

## Scents and Sensibility

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I started thinking about smell in 1965. At art college, a friend and I made a little collection of evocative aromas, housed in about fifty small bottles. There was rubber, naphtha, motorcycle dope, cuir de russe (used to make leather smell like leather rather than dead animals), gasoline, ammonia, juniper wood. In 1978, in a neglected and unlikely part of London, I discovered an old pharmacy that was crammed with oils and absolutes.

Their beautiful names - styrax, patchouli, franipani, amber, myrrh, geraniol, opoponax, heliotrope - and their familiar/strange aromas attracted my curiosity, and I bought over a hundred bottles. Soon I found myself actively collecting the primary materials of perfumery - in Madrid I found a crumbling apothecary's with dozens of mysteriously labeled phials; in San Francisco I discovered the strange olfactory world of Chinatown, of five spices and jasmine and ginseng; a woman I met in Ibiza gave me a minute bottle containing just one drop of an utterly heavenly material called nardo (I later came to think that this was probably spikenard oil, extracted from a shrub growing at between six and eight thousand feet on the Himalayas and used by wealthy Indian ladies as a prelude to lovemaking).

I started mixing things together. I was fascinated by the synergies of combinations, how two quite familiar smells carefully combined could create new and unrecognizable sensation. Perfumery has a lot to do with this process of courting the edges of unrecognizability, of evoking sensations that don't have names, or of mixing up sensations that don't belong together. Some materials are in themselves schizophrenic (or is it oxymoronic?) in that they have two rather contradictory natures. Methyl octane carbonate, for example, evokes the smell of violets and motorcycles; Dior's Fahrenheit uses a lot of it. Orris butter, a complex derivative of the roots of iris, is vaguely floral in small amounts but almost obscenely fleshy (like the smell beneath a breast or between buttocks) in quantity. Civet, from the anal gland of the civet cat, is intensely disagreeable as soon as it is recognizable, but amazingly sexy in subliminal doses (it features in Guerlain's Jicky, probably the oldest extant perfume, and one whose market has changed over the hundred years of its existence - it now has a following among gay men). Courmarin, the primary ingredient in Cacharel's Lou Lou, has the characteristic smell of late summer, from whose flowers and grasses it is derived, but then it carries strange overtones of powder, boudoirs, bedrooms...

You don't have to dabble for very long to begin to realize that the world of smell has no reliable maps, no single language, no comprehensible metaphorical structure within which we might comprehend it and navigate our way around it. It seems to compare poorly, for example, with the world of sight. If we want to think about color, we can use words like hue and brightness and saturation. We can visualize a particular slightly milky green, imagine where it falls on a spectrum chart, look at its neighbours and complementaries, and the finally say that it is, say, "eau de nil" or "pale turquoise" or "jade." These are relatively precise numerically, in angstroms, for example, or (if you want to paint your house in it) as "British Standard paintshade number something-or-other." Similarly with shape: We use measurement and geometry and, of course, drawings, to communicate that type of information.

But the best we seem to be able to do with smells is to evoke comparisons. We can say that karanal is "like striking a flint," that the aldehyde C14 is "like latex." As far as I know there is not even the beginning of a usable system of relating these to one another. Where does karanal stand in relation to tuberose? Or sandalwood to sage? Don't ask me.

Like others who've played with perfumes, I found this somewhat unsatisfactory. I wanted a system, a map. I briefly thought I might be able to make one myself, but this plan foundered as I jotted down the resemblance between strawberries and egg yolk, between breweries and certain types of horsehair bedding. I just knew I didn't have enough stamina to collect, let alone collate, all those sensations. I'd also noticed to my confusion that the substances "coriander" and "vetiver" were never quite the same twice. The vetiver I bought in the Walworth Road in London was distinctly different from what I got from the labs of Quest International in Paris, and the French coriander I found in 1988 was different from the French coriander I bought a year later. Even the names, it turned out, didn't describe anything stable. So, still lost, I abandoned the classification project (what a relief!) and decided to continue pleasurably stumbling around in the gloaming, rubbing bits of them and that on anyone kind enough to loan me a patch of their skin, then sniffing to test the effects (it turned out to be a great way of getting to know people...).

It took me a long time to begin to realize that this was the way things were likely to continue. Just like with everything else, there was probably never going to be a time when I "knew what I was doing," when I had in mind some final, logical picture of the whole world of smell. The Linnaeus of smell was not to be, or not to be me.

It's strange how you arrive at ideas, how thoughts consolidate themselves out of the most disparate and unlikely beginnings, and how often those beginnings are realizations from experience that something isn't possible (or alternately is possible but not interesting). This is one such roundabout story.

During my dabbling with perfumes, I'd also been dabbling with other things, including music. Whenever I talked about sound, I stressed the inadequacy of the classical languages that composers had used to describe it. I said that the evolution of the electronic instruments and recording processes had created a situation where the whole question of timbre - the physical quality of sound - had been opened up wide and had become a major focus of compositional attention. Modern composers and producers working in recording studios were experimenting with sound itself and were quite content to use largely traditional "received" forms (such as "the blues") upon which to hang their experiments. It struck me that this had been completely missed by classically trained musicologists, who were always looking for innovation in places where it wasn't happening. They were expecting that any music that deserved the title "new" would be making breakthroughs in harmony, in melody, in compositional structure; but here they were faced with a music that, in those respects, had barely made it past the turn of the century.

When they failed to notice, or at least attach any importance to, was that their language, the language of classical written composition, simply didn't have any terms to describe Jimi Hendrix's guitar sound on "Voodoo Chile" or Phil Spector's production of "Da Doo Ron Ron" - arguably the most interesting features of those works. Rock music, I kept saying, was a music of timbre and texture, of the physical experience of sound, in a way that no other music had ever been or could have ever been. It dealt with a potentially infinite sonic palette, a palette whose gradations and combinations would never adequately be described, and where the attempt at description must always lag behind the infinities of permutation.

So while I was happy to accept and exploit this wonderfully fluid situation in music, I was worried about finding myself in the same place vis-à-vis perfume. The inconsistency of these positions finally filtered through to me while I was delivering a talk to a group of

businessmen in Brussels. My talk was called "The Future of Culture in Europe," and in it I tried to sketch out the breakdown of the classical view of Culture and art history in favor of a more contemporary one. Until quite recently, I said, Culture had been viewed as a field of human behaviors and artifacts that could be organized in some ideal way, the assumption being that, if only we sat down and talked about it for long enough, we would all agree that, say, Dante, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Goethe, Wagner, and a few other big names were the real kingpins of Culture, and that, say, chocolate-box designers, popular balladeers, walking-stick carvers, hairdressers, clothes designers, and Little Richard were all relatively marginal. The history of the history of art is really the story of people trying to make a claim form one orthodoxy in favor of any other, asserting that the particular line that they drew through the field of all the events we refer to as Culture had some special validity and the proximity to that line was a measure of originality, profundity, longevity: in short, of value.

For many reasons this idea of intrinsic, given value becomes less and less tenable. We don't expect to write books now called "The History of Painting" (as if there were only one), and only a dwindling band of fundamentalists (about 5.9 billion at the last count) still believe in "the True Nature" of anything. We become more and more comfortable with the idea that there are all sorts of ways of describing and organizing phenomena, that there are descriptive languages that don't translate into one another, that there is no absolute basis upon which to decide between one language and the other, and that anyway, "the same set of phenomena" is a shifting field of energies that we choose to give the same name to until it gets so confusing that we have to find another.

So, just as we might come to accept that "coriander" is a name for a fuzzy, not very clearly defined space in the whole of our smell experience, we also start to think about other words in the same way. Big Ideas (Freedom, Truth, Beauty, Love, Reality, Art, God, America, Socialism) start to lose their capital letters, cease being so absolute and reliable, and become names for spaces in our psyches. We find ourselves having to frequently reassess or even reconstruct them completely. We are, in short, increasingly uncentered, unmoored, lost, living day to day, engaged in and ongoing attempt to cobble together a credible, at least workable, set of values, ready to shed it and work out another when the situation demands.

And I love it: I love watching us all become dilettante perfume blenders, poking inquisitive fingers through a great library of ingredients and seeing which combinations make sense for us, gathering experience - the possibility of better guesses - without certainty.

Perhaps our sense of this, the sense of belonging to a world held together by networks of ephemeral confidences (such as philosophies and stock markets) rather than permanent certainties, predisposes us to embrace the pleasures of our most primitive and unlangued sense. Being mystified doesn't frighten us as much as it used to. And the point for me is not to expect perfumery to take its place in some nice, reliable, rational world order, but to expect everything else to become like perfume.