates, in his *The sovereign and final happiness of man* (1680):

The End has always a powerful virtue to transform a Man into its likeness... Thus carnal Objects when propounded as the End of a Man, secretly imprint on him their likeness, [so that] his Thoughts, Affections, and whole Conversation is carnal. As the Psalmist speaks of the Worshippers of Idols, *they that make them are like unto them, so is every one that trusteth in them*: whatever we adore and esteem, we are changed into its Image. Idolaters are as stupid and senceless, as the Idols to which they pay Homage.⁷⁴

The process of worshipping idols results in a kind of anaesthesia, a loss of sensitivity and subsequently of intelligence. ‘For they that crave life at dead things’, as Calvin writes in his commentary on the Psalms, ‘do they not (as much as in them is) quench all light of reason[?]’⁷⁵ Calvin’s phrasing implies process: it is not (or not only) the case that senseless men make idols, but that the act of making idols makes men senseless. Human creation, here, is a process of self-defacement: in attempting to infuse inanimate images with life, men and women end up destroying the spark of sense and reason in themselves. According to reformers, then, in their sensual overinvestment in senseless idols Catholics transformed themselves into the dead images they worshipped, progressively and paradoxically anaesthetising themselves through an abundance of sensuality.

V.

⁷⁴ William Bates, *The sovereign and final happiness of man* (London, 1680), H7r-v.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *The Psalmes of David*, Ssss8v.

Earlier in this essay I suggested that, for George Herbert, the resources of verse can serve to renew the sensory relationship between man and God. Just as the Protestant fascination with divine sensitivity is compromised by a conflicting insistence on divine transcendence, however, so too do the sensory resources of poetry have a troubling aspect: they can also corrupt the sensory relation between man and deity. Herbert explores this aspect in his 'Jordan' poems, which describe how even pious verse tends to vain over-elaboration, accruing a troublesome materiality in the process: 'curling with metaphors a plain intention', as Herbert writes, 'decking the sense, as if it were to sell'.⁷⁶ Poetry, that is, is inclined to make an idol of itself when it strives to communicate with the divine, substituting an abundance of ornament for plain 'sense'.

For the final section of this essay, however, I turn not to Herbert, but to the Huguenot poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas's creation poem *The Divine weekes and works*, published in instalments between 1578 and 1603, and translated into English by Joshua Sylvester in 1611. Here, I take Du Bartas as a transnational poet – familiar to English audiences primarily in Sylvester's translation – who offers a sustained and immensely subtle, if strikingly idiosyncratic, exploration of the broader reformist interest in the intimate relations between poetry, idolatry, and sensation. Du Bartas is often described as a poet who avoids, or at least negotiates with consummate care, tricky doctrinal bones of contention.⁷⁷ Whatever poise or tranquillity Du Bartas's verse achieves, however, is a result not of delicate conciliation, or an avoidance of the dangerous peaks and troughs of polemic, but rather of a bold holding in balance of radically opposed streams of thought and feeling. In Sylvester's translation at least, the impression of equilibrium that Du Bartas's poetry can give is a result of his careful counterbalancing of a series of extreme contraries, rather than a cautious avoidance of such extremes.

⁷⁶ Herbert, 'Jordan [III]', *The Temple*, D12r.

⁷⁷ Kathryn Banks, for example, writes that 'Du Bartas rarely engages with theological problems in the *Sepmaine*', and refers to 'his general practice in the *Sepmaine* of avoiding complicated and potentially controversial theological issues'. Banks, *Cosmos and Image in the Renaissance: French Love Lyric and Natural Philosophical Poetry* (London: Legenda, 2008), 36 and 39.

This is certainly the case with his investigation of the relation between divine and human creativity, and of the potentially idolatrous inclinations of the latter, which comes to the fore in his account of God's creation of Adam in the 'sixth day' of first week. Describing Adam's body – and by extension, the human body more generally – as 'the divinest Master-Piece of Art' and as 'a second God, of Earth', Du Bartas describes the human impulse to engage in image-making as a consequence or outgrowth of the fact that mankind itself is a product of divine artistry:

This curious Lust to imitate the best
And fairest Works of the Almightyest,
By rare effects bears record of thy Linage
And high descent; and that his sacred Image
Was in thy [i.e. man's] Soule ingrav'n...⁷⁸

As we have seen, this notion that humankind's innate inclination to make artistic images attests to our own status as images of God is a key component of Catholic polemic in this period, levied in response to Protestant condemnations of idolatry. For Du Bartas, unlike Calvin, the human impulse to imitate divine creation is not a pernicious by-product of the Fall, but is innate in mankind from the very beginning. In Sylvester's translation, however, the verse veers back from articulating the full implications of this. Whilst Du Bartas's Calvinist credentials were firmly established in English minds, a residual anxiety about the influence of his Catholic compatriots on his verse is evident in Sylvester's efforts throughout his translation to highlight or enhance Du Bartas's reformist sentiments.⁷⁹ Here, even as Du Bartas deploys an argument associated with the

⁷⁸ Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, *Du Bartas his devine weekes and workes*, trans. Joshua Sylvester (London, 1611), N5v.

⁷⁹ As Susan Snyder notes in the introduction to her edition of Sylvester's translation, 'however admirable as poet and Protestant, Du Bartas was after all a foreigner. Sylvester had not only to translate his poem but to naturalize it... Sylvester creates in the *Weekes* a distinctively, even violently Protestant point of view which is absent in his original'.

defence of devotional images, Sylvester's use of the pejorative phrase 'curious Lust' to translate Du Bartas's more neutral term for the artistic impulse – 'chatouilleus desir', literally 'ticklish desire' or 'wish' – resonates with Protestant condemnations of such images.⁸⁰ In Sylvester's translation, the Catholic exaltation of human creativity and Calvinist suspicion of the same coexist: humankind's desire to 'imitate' the world around us is part of our divine inheritance, but it is also troublesome and potentially idolatrous.

Of course, Du Bartas's own poem not only describes but is itself profoundly implicated in this dynamic, for *The divine weeks* constitutes nothing less than a poetic recreation of creation itself. Du Bartas's own poem, that is, is itself an image or a series of images which imitate 'the best / And fairest Works of the Almightyest', thereby potentially placing Du Bartas in competition with the God he professes only to glorify.⁸¹ Rather than attempting to circumvent the spiritual pitfalls of his own poetic ambition, however, Du Bartas appears to revel in them, drawing numerous parallels between his own poetic image-making and the originary acts of divine creation that he so powerfully depicts. We can see this in his extensive use of ekphrasis in his description of the creation of Adam. Ekphrasis is a rhetorical figure according to which an author describes a visual image (for example, a painting or sculpture) in a vivid, evocative way that is intended to recreate that image in the reader's mind.⁸² As such, in Protestant discourse ekphrasis could be subject to the same charges of idolatry as other forms of visual art with some claim to represent the divine.⁸³

Snyder, introduction to Du Bartas, *The Divine Weeks and Works of Guillaume de Saluste, Sieur du Bartas*, trans. Joshua Sylvester, ed. Snyder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1:50-51.

⁸⁰ Du Bartas's original French phrase, 'ce chatouilleus desir', does not have the same pejorative implications: it can be translated more literally as 'this ticklish desire' or 'ticklish wish'. Thanks to Raphaële Garrod for discussing the connotations of 'chatouilleus' with me. Guillaume de Saluste Du Bartas, *La sepmaine, ou Création du monde* (Paris, 1578), Aa4r.

⁸¹ Banks discusses the close relation between divine and human artistry, particularly image-making, in *Cosmos and Image*; see especially chapter 1.

⁸² In Claire Preston's words, ekphrasis is 'verbal pictorialism'. Preston, 'Ekphrasis', in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 117.

⁸³ This suspicion has deep roots: for a penetrating discussion of the relation between ekphrasis and idolatry in Lollard culture, see Bruce Holsinger, 'Lollard *Ekphrasis*: Situated. Aesthetics and Literary History', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35 (2005): 67-90.

In describing Adam's body as a 'masterpiece of Art', and then in depicting that body in highly visual terms supposed to invoke the experience of viewing a picture, Du Bartas is doubly vulnerable to such charges.

Du Bartas's poem, however, evades idolatry precisely where it flirts most outrageously with it, and that this evasion is effected in part by the importance that Du Bartas gives to the sensory dimensions of artistic creation: his poetic recreation of the creation of Adam is not idolatrous because the images that he creates are not dead, but alive. Du Bartas's Adam, like God's, is a breathing, sensing, responsive being, vivified by the poet's skill. This animate quality is evident both Du Bartas's account of God's infusion of breath into Adam, and in his ekphrastic descriptions of Adam's sense organs. For Philip Sidney, whose *An apologie for poetrie* (1595) bears witness to his admiration for Du Bartas, humankind's divine origins are expressed in verse 'when with the force of a divine breath [the poet] bringeth things forth far surpassing [nature's] dooings'.⁸⁴ The link between divine exhalation and poetic inspiration is brought to the fore by Du Bartas:

... this most peer-les learned Imager,
Life to his lovely Picture to confer...
...breathing, sent as from the lively Spring
Of his Divineness some small Riverling.⁸⁵

God's infusion of breath into Adam confers life upon him, and subsequently upon the human race. Significantly, however, the economy of breath here is not linear but cyclical, with Du Bartas himself returning it to God in the form of his own poetry: 'Inspired by that Breath', Du Bartas

⁸⁴ Philip Sidney, *An apologie for poetrie* (London, 1595), C2r. On the relationship between Sidney and Du Bartas, see Alan Sinfield, 'Sidney and Du Bartas', *Comparative Literature* 27 (1975): 8-20.

⁸⁵ Du Bartas, *Devine weekes and workes*, N2v.

goes on, ‘this Breath desire / I to describe’.⁸⁶ In this elegant chiasmic formulation, Du Bartas’s poem both describes the moment that facilitated its own existence, and circumscribes it, re-creating the vivifying ‘Breath’ of God as a *product* of its own ‘inspired’ lines. Syntactically, Du Bartas’s inspiration precedes the breath that God gave to Adam. Neither breath – ‘that’ or ‘this’ – takes ultimate priority. Du Bartas’s poem re-creates the moment that enabled it: inspiration is reciprocal. This suggestion that Du Bartas’s own poetic virtuosity confers life on the images that it describes is reinforced by his prosody, as the use of the caesura in the middle of the line ‘inspired by that Breath, this Breath desire’, also present in the original French, inserts the rhythms of breath into the verse itself.⁸⁷

We can see a similar strategy deployed in Du Bartas’s vividly visual account of the parts of the human body, exemplified by Adam. Whilst Du Bartas’s blazon of Adam’s body as a whole is detailed and evocative, the elaboration of ekphrasis peaks in his descriptions of the sense organs. Adam’s eyes, for example, are:

These lovely Lamps, whose sweet sparks lively turning,
With sodain glauce set coldest hearts a-burning,
These windows of the Soule, these starry Twinns,
These *Cupids* quivers have so tender skins
Through which (as through a pair of shining glasses)
Their radiant point of pearcing splendor passes...
The twinkling Lids with their quick-trembling hairs
Defend the Eyes from thousand dang’rous fears.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ The line reads, ‘Inspiré de ce Vent, ce Ventie veus décrire’. Du Bartas, *La sepmaine*, Aa1r.

⁸⁸ Du Bartas, *Devine weekes and workes*, M7v-M8r.

In focusing his use of ekphrasis on the sense organs in this way, Du Bartas animates the images he creates, sidestepping the potential accusation that his poem deals in the construction of dead idols. Adam's eye is not a static, lifeless image, but an entity which both feels (it is 'tender'), and which looks back at us, 'turning' its 'sparks' to glance upon us, setting hearts burning, 'twinkling' and blinking. From the very beginning, Du Bartas suggests, human perception was reciprocal: and in recreating the creation of Adam's eyes, he involves the reader in the very first exchange of glances between God and man.

VI.

For early modern men and women, then, the question of the scope, quality, and significance of God's perception of humankind was at least as pressing as the question of the scope, quality, and significance of humankind's perception of God. Protestant writers and thinkers across a broad spectrum (from radical reformers including Calvin himself, to later establishment figures such as Hall, Hacket, and Stillingfleet) may have expressed anxiety about the dangerous allure of sensory worship, but they were equally concerned about the prospect of an anaesthetised, imperturbable deity. In the works of such writers, God employs his lower senses of smell, taste, and touch, as well as sight and hearing, in order to apprehend his creatures. God's senses have some distinctive features – they are spiritual and incorporeal, constant and consistent, and active and sustaining – but they also exist in a dynamic, reciprocal relation with the human sensorium. Human virtue and vice emerge as sensible entities; by pursuing the former and rejecting the latter, men and women might make themselves pleasant to God's perception, thereby cultivating a form of attention coterminous with the experience of grace.

The notion of a sensing – and by extension, an embodied – God was also profoundly troubling, however, particularly in the context of debates surrounding devotional imagery. For

some Protestants, idolatry was doubly problematic: on the one hand, it represented an excess of sensuality, a heretical effort to give God physical form; on the other hand, idolaters posited an unfeeling, unresponsive deity, thereby revealing their own lack of 'sense'. The resources of poetry, I have suggested, offer a way to negotiate – if not quite a way out of – this double bind. For George Herbert, the aural harmony of verse effects and represents the renewal of sensory harmony between man and God. For Du Bartas, the resources of ekphrasis – vivid visualisation – enable the poet to replicate God's original act of creation, a form of poetic image-making which veers dangerously close to idolatry, but which is redeemed when it is employed in order to animate sensorially the images that it creates. For both Herbert and Du Bartas, the images produced by poetry involve the reader in a perceptual exchange with the divine. And that is not to be sniffed at.