

Sense and Scent: An Exploration of the Olfactory Meaning. By Bronwen Martin and Felizitas Ringham (eds.). (Dublin: Philomel, 2003; pp. 322, ill., £14.99).

In an age when consumerism bombards us with manufactured odorants from the mountain-fresh scent in our bath suds to citrus zest perfumed fabric softeners, how often do we consider whether *our* smell has meaning? This collection of essays represents a cross-disciplinary anthology that pits medicine against literary theory, in an attempt to better understand all manners of exhaust from acrid odours to sweet smells. It begins with the assumption that declares to each his own smell, and ends on a similarly subjective foot. Little attention is ever paid to scent alone, rather that temporal, wafting accumulation of gaseous organic chemicals is just one part and particle in the battery of what we experience in the world. This book is primarily concerned with the language of smell, or the lack of paradigmatic ways of describing smell.

Immanuel Kant consigns smell ‘to the dustheap of the senses’.¹ His sentiment is indicative of the philosophical lot. Science better understands smell as sensory data but history has not – argues *Sense and Scent: An exploration of the olfactory meaning*. Invitations were extended to contributors who, as is succinctly summed up in the introduction, were ‘interested in smell and how it signifies’.² If in an academic frame of mind, one may already conjure up the complex frontier that lies ahead awaiting its deconstruction. This book is quick to identify the absence of language to describe smell. An early appetizer to this problem presents the book’s main challenge: ‘Smell is a volatile elusive phenomenon that like its conductor, the air we breathe, inescapably affects us while at the same time escaping our power, linguistic or otherwise’.³

At present, are smells a part of the cultural psyche? There was much chatter in late nineties about pheromones and their ability to attract the opposite sex. Any confusion was made clear: pheromones are not scents per se. Rather they are chemically defined messengers that play a role in the social behavior. They are, however, sensed to certain extent by the same olfactory system used for everyday smelling. The reasoning, as supported by certain scientific findings, was that animals interact this way and so do we. This idea summons the image of the famous Warner Brothers cartoon skunk named Pepe Le Peu who snares his lovers with all manner of entrapments. Much of the hilarity from the audience’s standpoint is how foul smelling (a misconception) skunks tolerate each other. We rely less on scent than several other members of the animal kingdom. What we *do* better, these authors continually remind us, is assign *meaning* to smells.

Science aside, there is little mystery that sexual interaction is related to smell. Smell is distinctly a part of our sweat. One particular grand food description is that a good white

Alba truffle smells like sex. What exactly do we *mean*? Firstly, one cannot engage with this description without the experience of having had sex or having smelled a good white Alba truffle, but there's no need to confuse semantics with situations. Yes, these experiences are pleurably subjective, yet they remain differentiable. Truffles are among the most scarcely available and dear foodstuffs. Good smells are not necessarily expensive, but they are scarce (some argue that this is what makes them good) and those who can differentiate between them are rare.

A Chanel perfumer trained to detect odorants can distinguish between as many as 5,000 different odorants. Jancis Robinson, or a comparable wine connoisseur, may be able to distinguish between more than 100 different components of taste based on combinations of aroma and flavor.⁴ Conditioning plays a large factor in a person's ability to learn and be able to identify fine differences between similar entities. Taste becomes refined. Though like a bear that follows his nose, instincts drive much of our basic interactions with smell. Long before modern neuroscience began to explain the physiological pathways of olfaction, the French nineteenth-century gastronome Brillat-Savarin had a hunch. His laboratory was the kitchen and his proving ground was the dining room:

I am not only convinced that there is no full act of tasting without the participation of the sense of smell, but I am also tempted to believe that smell and taste form a single sense, of which the mouth is the laboratory and the nose is the chimney; or, to speak more exactly, of which one serves for the tasting of actual bodies and the other for the savoring of their gases.⁵

He furthers his defense by offering a series of everyday experiments that elegantly illustrate his hypothesis. Perhaps most important to the gourmand is the ability to make fine discernments using his nose. Brillat-Savarin recognizes this in a follow-up statement: 'A man eats nothing without smelling it more or less consciously, while with unknown foods his nose acts always as the first sentinel, crying out *Who goes there?*'⁶ This inquiry, several of the present authors argue, can be reduced to a judgment of aesthetic and moral values. For each person there is a demarcation between good and bad smells, between those that are pleasant and those that are repulsive.

How we intuit a particular odor, and describe it to others is a fundamental linguistic problem. In his essay entitled, 'Olfactory Syntax and Value-Systems: The treatment of smell in Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* [Journey to the End of the Night]', included in the present volume, the philosopher Jacques Fontanille argues that smelling begins with identification and ends with linguistic associations. He reminds us that in order to smell we must inhale. This physical process offers a model for interpreting smell as an action/reaction means of phenomenology. Add metaphor to an identified scent and you

reach the limits of language's ability to describe smell. Céline offers a series of blunt statements that are used to construct the author's argument:

Since we are nothing but packages of tepid, half-rotted viscera, we shall always have trouble with sentiment. Being in love is nothing, it's sticking together that's difficult. Faeces on the other hand make no attempt to endure or to grow. On this score we are far more unfortunate than shit; our frenzy to persist in our present state – that's the unconscionable torture.

Unquestionably, we worship nothing more divine than our own smell. All our misery comes from wanting at all costs to go on being Tom, Dick or Harry, year in, year out. This body of ours, this disguise put on by common jumping molecules, is in constant revolt against the abominable farce of having to endure.⁷

As indicated by his ribald statements, for Céline smell is the preservation of identity. Smell allows us to recognize sources but does not provide any information about itself. Fontanille notes that our nomenclature of smells provides access to the 'narrative structure of smell: *aroma, bouquet, fragrance, perfume, scent, fetidness, stink, stench, effluvia, exhalations*'.⁸ Within each term, the smell results from a material, an emission and a penetration. Quality judgments about our terms for describing scents are, however, susceptible to deep criticism. In a later entry in the present anthology, a member of the British Society of Perfumers, reminds us that if a product smells bad consumers will not buy it. We are what we smell. Our language tells us so.

Londoners in the mid-nineteenth century confronted a shameful stink on a daily basis. Drifting up from the marketplaces were the putrid fumes of rotting animal carcasses emanating from the tanneries and the slaughterhouses. Industrial pollution was omnipresent. Yet, none could compete with the mighty Thames, which was such a malodorous tincture of raw sewage that Victorians, including Prime Minister Disraeli, were often depicted nose-pinching as they strolled riverside. Urban sanitation found its modern self when Sir Joseph Bazalgette created a system of unprecedented size to clean the filthiest river in the world. The 'Great Stink' of 1858, prompted Bazalgette to rebuild London's sewers, decontaminating the waters and ridding the city of pestilence. With the Thames as its lifeline, the heavily stressed urban ecosystem became the cleanest metropolis in the world at that time.

The world has fought similar fetid battles ever since; and now the West capitalizes on deodorizing all social odors. We remove scents we dislike. Antiperspirants are loaded with astringents to block our underarm sweat pores, and deodorants use antiseptics to neutralize the smell of sweat by combating bacteria. Simple stale air is bad too so we add scents we like, but bundles of lavender are not just souvenirs from a trip to Provence.

Burning fumes of the humble plant, a horticulturist reminds us, has warded off plague in Europe, and its rich scented oil is known to kill diphtheria, typhoid bacilli, streptococcus and pneumococcus. The British population spends £500 million annually on alternative medicine that includes aromatherapy. Most everyday scents that confront the consumer are born in the providence of a test tube, sampled and matched against naked scents.

We even enhance natural scents as exemplified by wine glasses that are marketed with the claim that they reveal the bouquet of a particular grape grown in a particular region of the world. How can we escape the allure of such products when our staunchest consumer critics endorse them? Never fear for most smells can also be put to unassuming use. Of course we couldn't have a text on the historicity of smell, without the mention of the doyen of taste and memory. Who would Marcel Proust have been without his nose? Without smell, we are crippled in the pursuit of gustatory pleasure. The noted Proust effect, induced by a spoonful of tea and *madeleine* crumbs, is a powerful historical apparatus that evokes key events in the past. This effect remains markedly different from how a chemosensory experience describes our ability to smell. Yet, for the purposes of conceiving a stream of memories in the past, autobiographical and otherwise, the recognition of a scent can certainly be thought provoking.

As the taxonomy of smell increases in complexity, so does the boldness of the marketing that sells scents. Our biology gives admen something more to exploit. Give that kid a contract! Proust, locked in his closed-eye reverie, is certainly the poster boy for this discussion. There is much irony in the scentless, as our want to clear the air or fill the air is in sync with the moons of fashion, the least influential of poorly understood societal phenomena. Upward trends wreak havoc with our culturally unscented norms. Certain public intellectuals bemoan the 'de-caffeinated' society in which we live. 'Today's history comes deodorized', remarked the late historian Roy Porter. What we now respect is full-strength, unfiltered and uncensored. In bestowing an honorary doctorate on the late American TV gourmet Julia Child, Harvard mentioned in her citation that she, 'filled the air with common sense and uncommon scent'.⁹ If ever this sprawling tome is revised, I suggest an entry should associate its title with Ms. Child's earnest directness.

In the end, the ideas presented in these collected essays take us in many divergent directions. The reader who mills this text for historical thoughts on scent, will inevitably scan through the obtuse passages on supero-laterally situated olfactory receptors and relish the moment when an author dwells on faecal allusions in Joyce's prose. Sadly, science here is irrelevant and included to remind us that there is understanding in our isolation of odor types. While we may recognize sandalwood, we are unlikely to sniff out skatolish, etc. This science is by and large *meaningless* given the context. Social historians take from these writings a lesson that adds to their arsenal for scene painting.

Particular scents are associated with moments in time, and can be characteristic of class, type and era. No one doubts that smell is important. If asked, which of the senses is least appreciated and most enjoyed, what would you answer? The manner in which such academic volumes come to light is always a curious one, but rest assured that herein the underdog earns its medal for the high jump.

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NOTES:

¹ C. Classen, D. Howes, and A. Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 89.

² M. Bronwen and R. Felizitas (eds.), *Sense and Scent: An Explanation of Olfactory Meaning* (Dublin: Philomel, 2003), p.14.

³ *Sense and Scent*, p. 31.

⁴ E. Kandel, J. Schwartz, T. Jessell (eds.), *Principles of Neural Science* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2000), p. 625.

⁵ J. A. Brillat-Savarin (trans. by M.F.K.Fisher), *The Physiology of Taste; or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* (Washington: Counterpoint, 1999), p. 39.

⁶ Brillat-Savarin offers the evidence of three simple experiments: First, the person has a head cold or *coryza*, dulling his taste. Everything he swallows has no taste even though his tongue is functional. Second, the person consumes food while pinching shut his nostrils, he realizes that his sense of taste is faint. 'By this means, the nastiest dosage can be swallowed quite easily.' The third, produces the same effect as the second by at the moment of swallowing, he presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth. This, Brillat-Savarin claims, prevents the scent-loaded air from circulating. pp. 39–40.

⁷ *Sense and Scent*, author's translation. pp. 44–45.

⁸ *Sense and Scent*, p. 47.

⁹ R.W. Apple, "Recalling Julia Child, Oyster-Loving Idealist", *The New York Times*, 18 August 2004.