

PERFUME AND LITERATURE

*The Persistence of
the Ephemeral*

Daniela Ciani Forza
Simone Francescato
Editors

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Cosmetica Italia is proud to present Perfume and Literature. The Persistence of the Ephemeral, a publication that illustrates the extensive, diversified roots of perfume in the universe of literature and world culture. This book is testimony to just what degree smells and the world of fragrances have always played a constant role in society, at all levels and at various latitudes. It is clear that leading the concept of perfume back to alcoholic compositions is restrictive: perfume encompasses anything that stimulates the sense of smell, offering emotive sensations that reflect the multiple facets and complexity of interpersonal relationships.

When Cosmetica Italia was founded in 1967 with the name Unipro – Unione nazionale industrie di profumeria, cosmesi, saponi da toeletta ed affini (Union of Industries for Perfumery, Cosmetics, Toilet Soaps and similar) – over half of the founding members came from businesses that produced perfume; this is therefore not only proof of how important the world of perfumery actually was in the cosmetics sector, but also of how it responded to the taste of a people who stood out with its creativity, innate elegance and sophistication. It was the confirmation of leadership within the tradition, innovation and historical-social legacy of perfume, the history of which goes back to times immemorial, and shows that our country is still the unrivalled protagonist. In addition to this Italian result we can now add the sensitivity and competence of the editors and authors of this publication that, from Venice, the birthplace of the art of perfumery, we hope will contribute significantly to the knowledge of the fascinating and mysterious nature of perfume.

Fabio Rossello
President of Cosmetica Italia
The Personal Care Association

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EDITORS' PREFACE

How can you describe a perfume? How can you put into words a presence that is fleeting but intense, embodied in an evanescent fragrance? From the beginnings of time, the fascination of *pro-fumus* – which, being intangible, joins the sensitive with the spiritual – accompanies religious ceremonies, social occasions, personal encounters and memories, offering moments of liberation from subjection to the visible, and from the precariousness of the tangible. Similarly, the preciousness of essences and spices is underlined by the onset of important economic and cultural relations amongst peoples, be they close by or far away.

Literature, on the other hand, cannot help but reflect the exuberance with which the olfactory sphere pervades its pages – the narrated stories accompanying us with visions and sensations animated by the art of the word:

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes ... the shelves are
crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it
(vv. 7-9)

From the very first lines of his most famous poem, “Song of Myself,” Walt Whitman, the great American bard and father of modern poetry, intoxicates us with this image of perfumes pervading homes and rooms, shelves that are overflowing, and that he himself “knows” and “likes.” Far away from the sophisticated

preparations of the Old World, and from its iconographic rhetoric, the perfumes Whitman would evoke later on in the poem exhale trails of knowledge as if they were essences. What Whitman's free verse and immediate language are singing is the 'perfume of democracy,' and it is ultimately with this that he wants to identify his country, and in the latter identify himself. One 'breathes' knowledge: like a perfume it rises from life, and like life it derives its substance from the surrounding reality; it renews it and places it in a dialogic comparison.

Emulating Whitman's words, we shall therefore look more closely into the relations between writing and olfactory sensations as eloquent signs of world cultures – of the diverse sensitivity with which we each interpret its nuances. The essays in this collection are testimony to this. As regards their style, content, and approach to the subject, they offer a kaleidoscopic overview of a 'literary-olfactive' universe. They all deal with different aspects, reflecting on the mystery of perfumes and, more in general, on the sense of smell, the most archaic of the five senses – a reflection that spans literary history from antiquity until today. It ranges from Renaissance culture, Symbolism and the *fin de siècle* Decadent Movement, finally reaching postmodern world-shaking literary phenomena such as Patrick Süskind's renowned novel *Perfume* (1985). Already in the past century such a theme was object of important anthropological and sociological studies, such as the fundamental one by Alain Corbin (1982), which later gave rise, in particular in the Anglo-Saxon world, to olfactory studies, a branch that has investigated this still relatively new universe from an interdisciplinary perspective, resulting in works such as Clasen, Howes and Synnott's (1994).

Despite the extensive production of texts on the precious art of perfumery or the history of essences and perfumes, there are still very few studies about the sense of smell in the literary field, although the ones available are of great quality; one such example

is Hans J. Rindisbacher's (1992), which is an excellent reference for a more specific, orthodox study of the subject. In an attempt to fill this gap and expand the horizon of these studies, the essays in this collection not only offer enlightened insights into works and authors – some of whom are very well known, whilst others deserve to be rediscovered in a new light – but, above all, they offer an innovative and idiosyncratic interpretation of what a study of perfume in literature worldwide actually means. The result is a selection of contributions that explore an intricate, diversified thematic itinerary with both curiosity and eclecticism.

The book starts with an introductory essay by Giuseppe Goisis, who offers a systematic reflection on the 'vicissitudes' of olfactive perception in philosophic and literary thought from its origins to the modern day.

This preface is followed by thematic essays, each of which presents the role that olfactive sensitivity exerts in literary imagination in diverse languages. They range from the classic to today's vehicular, including the less common ones that, nevertheless, are an expression of great civilisations and significant artistic and intellectual confluence.

Unveiling the versatility of its meanings, the contributions in this volume show that the importance of perfume is anything but secondary in different literatures and to their canonical authors. Thus, with his select choice of Shakespeare's texts, Sergio Perosa illustrates the significant variants with which the Bard describes perfumes and smells in his works; similarly, with its analysis of *The Tale of Genji*, Giorgio Amitrano's essay highlights the value Japanese culture attributed to perfume: the conception itself of olfactive ability being not equal to pure aesthetic sensitivity, but to the ability to concentrate that such a practice implies. Alessandra Lavagnino's essay also looks at the edifying meaning of perfume with her analysis of the relationship between 'fragrance' and 'ethics' in literature, starting with Confucian tradition, and still present today in the entire Chinese culture.

Paolo Mastandrea focuses on classical antiquity, presenting us with an *excursus* of Latin, pagan and Christian authors who dwell on the subject of smells, sensing first and foremost the spontaneous relationship with circumstances and surroundings – whether conventional or exotic – in which each of the literary descriptions is set. Magda Campanini's essay then opens the window onto perfumes and Western European literature; it looks at the continuity of the Renaissance with the Classic culture in the context of relations between Italy and France, where perfume is a motif of interaction between the sacred and profane.

Dwelling on the works of authors who were dazzled by the fascination of perfume, Massimiliano De Villa outlines an itinerary that starts with Romanticism, leads to the Decadent Movement and German Expressionism, thus introducing the reader to the Middle European world and its existential unrest at the beginning of the twentieth century. Massimo Tria writes about the synaesthetic sensations associated with the olfactive universe, introducing us to the writer and painter Josef Váchal, an eclectic exponent of the Czech culture and the author of the curious book *Mystics of the Sense of Smell*, in which a visual and visionary universe blends with natural phenomena through smells and perfumes. Two of the authors reflect on the complexity of the history of Eastern Europe. In Donatella Possamai's essay on the Russian writer Ivan Bunin, perfume appears to be inextricably linked to his memories during exile, whilst in Giuseppina Turano's on Albanian literature exile seems to be associated with the affirmation of an identity that is suspended between ideologies and contrasting aspirations.

Perfume is generally outlined as a link and evidence of the hybridisation and contamination between traditions; owing to its very nature, it is nevertheless the concrete expression of a wealth of diversities that are not exhausted by simple exotic or exotically inspired evocations, as some of the essays show so clearly here.

For example, Elisabetta Bartuli's offers us an image of a de-Westernised contemporary Arab world: one that is deep-rooted in the legacy of a history that has developed pervasive concepts of civilisation on the art of perfume distillation and the transposition of human emotions in the most concrete olfactive expressions. Similarly, Caterina Carpinato's essay on Greek literature, from the late Byzantine age to Kavafis' modern poetry, underlines how the extensive presence of references to perfumes and fragrances in such a context is derived from an atavistic tradition that is still alive in popular culture today. Giampiero Bellingeri looks at Turkish and Turkish-Ottoman literature, offering us examples of refined poetry that, through the ethereal metaphor of essences, rises up to intertwine factuality with evanescence.

Vanessa Castagna's essay focuses on the connection between the Old Continent and the colonial world, underlining how ample room was given in Portuguese literature to the fragrances of spices that were imported from the colonies, such as cinnamon, which mainly became a highly prized commodity in commercial trade. Carmen Concilio then focuses on the contemporaneity of a literature that is the fruit of colonial history, introducing us to migrant authors for whom the perception of perfumes and smells is a source of nostalgia, opening up the threshold between a sense of homeliness and homelessness – between being here, and elsewhere.

This brings us to the literature of the New World. Whilst the idea of perfume in Argentinian literature is dichotomously centred on the word pair Eros/Thanatos, as Silvana Serafin shows so clearly, in North American literature we find multivalent nuances and meanings. Perfume is thus an index of moral frivolity and aestheticizing dilettantism, as Simone Francescato writes; similarly, in her reflections on the manifesto by the New York perfumer Christopher Brosius, Irene Nasi shows how it is a “breath of nature,” whilst according to Giorgia Tommasi

in William Faulkner's works it is confused amidst the smell of death and the exuberant fluxes from a world that has fallen into decline. In her essay on American theatre in the twentieth century Francesca Bisutti, on the other hand, shows us that when evoked on the stage, perfume acquires the mysterious permanence of a dramatic illusion.

There are interesting synergies to be found between the world of perfumes and other spheres of creativity in this book. With extensive extracts from the correspondence between Gabriele d'Annunzio and his perfumer, Pietro Gibellini offers us a highly particular perspective of the writer's manifold talent; he not only allows us an insight into the extremely sensitive poet, but also into a figure who is an unexpected prompter of essences and designer of original labels. Diego Cembrola, for his part, delves into the music world, underlining the subtle similarities that link it to that of olfaction and that, according to the author, underlie the creative process of the musicologist and perfumer Edmond Roudnitska.

Meena Alexander's poetic *Envoy* brings the volume to a creative close, with two texts she composed especially for the occasion. In both the poetess uses perfume as metaphor that blends the essences of her native India, of the places she visited and where she lived, and of her current life in America: an everlasting flow between memory and the present, imagined and recreated in the poetic space to overcome any liminality.

Countless other samples of literature could have been included here to show just how much influence *pro-fumus* continues to have on the art of writing, and on how it can portray the essence of a dialogue between cultures. However, we wanted to offer readers a glimpse of this endless panorama, in which perfume propagates its spirit: the languages it speaks, and how it transforms its fleeting, but intense presence.

The first edition of this book was published in Italian in 2014. Both the Italian and this new English edition are meant as a homage to the opening of the Perfume Museum at Ca' Mocenigo in Venice, the restoration of which received the patronage of the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia and generous support from the Vidal family. Their Mavive Parfums firm is indeed an example of how a new entrepreneurial spirit can contribute to the prestige and significance of an art that has been part of the history of Venice through time.

Particular thanks go to Cosmetica Italia for having believed in both projects and for supporting them so generously.

OLFACTION AND PERFUME IN THE REDISCOVERY OF THE SENSIBLE LIFE

Giuseppe Goisis

The sensible life along the path of humanity

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contemporary culture and philosophy in particular encouraged an energetic reappraisal of the sensible life as an integral part of corporeity and intermediation between humans and ‘their’ world.¹

‘Sensibility’ evokes an interface relationship with the world, while the ‘sensorium,’ a distinct term/concept that is related to the former, expresses a more articulated and determined approach to the world, which is displayed through stimuli and prompts from the five sense organs; each has its specific role but they interact with one another, resulting in what is traditionally known as the ‘sensory realm.’²

However, the real filter that controls everything is the brain; together with the encephalon and the central nervous system, the brain is the true keystone of the human building. Now, although this fundamental function had already been sensed and even studied in detail by some of the great philosophers in the past, such as Bergson,³ it was not until today that the crucial, neuralgic relevance of our brain has been understood: it is able to create order in chaos and chance, allowing us to perceive the forms of reality and gradually construct a unitary image of the world.⁴

Paying more and more attention to scientists, philosophers have seen the brain as an extraordinary ‘transformer;’ they have understood it was capable of linking each of the stimuli from the external world and, with a continuous motion from the inte-

rior to the exterior, of transferring memory and the plurality of memories on the world, to bestow transparency to opaqueness, and light to the darkness of the indefinite.

From a philosophical perspective, sensibility and the sensorium were reassessed as part of the general rediscovery of the corporeal dimension and its primary value. Ludwig Feuerbach, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche played a particular role in this, highlighting the centrality of the body in human life with their rigorous anthropological analysis: to use the words of Gabriel Marcel, thanks to this philosophical activity, “we do not have a body, but we are our body” (236; 252).⁵

Reassessing the body, these three great philosophers understood and described the original meaning, associating it with mankind’s lengthy evolution. Corporeity, and sensible life in particular link man’s path to his animal origins; slowly, with great reversibility and brusque falls, humans gradually emerged, elevating themselves from the condition common to that of animals thanks to modesty, *pietas* and other forms in which social ties are expressed; as a result, every way in which the future human is conceived appears to be rooted in a kind of nostalgia, in a close relationship with the past that one would like to overcome; however, it is one that seems impossible to disassociate oneself from, and even arouses in us a considerable sense of regret.⁶

Of all animals, man seems to be the most adept at delocalisation; always aware and exhaustive, his consciousness makes him a unique being who is able to intervene in the world resolutely, thanks to technique, which is potentially able to distance itself from the immediacy of his surroundings.

The unique nature of man has often been perceived by those philosophers who studied technical progress in greater depth (for example, Heidegger, Jonas and Gehlen), with its potential to ‘conceptualise’ the world: in reference to humans, the theme of intentionality also means going beyond the indistinct embrace

of the world; instead, it means conceptually discerning, selecting and describing in an articulate manner the various forms that can be perceived in the world surrounding our existence (*Umwelt*), with the aim of transforming the world itself.

It is the ‘image’ that allows vigorous emancipation from evocations from the external world: whilst taking form in our mind and brain, together with the sensible life the image seems to be capable of taking us elsewhere, beyond, yonder; as it was rightly described, our form delocalises, it exists outside ourselves, outside our bodies and outside our conscious. For the image, existence takes place in a form that is without its original place. “Each form and every thing that comes into being outside its own place becomes an image” (Coccia 45-6).

Plato: the hierarchy of the senses and the privilege of sight

In one of his beautiful books, Marcel Detienne described the perfumed fascination of gardens, which were so close to the hearts of men in both ancient and modern times.⁷

Nevertheless, this common feeling occurs by disassociating oneself from the philosophers’ point of view, at least from the most influential part of those who believe the sense of smell and taste are only able to give a sense of momentary pleasure that is linked to a superficial layer of the memory, regarding only ‘what usually happens.’

Plato in particular distrusted *empeiria*, that is, experience, which is unable to elevate itself to *techne*.⁸ Chance and chaos dominate experience while according to Plato, the philosopher prefers the condition in which man imprints his seal on material through technique, following a regulating finality that, through the comprehension of models, leads to the transformation of the world.

Thus, from the very beginning, what is disturbing about the sense of smell is the passivity that it induces in humans: some-

thing coming from the external world catches us, is imprinted in us and changes our existential tone, regardless of our volition. While many philosophers see universality and liberty as the decisive human traits, the sense of taste and smell do not appear to be particularly susceptible to abstraction, thus simultaneously ignoring the dimensions of universality (singularity prevails) and liberty (we experience the fascination or repulsion of smells and tastes).

In the age of mass deodorants, one can perceive widespread irritation towards anything that hinders our frenzy, our incessant activism and, in the background it might be concealing a deep sense of shame for our ancient animal origins that we are trying to remove, although even the sudden whiff of a smell can evoke such origins in a flash.⁹

Plato was firmly convinced that smell/perfume, and olfaction that detects them, were the relics of an approach that precedes thought, much as if they displayed the ecstasy and charm of a magic age in their centre, in which inspiration makes men inebriated like poets and incapable of real responsibility.

Technique is superior to experience because it has an objective, because it expresses the smithying awareness of man and his soul and because the technical dimension is based on a knowledge of causes; the see-saw alternation of experience, on the other hand, displays considerable fortuitousness, with man at the mercy of fortune, unable to “to explain or to give a reason of the nature of its own applications. And I do not call any irrational thing an art” (*Gorgia* 465a).¹⁰

Let us look at the following passage, which I think is decisive, where the great Greek philosopher contrasts medicine, which is capable of ‘giving reasons to justify what it does’ and the art of cooking and gastronomy, which instead offer ephemeral pleasure:

I was saying, I think, that cookery seems to me not an art but

a habitude, unlike medicine, which, I argued, has investigated the nature of the person whom she treats and the cause of her proceedings, and has some account to give of each of these things; so much for medicine: whereas the other, in respect of the pleasure to which her whole ministrations are given, goes to work there in an utterly inartistic manner, without having investigated at all either the nature or the cause of pleasure, and altogether irrationally – with no thought, one may say, of differentiation, relying on routine and habitude for merely preserving a memory of what is wont to result; and that is how she is enabled to provide her pleasures.¹¹

Two observations are necessary: first of all, in this and in other similar passages, Plato links the two senses of smell and taste, which are considered decidedly ‘inferior,’ associating inextricably the nose and palate, and outlining a sort of synesthesia, as the reference to gastronomy clearly shows. I believe that in the background, the idea that the hierarchy between the senses wants to place the more immediate ones on the lower steps, the ones that are more closely linked to the corporeal dimension and human passiveness, and that are endowed with less cognitive drive.

Secondly, I would like to point out how two kinds of memory unfold in Plato’s thought, and they do so in such a way that they both merge with sensation; the first, which is of an associative and mechanical nature, transfers the sensation with the attestation ‘of what usually occurs,’ configuring a world of the approximate and ephemeral; this memory thus has no real cognitive potential. One can therefore understand the existence of another kind of memory with a more superior value, which would help the artisan’s technical drive, a memory of used models and the difficulties involved in their creation; this is therefore a memory that is connected to planning and creation (in the sense that the verb ‘to create’ is not an operation starting from nothing, but a demiurgic transformation of matter).¹²

One of Plato's last dialogues, introducing the myth of the Demiurge, *Laws* offers a harmonious conclusion of Plato's intuitions about the nature of the cosmos, the soul and the city, creating an 'artificialistic' model in which it is ideas in the sense of paradigms that dominate.

Because of their roots, ideas refer to seeing and contemplating: having become experts of their ideas, with every scruple men use them to order and transform the world.

Let us dwell a moment on the primacy of sight, which is a true characteristic of the conception of the Hellenic world and Plato's in particular; as attested in the Bible, while ancient Israel establishes the primacy of hearing, the Greek *Weltanschauung* reveals the privileged position of the dimension of the act of looking and sight, emphasising the enchantment of a limpid, crystalline vision without any opacity. However, the connection between sight, initially disinterested, and the useful does not elude us:

To what does the carpenter look in making the shuttle? Does he not look to that which is naturally fitted to act as a shuttle? [...] And whatever shuttles are wanted, for the manufacture of garments, thin or thick, of flaxen, woollen, or other material, ought all of them to have the true form of the shuttle; and whatever is the shuttle best adapted to each kind of work, that ought to be the form which the maker produces in each case.¹³

The relationship thus appears to be overturned: only a person who uses an artefact, whether flautist, guitarist or helmsman, is able to judge if it has been made perfectly by its contemplator/creator; this is because it is only through proper concrete use that one can verify the quality of a project that was conceived through the memory regarding the intuitions and inceptive ideas of what is to be the artificer in question. I believe that in this context the distinction between 'pleasure' and 'goodness' is fundamental:

pleasure appears as a short-lived object, with immediate strength but also with a certain superficiality and temporality; it is because the sense of smell and taste are ephemeral that they tend to be disparaged, whilst for Plato this was the case because they could not be associated with a specific nature and a clearly-defined cause.

If the pleasure given by the senses of smell and taste is presented in the form of repetition, with something coarse and untidy, what the other senses prepare, in particular sight, opens up the path for possible reworkings; this is because sight also prevails in politics (the city that Plato had in mind, his ideal Republic was called *Kallipolis*, the beauty and harmonious arrangement of which can be clearly perceived by human eyes).

In short, according to Plato, everything that makes man worthy and elevated – mathematics, astronomy, music, philosophy and theology – is arranged as a succession of the sense of sight, or hearing, which comes after sight; in this ideal hierarchy, in the third place I could add touch, which the artificer needs to test the resistance of matter, so he can challenge and finally overcome it.¹⁴

Structured in this fashion, the hierarchy of the senses has tended to be preserved at length, also because of Plato's decisive influence and the great consideration given to his reasoning which was placed under the sign of the Divine; Plato believed that the gods should be admired and imitated owing to their benevolence which was devoid of any rancour or jealousy, and owing to their sense of harmony and thus justice; being of the same nature as ideas, they live in the light and their blessed existence strengthens the privilege of sight, so that it can be indicated in the lives of mortals.¹⁵ If humans are able to copy the gods, they themselves tend to become divine, in as far as this is possible for a human being.

The political ruler, the one who governs, accepts the city and the characters of the human beings like a wax tablet that can be

engraved, removing what is evil and vain, and writing the plan of a good constitution; nevertheless, Plato warns with the same intensity that it is necessary to maintain a sense of moderation and limit, so that an excess of interventionism does not inebriate men, whom the gods would then dislike. Moderation is befitting to mortals, without forgetting that “the soul surpasses the body in dignity” and that it is supremely useful to “perfect one’s soul” rather than the body, thus looking after not only the macrocosm of the political constitution, but also the microcosm of the “Interior City.”¹⁶

I have mentioned the influence of Plato’s position regarding the superiority of sight compared to the other senses; it suffices to remember Saint Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy, who defined the primacy of the “highly noble sense of sight,” which exists so that man “may freely survey the sensible objects around him, both heavenly and earthly, so as to gather intelligible truth from all things” (“libere [...] ex omni parte sensibilia cognoscere, et coelestia et terrena”).¹⁷

The above-mentioned quotation is part of a detailed description of the human organism, in which Saint Thomas gives each part of the body inferior and superior powers, so that each element of our organism has a congruence and clearly-defined purpose: precisely because he is destined to develop the interior dimension, man’s external senses are less developed than in other animals.

Going back to our object of interest, the sense of smell is weak because it requires ‘dryness,’ while the presence of a larger brain would mean intense ‘humidity,’ which Saint Thomas believed helped alleviate the heat produced by the heart. Finally, the fact that man’s hands were more developed compensated any other weakness: since he no longer had to use his hands, assuming an upright position to move, they remained free for work and craftsmanship.

For the philosopher this is all very convenient, and as it is convenient, it is also beautiful and dignified since, in the end,

man has the language that allows him to rise up and communicate and relate with other human beings.

What Saint Thomas is for medieval Christianity and Catholicism, Avicenna is for Islam; Avicenna believed the primary sense was touch, followed by taste, which was necessary to find food, and more suited to vigour and health. The sense of smell (*al-šamm*) is located in the two frontal protuberances in the brain. The medium for the sense of smell is water or air, as it is either transmitted through smoke or vapour, and since we perceive smells through water or the air. However, Avicenna also believed that the most noble and important sense was sight, and he wrote extensively on the subject, including both medical and scientific treatises, the climax of which was the “prophetic vision.”¹⁸

The ambiguity of smell: from Adorno to the dandy

The entire modern culture is characterised by its love/hate for the body. The body is derided as something inferior, but at the same time it is desired, like a forbidden dimension, alienated and precisely because of this, sought after and the object of a mad, forbidden love. Reified and separated from the spirit, the body is also desired because one can perceive the painful nature of the operation that estranged the body from the spirit, and violently set them apart.

Horkheimer and Adorno write:

In civilization, therefore, smell is regarded as a disgrace, a sign of the lower social orders, lesser races, and baser animals. The civilized person is allowed to give way to such desires only if the prohibition is suspended by rationalization in the service of practical purposes, real or apparent. One is allowed to indulge the outlawed drive if acting with the unquestionable aim of expunging it. (156)

The ambiguity of smell and smelling in modern civilisation could not have been brought to light better; prohibition can be transformed into an irresistible inclination, with the double impulse of indulging in the taboo whilst destroying its source, either with disdain or mockery.

A sort of mimetic function is in action, propelling a partial satisfaction, one that leads to savouring before immediately afterwards hiding or cancelling it: “Anyone who sniffs out ‘bad’ smells in order to extirpate them may imitate to his heart’s content the snuffling which takes its unrationalized pleasure in the smell itself. Disinfected by the civilized sniffer’s absolute identification with the prohibiting agency, the forbidden impulse eludes the prohibition” (*ibid.*).

In the apparently coherent frame of civilization, a crack appears exactly at the point at organic the mechanic and associative suddenly emerge within the organic: when one goes beyond this threshold, one can hear laughter, laughter of mockery and conformism, which alleviates the situation as it is inexorably attracted to the very thing we despise.

The sinister ambivalence of smell is reminiscent of racism, the disdain for anyone we believe inferior and also the obscure attraction we feel for all of this; particular attention to social phenomena and politics cannot remain indifferent to these different aspects, which converge and assemble in a single perspective.¹⁹

In the same way that the ephemeral communion of laughter is produced to the detriment of something or somebody, the racists’ community of mockery is suddenly created; it enjoys an authoritarian exemption from that ban to place the sense of smell and that dimension of smell at the centre that, in a flash, creates both the community of the despised and the collective, the racial community of those who believe they are superior. Their clamour is organised laughter, the merciless derision in which fury and toxic imitation converge into a single dimension.

In reality, each smell or perfume is a symbol and this easily triggers the translation into other symbols, bringing about the mimesis of mimesis with figures, at times complex, that imply regressive camouflages with the barbaric roll of drums, with the hammering repetition of gestures and words, indicating the continuous reversibility between ideology and nature, between reality and its clownish disguise.

This is what is so clearly insidious about totalitarianism: it tries to stir up the revolt of exploited nature against the rule that is at the service of the rule itself.

This all evokes the undeniable tie between the sense of smell and sexuality. In its tangle that sums up languid refinement and extreme barbarism, the figure of the dandy constantly highlights this relationship between the sense of smell and sexuality. In his novel *À rebours* [*Against the Grain*], Joris Karl Huysmans describes Des Esseintes, a dandy who is disgusted by common smells and thus seeks ancient fragrances such as the hazelnut paste, lily emulsion, lotions with strawberry and elder water, and lastly solutions with cinchona ink and rose water:

He handled this collection, formerly bought to please a mistress who swooned under the influence of certain aromatics and balms, – a nervous, unbalanced woman who loved to steep the nipples of her breasts in perfumes, but who never really experienced a delicious and overwhelming ecstasy save when her head was scraped with a comb or when she could inhale, amid caresses, the odor of perspiration, or the plaster of unfinished houses on rainy days, or of dust splashed by huge drops of rain during summer storms. (ch. 10)

One could actually say that Huysman's entire work is influenced by the sense of smell, which was his real guide and authentic orientation through the labyrinth of the world: from the bitter fragrances of carnal temptation and even Satanism, up to the incense

that dominates in his last works, on his path to conversion, for example in *La cathédrale* (1895), *L'oblat* (1903) and *Les foules de Lourdes* (1906), in his search for the authentic ‘perfume of holiness.’ As we shall see later, Oscar Wilde, Gabriele D’Annunzio and Marcel Proust were certainly not to be immune to Huysmans’ influence.²⁰

Nietzsche against Plato: the sense of smell undergoes vigorous rehabilitation. What about today?

One might wonder why so many precise, detailed observations are made about the sense of smell and smells/perfumes in literature rather than in philosophy.²¹ One of the scholars who dealt with this question was Cavalieri and she names a long list, including Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola, Pirandello, Gadda, Calvino and countless others.²²

According to several exponents, the fundamental reason for this lies in the inevitable subjectivity and singularity of the limits of the sense of smell, which is unable to attain a classification founded on the abstractive abilities of our mind.

When summarising the presumed inferiority of the sense of smell, Kant explains this perfectly: “it is contrary to liberty,” imposing itself on us as defenceless beings, with exceptional speed and placing us in a condition of passiveness.²³

Nevertheless, as early as the nineteenth century Kant’s peremptory judgement was being disputed.

Firstly, with the striking force of Feuerbach’s contestation, who believed that the sense of smell and taste are related to one another and actually represent a sort of ‘sixth sense;’ from a synthetic perspective the latter is able to unify the complex bulk of experience, with a kind of anticipatory ability, understanding the sense of smell as an ability to ‘scent’ the progress of the human path, step by step.²⁴

Discerning a new “philosophy of the future,” Feuerbach

fought bitterly against the dualism of body and soul, spirit and the flesh, clearly distancing himself from idealism and reinterpreting Christianity to corroborate his own theses.

Ignored by ascetics and idealist philosophers, the theme of nourishment played a key role in Feuerbach's works, resulting in the renowned expression "man is what he eats." Such a statement implies cognition, self-control and education, whilst it does not mean what is erroneously attributed to Feuerbach: an idea of dissipation and the egoistic oblivion of the other men.

The sense of smell is the best path to follow to reach the new dietary discipline that Feuerbach foresees. His reassessment of sensibility is gradually transformed into sensuality, in the conscious cultivation of the senses that are declared the true "sources of all happiness." According to Feuerbach, beyond the determinism that enchains the animal world, the sense of smell and taste grant us access to the world, becoming factors that create genuine freedom: when adequately nourished, the heart and brain are able to nourish thoughts of benevolence and collaboration.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche undertook a formidable reappraisal of the sense of smell, together with a revival of the sensorium in general, as part of the picture of a renewed consideration of corporeity. Initially at least, Feuerbach was moving along the horizon of a Christianity that had been brought back to the world in a cleansed form, trying to eliminate the dualism that had been introduced by gnosis, Catharism and Manichaeism; in some of his more explosive papers, however, Nietzsche broke radically with Christian tradition, and transformed philosophy into a question of the 'nose,' in other words, rapid intuition, capable of sudden synthesis.

The 'decadence' of the human is perceived through the smell of death, decomposition, and also hypocrisy, which is connected to an excess of idealism and reveals itself to olfaction through a smell of fustiness, as if one were in a closed storeroom ...

Of course these are metaphors, but decisive ones that take philosophy back to its moment of original intuitiveness, gushing forth with great vigour, in relation to the experience of man's primary and immediate orientation in the labyrinth of the world.

Whilst Nietzsche believed Parmenides separated the senses from reason claiming they deceive, the German philosopher spurned such a separation, speaking of the senses as more primitive than reason.²⁵ According to Nietzsche, Western metaphysics has always neglected the senses with a certain viciousness, even cruelty: but it is not the senses that deceive, since anything that is worthy of faith comes from them, from them alone.

In several passages in his vast work, Nietzsche highlights the interpretative power of the senses: they make phenomena simple, they give the self-same phenomena new profiles, allowing humans not only to open themselves up to the world, but also to take control. The intensification and dilation of the senses sharpens our cognitive ability and, furthermore, according to the philosopher, it is impossible to understand the world in a manner that is different to how it is presented by our senses.

And what magnificent instruments of observation we possess in our senses! This nose, for example, of which no philosopher has yet spoken with reverence and gratitude, is actually the most delicate instrument so far at our disposal: it is able to detect tiny chemical concentrations that even elude a spectroscope. Today we possess science precisely to the extent to which we have decided to accept the testimony of the senses – to the extent to which we sharpen them further, arm them, and have learned to think them through.²⁶

Further on, the philosopher from Röcken inveighs against logic – this fragile, inanimate spider's web:

The rest is miscarriage and not-yet-science – in other words,

metaphysics, theology, psychology, epistemology – or formal science, a doctrine of signs, such as logic and that applied logic which is called mathematics. In them reality is not encountered at all, not even as a problem – no more than the question of the value of such a sign-convention as logic.

Elsewhere, Nietzsche invokes a philosophy of nourishment and perfumes, challenging traditional philosophies that had renounced anything that gave colour and vibration to existence. This would guarantee “the salvation of mankind” but he realises that “such a philosophy does not yet exist.”

In *Ecce Homo*, in a manner that is often moving, Nietzsche bares his soul, which has been polluted for so long by the ‘moraline,’ by an education that is excessively idealistic, ruining his eyes and stomach, making him unable to live his existence in good health. Hence, an explosive spirit of rebellion, based on the best resources of his own temperament.

I have a finer nose for the signs of ascent and descent than any man has ever had, I am the teacher par excellence of this – I know both, I am both. (11)

It is to the sense of smell, half sense and half intuition that Nietzsche reconnects his “instinct of cleanliness,” his “fine nose” for what is around him in its very depths, even the bowels of every soul.

Related to this are his observations on the German cuisine and habits, which he appears to detest: “German intellect is indigestion, it gets finished with nothing.”²⁷

In a passage evoking Venice, also in *Ecce homo*, Nietzsche underlines the value of taste: “The customary word for this self-defense instinct is ‘taste;’” taste and the sense of smell teach you to say yes and no, without any quibbles, as an immediate reaction: the scholar “peruses, does not think” whereas one should

think on one's own and with immediacy what life requires (1975b, 300-1).

According to the philosopher one should also reflect on the “small things:” diet, place, climate and games, all of which are things that traditional philosophy despised because they were egoistic; but the serious things of such philosophies are only lies, conventional lies ...

Finally, with an outburst of radical sincerity in which one can detect a hint of delirium, Nietzsche claims, almost as if he were shouting: “I was the first to *discover* the truth in that I was the first to sense the lie as lie – to *smell* it... My genius lies in my nostrils...” (90).

Nietzsche’s vehement observations seem to have become an almost irresistible model, becoming part of the common understanding. I shall limit myself to mentioning the highly popular stances of Michel Onfray, a singular pop philosopher who fills the public squares, in France especially, with his packed conferences. He contrasts the immediate violence of the sensorium with “conceptual ectoplasms,” vague and bloodless abstractions that appear to have relentlessly dominated so many expressions of traditional philosophic thought.

Onfray rewrites the history of philosophy in the opposite direction, exalting the philosophers who did not despise the senses, and the sense of smell in particular (Protagoras, Epicurus, Lucretius, La Mettrie and Condillac, amongst others).

In one of his most successful works Onfray outlines a sort of history of the sense of smell, bringing the pleasure it gives back to the heart of the philosophical discourse about man, observing how disdain for smells is inextricably linked to disdain for the body.²⁸ Unjustified disdain because neglecting the sense of smell means isolating oneself from reality since the nose “is the door that connects the brain to the world, the bridge uniting the subject that perceives with the perceived reality.”

Our body is an ‘amorous body,’ open to pleasure but also

aesthetic enjoyment, and man is able to transform the world through emotions, seizing it as a pretext of excellence and delight.

In the age of globalisation, sacrificing the sense of smell would have resulted in considerable disorientation, depriving us of the sensible pleasures that are the most intense to our nature.

If one looks more closely, by making Nietzsche coherent, Onfray comes to a simple reversal, an overturning of the traditional perspective as exemplified by Plato.

I believe, however, that one should grasp the positive aspect of such contestations, with a certain disdain for the technology in the background, seeking a new equilibrium with the values expressed by traditional philosophies and customs. Thus, with its essences perfume in particular does not negate the essences described in Platonic and neo-Platonic tradition, thus taking the first essences as a ladder to reach the other, supersensible ones.

In this overview I have showed that the sense of smell represents a fundamental ability for orienting oneself in the world, and for contemporary man its absence represents an actual impoverishment; the sense of smell is a primary ‘category’ to establish relations between human beings, causing attraction and repulsion, constituting an initial filter of sociability (the ambiguity lies in the following: the filter that is necessary can become an insurmountable barrier, an endless source of stereotypes and prejudice, fuelled by those who want to discriminate and hierarchize).

In conclusion, the sense of smell does not appear to have been sentenced once and for all to being the fixture of an insuperable singularity, and thus becoming against freedom; it seems to have a synthetic value, a sort of ‘sixth sense’ that is able to summarise and merge together the entire experience, also with a few anticipatory glimmers, such as the ability to ‘have a nose for’ the progress of the human path, step by step.

Lastly, I would like to make a few observations about per-

fume. It can be chosen at will, and even collected; it is not completely ephemeral, on the contrary, it fights against time; as Proust observed, perfume “supports the huge building of memory,” and it not only evokes individual infancy, or other phases of our existence, but helps us remember complex settings and landscapes, natural and interhuman, permeating the past with the present and, beyond the present, providing us with the construction of a shared future, with the daily suggestion of prudence that calculates our path *step by step*.²⁹

Smell is endowed with extraordinary ambiguity; it is an intricate knot that cannot be undone: if Hell smells of sulphur, the paths of Paradise smell of myrrh and exquisite plant resins, the magic of which has always masked animal smells, evoking in its enchantments the eternal rebirth of life in the spring. The perfume of plants, or anything simulating the fragrances of plants, evokes the conviction that the plant kingdom is the oldest matrix of life, and this remains in our mind, more or less consciously, with eternal, effective symbolism.³⁰

Perfumes of the past, fascinating perfumes of the unknown, that lead us to seek, and even more so to create.

Nietzsche showed us that there is a smell of fear and lies; on the other side, the perfume of possible hope might be discernible, vague, but intense.

Notes

- 1 Cf. COCCIA.
- 2 Sensorium: “the sensory apparatus or faculties considered as a whole” (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary*). The five senses are: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch).
- 3 Cf. BERGSON 1990.
- 4 Cf. BERGSON 2009.
- 5 Unless otherwise specified, quotations have been translated by C. Cawthra from the original texts, the pages of which are indicated in brackets; cf. CASINI 11-24.
- 6 Cf. CIMATTI *passim*; CORBIN, ch. I.
- 7 Cf. DETIENNE.
- 8 Cf. PLATO, *Protagora*, 320b; PLATO, *Gorgias*, 448c.
- 9 HORKHEIMER AND ADORNO observed that “In the ambiguous partialities of the sense of smell the old nostalgia for what is lower lives on, the longing for immediate union with surrounding nature, with earth and slime. Of all the senses the act of smell-

ing, which is attracted without objectifying, reveals most sensuously the urge to lose oneself in identification with the Other. That is why smell, as both the perception and the perceived – which are one in the act of olfaction – is more expressive than other senses. When we see we remain who we are, when we smell we are absorbed entirely.”

Worthy of note is also this clear summary from *Perfume* by SÜSKIND: “For people could close their eyes to greatness, to horrors, to beauty, and their ears to melodies or deceiving words. But they could not escape scent. For scent was a brother of breath. Together with breath it entered human beings, who could not defend themselves against it, not if they wanted to live. And scent entered into their very core, went directly to their hearts, and decided for good and all between affection and con-

- tempt, disgust and lust, love and hate. He who ruled scent ruled the hearts of men." (61) <http://kadebg.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/perfume-patrick-suskind.pdf>
- 10 Cf. *Fedone* 24-27; *Timeo*, 73a. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/gorgias.html>
- 11 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0178%3Atext%3DGorg.%3Asection%3D501a>
- 12 *Matter and Memory*, a famous book by Bergson, can be regarded as the elucidation of some intuitions on the two memories in the works of Plato and Plotinus.
- 13 <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/cratylus.html>
- 14 For more about the sense of touch, cf. the beautiful book by HELLER-ROAZEN.
- 15 PLATO, *La Repubblica* VI, 500b- 501c.
- 16 Cf. *La Repubblica* IX, 591b- 592b.
- 17 Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS 401; cf. on the subject, Eco 118-9.
- 18 Cf. LIZZINI 144-6; for the "prophetic vision," cf. *ibid.*, 295-301. In actual fact, Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle and the first promoter of characterology made a vigorous attempt at rehabilitating smells and perfumes: cf. THEOPHRAS-
- 19
- TUS, 13- 59. For the ancient Latin scholars, cf. TONDO.
- Humans are divided by stereotypes, corroborating any form of discrimination, cf. APRILE, 7-8; the prejudice of smell is harboured in nearly every kind of racism, in particular in anti-Semitism, cf. SCHÄFER, ch. I.
- 20 Wilde, in particular, displays an irresistible attraction to fragrances, both the natural ones from meadows and woods, and artificial ones in essences, with their overwhelming effect: "And so he would now study perfumes and the secrets of their manufacture, distilling heavily scented oils and burning odorous gums from the East. He saw that there was no mood of the mind that had not its counterpart in the sensuous life, and set himself to discover their true relations, wondering what there was in frankincense that made one mystical, and in ambergris that stirred one's passions, and in violets that woke the memory of dead romances, and in musk that troubled the brain, and in champak that stained the imagination; and seeking often to elaborate a real psychology of perfumes, and to estimate the several influences of sweet-smelling roots and scented, pollen-laden flowers;

of aromatic balms and of dark and fragrant woods; of spikenard, that sickens; of hovenia, that makes men mad; and of aloes, that are said to be able to expel melancholy from the soul.” (133). The reference to the spikenard might be a reference to the Bible: *Song of Songs* 1, 12.

21 Cf. CAVALIERI 2009, 129-81; CAVALIERI 2011, *passim*.

22 Cf. CAVALIERI 2009, 130.

23 Cf. KANT 2010, 48; for more about the opposite meaning of the idea, cf. KANT 2009, 215-6.

24 Cf. FEUERBACH 129-45.

25 Cf. BRUGIALETTI 322-3. For more about Nietzsche, cf. LE GUÉRER 196-215.

26 http://www.inp.uw.edu.pl/mdsie/Political_Thought/twilight-of-the-idols-friedrich-nietzsche.pdf

27 <http://cnqzu.com/library/Philosophy/Ecce%20Homo.pdf>

28 Cf. ONFRAY, part III.

29 Cf. PROUST 37: “Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which

does not yet exist, which it alone can make actual, which it alone can bring into the light of day.” This is the famous passage about the piece of *madeleine*, the biscuit that, together with memory, opens up an entire world, and its profound symbolism does not escape us: the biscuit is shaped like the shell that the pilgrim would attach to their cloaks on their way back from Santiago de Compostela. In Proust, the sense of smell and taste open the door, with the help of memory, to our most authentic *identity*, and of which they remain the most faithful testimony. Cf. POGGI.

30 Cf. LANTERNARI 756-9. In the poem “É uma brisa leve” (“A Light Breeze”), the writer Fernando Pessoa associates the blowing of a breeze with the smell of fragrances, which seem to dissolve identity whilst also accompanying memory as it emerges, allowing the complex articulation of the past to reappear.

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LISTENING TO PERFUME THE SENSE OF SMELL AS ART IN PRINCE GENJI'S WORLD

Giorgio Amitrano

As is the case with many of the greatest literary masterpieces, in the *Tale of Genji* different perfumes pervade the rooms, winding their way into the lives of the characters. However, with its admirable portrayal of aristocratic society in the Heian period (794-1185), the role that fragrances play in this novel¹ is of an importance that is almost unequalled in other great classics. This can be partially explained by the significance of the art of perfume in life at that time, but the intensity with which odours and fragrances repeatedly appear throughout the tale as if they were music themes is certainly also due to the sensitivity that the author, Murasaki Shikibu (around 973 – around 1014) displayed towards the subject.

In that period one of the most esteemed arts at court was the ability to mix incenses; these were not only used as perfume but were also at the centre of competitions in which judges had to compare different formulae and choose the most refined. Known as *kōdo*, this ancient art of incense is still practised in Japan as a refined pastime connected to traditional aesthetics, as are calligraphy or ikebana. The word used in this context to indicate the act of inhaling the incense and appreciating its odour is *monkō* (from the Chinese *wenxiang*), literally: “listening to incense.” More than an experience of a synaesthetic nature in the strict sense of the word, *monkō* is a symbolic allusion to the assiduous attention that is needed to appreciate the different fragrances in incense and to be able to recognize the subtle differences.

As in many other cultures in the Heian period – that is, in a phase of this civilisation in which bathing was not as widespread as it was later – perfumes not only had the function of hiding body smells but also of blending with them to create seductive fragrances. Nevertheless, in addition to this practical use, perfume was also used for religious purposes. In the *Tale of Genji* the two ‘souls’ of perfume live side by side in harmony: the aromas of incense create an immaterial bridge that links the sacred and the profane in people’s everyday lives.

Like many of the elements that characterise the unique nature of Japanese culture, incense came from abroad, arriving in Japan together with Buddhism around the middle of the sixth century.² The first written testimony on the subject is to be found in *Nihon shoki*, a proto-historiographic work that was completed in 720. According to this text, in the third year of the empress Suiko’s rule (595), some inhabitants in Awajishima found a large trunk that had drifted ashore with the tide. When it was burnt, they were surprised to discover that it gave off a delightful perfume in all directions, and they presented it at court.³

Around one century later, in the Nara period (710-794), incense had become widespread, although its use was restricted to the imperial court and reserved for Buddhist religious practices, for offerings to Buddha, ceremonies and purification rites. It was the Chinese monk Jianzhen, known as Ganjin in Japan, who transmitted most of the knowledge of incense preparation underlying the cult of perfumes in the Heian period. He arrived in Japan in 753, where he remained until his death ten years later. Ganjin not only taught Buddhist doctrines, but also introduced ingredients for the preparation of incenses that had, until then, been unknown and taught the methods used to blend aromas. As a messenger of the Tang culture, in which incense was also used for recreational purposes, he probably introduced the tradition of using incense for purposes other than devotional or meditational

practices in Japan, although it was not until several years later that this was to develop.⁴

As a matter of fact, it was only in the Heian period that incense began to be used in an everyday context as well, for people's pleasure and amusement: ladies and gentlemen began to use it to perfume their body; not by applying it to their skin in the form of oil or balsam as in the West, but by impregnating their hair and clothes with the smoke produced by burning the incense, until the fragrance was absorbed by the skin. The fragrances were the result of a detailed preparation process that the ladies and gentlemen of the court devoted much time to. The ability to prepare outstanding incenses was held in great esteem and possessing secret methods to blend aromas was proof of an accomplishment that equalled a sound mastery of calligraphy. Incense was obtained by mixing the powders from different aromas, adding honey and other ingredients to a base of fragrant wood, and this blend was then used to produce highly refined perfumes. This fashionable use of incense was called *soradaki* ("empty burning"), the secular opposite of *sonaekō* ("incense offered to Buddha").⁵

Heian literature offers countless testimonies and tales about the art of perfume but *Genji Monogatari* is a real goldmine of information on the subject. In addition to helping us reconstruct many 'technical' aspects of the use of incense, it also reveals the social and psychological implications of the practice, transporting the reader to the centre of a perfumed world in which the vicissitudes of Genji and the countless other characters in the novel are intertwined.

Even a partial summary of the plot of a work that has more than one thousand pages in the English edition would be an arduous task. However, a brief outline is necessary to guide a reader who is unfamiliar with the book. *The Tale of Genji* is divided into fifty-four chapters. In the first forty-one Genji is the absolute protagonist whilst the following chapters describe the lives of the

other characters after his death. Genji is a member of the court nobility who, owing to the particular conditions of his birth – he is the fruit of the love between the emperor and a low-ranking noble woman – is destined to important positions at court but not to inherit his father's title. Even as a child, his outstanding beauty (his nickname is “shining prince”), his artistic skills and innate fascination make him popular with the women at court, who also feel affection for him because he lost his mother. His talents become even more refined as he grows up. However, despite the countless passages in which Genji is described as an unrivalled example of beauty, artistic excellence and talented seduction, one cannot say he is an idealised character. Although some scenes make him appear a demigod, the author also describes his mistakes and failures without any clemency, such as when the hostility of some court circles marginalizes him, forcing him into exile, or when he is spurned by women (a very rare event).

One of the women who refuses to succumb to his charms is the most important: his first wife, Lady Aoi. Forced to marry him by her father when Genji is much younger than her and still a boy, she never manages to overcome her reserve towards him and dies prematurely giving birth to his son, without them ever falling in love. More often than not, however, it is Genji who makes his women, wives or fleeting lovers suffer, all of whom find it difficult to put up with his continuous affairs. Although he still looks after them once his infatuation has passed, showing a faithfulness that is unusual in a polygamous society, the author describes the profound, frequently heart-breaking emotions of these women when they are no longer the favourite of the man who was once at the centre of their universe.

If one is to understand the importance of perfumes, one aspect of court life during the Heian period that must be borne in mind is the fact that the presence of numerous drapes, curtains, screens and a lack of windows made the interior of the houses

very dark, and the areas inhabited by women even more so. This was not only due to the arrangement of the buildings but also to the need to protect the women's privacy. As Ivan Morris said:

When reading *The Tale of Genji* and other works of the time, we must remember how much of the aristocracy's life was spent in a state of semi-obscurity. The gloom that overcomes so many of the characters may well be related to the murkiness of their houses. Women in particular lived in a state of almost perpetual twilight. As if the rooms were not already dark enough, they normally immured themselves behind thick silk hangings or screens. (34)

At times, when the features of a person's face and the outlines of their body are almost indistinguishable, it is their perfume that compensates for what the eye is unable to see. In the following passage, Genji visits a princess who fascinates him with her bashfulness. He has not yet managed to see her or hear her speak and even when he is near her, his only source of information in the dark surrounding them both is his imagination and the smell of perfume.

Genji was certain that he need not fear being dazzled – indeed the certainty was what had drawn him to her. He caught a faint, pleasing scent, and a soft rustling as her women urged her forward. They suggested serenity and repose such as to convince him that his attentions were not misplaced. (I, 120)

Unfortunately, when Genji is able to see better he is disappointed. In his imagination the princess had been beautiful but her face is actually disproportionate with an ugly, red nose and her bony body without any grace. Her garments are also worn and old-fashioned but this disagreeable impression is partially redeemed by an old-fashioned but “rather splendid sable jacket, richly perfumed” (I, p. 124).

And when he receives a letter from the lady several days later, “the letter was on thick Michinoku paper and [...] the scent that had been heavily burned into it” (I, 127). Time goes by and Genji goes back to visit the princess; however, although this time she is more talkative than before, once again it is her perfume that expresses more than even poetry is able to do.

“I have waited and waited, to no avail, it seems. Wisteria, not the waiting pine, has brought you.” The faint stirring behind the curtains, the faint perfume that came to him from her sleeves, made him feel that she had perhaps improved a little with age. (I, 301)

As said earlier, the author does not stint with her praise when describing Prince Genji’s good looks. Such insistence on male beauty was connected to the customs of that period. “The picture of the average Heian aristocrat that appears in literature and painting is likely to strike many Western readers as effeminate,” says Ivan Morris (144). In actual fact, however, such a delicate male figure, concentrating on powdering his face and devoted to the preparation of perfumes, is linked to a specific historical period in the Japanese context as well. The Heian period is the triumph of the *taoyameburi*, the female style that pervades *Kokinshū* and other poetry collections of that time, and that prevails in *The Tale of Genji* and the contemporary *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*). Having faded in the Heian age, it was not until the later periods when the languid aesthetes made way for warlike heroes, that the male style *masuraoburi* was to reassert itself.

Genji was said to be very handsome. However, since most of the episodes took place in the dark, in particular those regarding his love affairs, the author skilfully highlighted his characteristic perfume. As if he is covered with a phosphorescent powder that makes him visible in the dark, Genji is recognised wherever he went owing to the scent of his perfume. When wandering around furtively to find a way into the private rooms of the woman he has

become infatuated with, it is his perfume that reveals his identity. Not one woman is unable to recognise him.

She was so small that he lifted her easily. As he passed through the doors to his own room, he came upon the Chūjō who had been summoned earlier. He called out in surprise. Surprised in turn, Chūjō peered into the darkness. The perfume that came from his robes like a cloud of smoke told her who he was. She stood in confusion, unable to speak. (I, 42)

Although most of these love affairs are little more than pleasant distractions, some of them involve betrayal, lies and danger. It happens more than once that a liaison Genji starts light-heartedly has devastating and in some cases fatal effects. Thus, at times, the revelation of Genji's identity thanks to his perfume does not create a sense of pleasant expectations in the lady but rather one of panic. He has a secret affair with the Princess of the Pavilion of Wisteria, Fujitsubo, who married his father and is therefore Empress. Their relationship represented the most serious transgression one could undertake at that time since it violated more than one taboo (filial respect, a wife's fidelity towards her husband, the sacredness of the imperial descent), and Fujitsubo tries desperately to elude him. When she recognises Genji's unmistakeable perfume in the dark, she is overcome with anguish but in the end she relents, as if it were a fatal decree she cannot disobey.

No longer in control of himself, he slipped inside her curtains and pulled at her sleeve. So distinctive was his fragrance that she recognized him immediately. In sheer terror she sank to the floor.

If she would only look at him! He pulled her towards him. She turned to flee, but her hair became entangled in her cloak as she tried to slip out of it. It seemed to be her fate that everything should go against her! (I, 197)

When Genji returns to visit her later, once again the perfume represents a threat, almost as if its fragrant molecules have the power to overcome any barrier leading to not only an irresistible erotic temptation, but also confusion and pain. However, in the same way that people can observe an object from diverse perspectives and gain different viewpoints, the same fragrance can also arouse contrasting reactions. The Empress hates the delicate scent of perfume that Genji leaves behind him when he goes away whereas it is the most exquisite fragrance her ladies-in-waiting could ever hope to inhale.

She seemed to be inching away from him.

“I have displeased you, and am sorry – though I doubt that most people of feeling would have been quite as displeased. Well, do not let the displeasure last. It could be very trying.” He went out. Even the perfume that lingered on upset her.

“What a scent he did leave on these cushions – just have a whiff. I can’t find words to describe it. “Her women were lowering the shutters. “He brings everything together in himself, like a willow that is all of a sudden blooming like a cherry. It sets a person to shivering.” (I, 346)

The thirty-second chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, “A Branch of Plum,” is mainly dedicated to the description of court practices regarding incense. Genji devotes himself passionately to the preparation of various blends, involving in a perfume competition the women he is intimate with, such as the spouse Murasaki no Ue, First Lady of the Eastern Wing, the Empress,⁶ daughter of Lady Rokujō, to whom he was extremely close in the past, and Princess Asagao, one of the few who resisted his advances. Other participants include the Lady of the orange blossoms, another of his favourites, and the Akashi Lady, his daughter’s mother. All the women, all of whom are tied to him

in some way, participate in the competition and present their own blend. The judge is Hotaru no Miya, “Prince of the Fireflies,” Genji’s younger brother who has come to visit. When entrusted with this task, Prince Hotaru’s initial reaction is to get out of it in some way by saying he is unsuited. However, it immediately becomes clear that his reluctance is completely unfounded because his ability to ‘listen’ to perfume is considerable. Each blend is studied: each one expresses a slightly different characteristic, almost as if the choice of the ingredients expresses the personality of each of the different women who have prepared and enriched them in their own way, together with their individual preparation technique.

Despite Asagao’s self-deprecatory poem, her “dark” winter incense was judged the best, somehow gentler and yet deeper than the others. The prince decided that among the autumn scents, the “chamberlain’s perfumes,” as they are called, Genji’s had an intimacy which however did not insist upon itself.

Of Murasaki’s three, the plum or spring perfume was especially bright and original, with a tartness that was rather daring. “Nothing goes better with a spring breeze than a plum blossom,” said the prince. (I, 514)

Corresponding to her reserved nature, the Lady of the orange blossoms presents a blend that conveys the qualities of the season she represents, summer. “She finally submitted a single perfume, a summer lotus-leaf blend with a pungency that was gentle but firm” (I, 514). Finally, the Akashi Lady, mistress of the Winter Quarter, presents a type of incense that is perfect for perfuming garments, created using a highly refined process based on a recipe that had been handed down from the previous Emperor to the current one. The judge demonstrated he had such a sound knowledge of the subject that he was able to appreciate each creation; he was, however, unable to select a winner as he thought they were

all excellent. Genji jokingly rebuked him for his inability to take a decision, but it is clear that the aim of the competition was not to choose a winner, but rather to take delight in comparisons, using the art of perfume to exalt the exquisite pleasure of being alive as a moment of respite from worries and pain.

The moon rose, there was wine, the talk was of old times. The mist-enshrouded moon was weirdly beautiful, and the breeze following gently upon the rain brought a soft perfume of plum blossoms. The mixture of scents inside the hall was magical. (I, 514)

This sensitivity for smells is also present in the novel in episodes that are unrelated to the use of incense. At one of the most dramatic moments in the book, Lady Rokujo realises that her spirit has possessed Genji's principle spouse, Aoi no Ue, when she recognises the smell of poppy seeds burnt during exorcism in her clothes. It is only thanks to this olfactory epiphany that she discovers to her horror that her spirit, which detaches itself from her body regardless of her will, has entered that of her rival, causing the illness that is soon to lead to her death.

The Rokujo lady received the news with mixed feelings. She had heard that her rival was critically ill, and now the crisis had passed. She was not herself. The strangest thing was that her robes were permeated with the scent of the poppy seeds burned at exorcisms. She changed clothes repeatedly and even washed her hair, but the odor persisted. She was overcome with self-loathing. And what would others be thinking? It was a matter she could discuss with no one. She could only suffer in distraught silence. (I, 169)

As said earlier, *The Tale of Genji* continues after the protagonist's death. The forty-second chapter starts with the news of his

demise behind the scenes. Together with the concise, poetic information about his death is a comment that almost seems to be a warning for the reader.

The shining Genji was dead, and there was no one quite like him. (II, 735)

It is as if the author felt the need to make it clear straight away that the golden age had finished, and the reader was going to have to confront the real world. However, although the splendour of the world had grown dim, life went on. There were now two male protagonists: his Highness Niou, son of the ruling Emperor and Genji's nephew, and the young Kaoru, officially son of Genji and the Third Princess, but in actual fact, fruit of a relationship of the latter with the Captain of the Palace Guards, Kashiwagi. Niou and Kaoru divide the scene as if neither of them was capable of following in Genji's footsteps as the only main character. The pair reminds us of Genji and his friend Tō no Chūjō: a friendship that often ended in rivalry. Despite the affection they felt for one another, the couple were constantly competing both at court and in love affairs. However, in the case of the young epigones emulation is transformed into antagonism, and the women involved have to pay a much higher price for their love affairs. Although they are both good looking and in prestigious positions, they lack the brilliance that surrounded Genji and paying them honour with the epithet 'brilliant' would be inappropriate. Furthermore, it is the world as a whole that has lost an old-time splendour. To emphasise this obfuscation, the setting is moved from the imperial court to the centre of the capital, in a peripheral, melancholic place called Uji. Murasaki, however, as if compensating the two young protagonists for having deprived them of the brilliance that she had attributed to Genji, gives them a precious gift: perfume. To underline the importance of this element she calls them Niou



Tosa Mitsuoki (1617-1691) (attributed to), illustration from chapter 42 of *Tale of Genji*, “His Highness Niou.” New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

and Kaoru, names that are translated respectively as ‘perfume’ and ‘frangrance.’ Kaoru was actually endowed with it since his birth while the pleasant scent that accompanies Niou is the result of intense, almost manic-like research. Richard Bowring successfully summarises the traits of the two characters and the manner in which their destinies are interwoven by perfume:

Kaoru, whose name means ‘fragrant,’ is by nature blessed with an extraordinary fragrance all his own; Niou, whose name suggest a less subtle, brasher sort of scent, tries to emulate him by perfuming himself. For Kaoru the fragrance is an outward and sensible sign of an innate religiosity which constantly interferes with his more human desires. For Niou, who takes his opportunities as they come and for whom life is less complicated, desire, like fragrance, is something that can be manufactured. (50)

In literature it is uncommon to find the subject of perfume integrated so skilfully with the psychologies of characters and their lives, going as far as to make it an extension of their presence

in the world. Through the fragrances they give off, more or less consciously they transmit a sort of olfactive message that faithfully portrays their virtues and flaws. It is a complicated message but one that the court setting is able to understand, as can be seen in the following passages. The first refers to Kaoru.

And there was the fragrance he gave off, quite unlike anything else in this world. Let him make the slightest motion and it had a mysterious power to trail behind him like a "hundred-pace incense." One did not expect young aristocrats to affect the plain and certainly not the shabby. The elegance that is the result of a careful toilet was the proper thing. Kaoru, however, wished often enough that he might be free of this particular mark of distinction. He could not hide. Let him step behind something in hopes of being unobserved, and that scent would announce his presence. He used no perfume, nor did he scent his robes, but somehow a fragrance that had been sealed deep inside a Chinese chest would emerge the more ravishing for his presence. He would brush a spray of plum blossoms below the veranda and the spring rain dripping from it would become a perfume for others who passed. (II, 739)

Kaoru's natural fragrance is not only appreciated owing to its intrinsic agreeableness, but also because of the moderation with which he makes sure he does not over do it. Niou's attitude, on the other hand, is compared unfavourably to Genji's. The following passage shows that his olfactive message was met with a certain coolness.

Niou was his rival in everything and especially in the competition to be pleasantly scented. The blending of perfumes would become his work for days on end. In the spring he would gaze inquiringly up at the blossoming plum, and in the autumn he would neglect the maiden flower of which

poets have made so much and the hagi beloved of the stag, and instead keep beside him, all withered and unsightly, the chrysanthemum “heedless of age” and purple trousers, also sadly faded, and the burnet that has so little to recommend it in the first place. Perfumes were central to his pursuit of good taste. There were those who accused him of a certain preciousity. Genji, they said, had managed to avoid seeming uneven. (II, 739-740)

It was therefore not only the art of perfume that had reached levels of great sophistication in the Heian period, but also the general sensitivity of the time; the latter was able to perceive all the psychological implications, social repercussions, and poetical potential, and had developed a literature that was able to express it to the full. After the Heian period the cult of perfume did not disappear from the lives of the upper class, not even during the most intensive phases of the wars that were to characterise the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1336-1573) periods, although the way in which it was used obviously changed; a situation such as Genji’s perfume competition, which had been shared with such carefree abandon, was to become unthinkable.

The art of ‘listening to perfume’ in a sophisticated, protected environment, admiring the moon and enjoying the beauty of nature, living in the present whilst serenely contemplating the past, is connected to the limited timespan of a period that lies beyond the range of our experience. Nevertheless, great literature works the wonder of erasing distances. Reading *The Tale of Genji*, a world in which men’s and women’s each and every movement in dimly illuminated rooms, gave off a scent of perfume that was able to enchant or repel, even in the dark, does not seem that far off to us. Furthermore, an element of that ineffable atmosphere has survived in our world today, albeit in profoundly different circumstances. Today, everyday life in Japan is much more frenetic

and some people still manage to find respite in meeting and practising what appears to be an anachronistic hobby such as *kōdō*; it is likely that they feel a sense of indefinable nostalgia for an age in which incense played an important role in everyday life, and perfume accompanied every gesture, from solemn ceremonies to social occasions, and even the more secret moments of intimacy and abandon.

Notes

- 1 “Novel” is a loose translation for the Japanese word *monogatari* (literally: “tale of things”). *Monogatari* is a literary genre that developed in Japan in the Heian period and has no equivalent in Western literature. *Monogatari* comprises a broad range of works of fiction, going from the fairy tale to a realistic narration, but excludes diaries and combinations that are included in other

categories. *Monogatari* can be translated with “story,” “tale” and “narration,” depending.

- 2 Cf. Kōdō BUNKA KENKYŪKAI 2.
3 Cf. SACAMOTO 86.
4 Cf. JINPO 194-5 and MATSUBARA 18-26.
5 Cf. MATSUBARA 28-38.
6 This is not the Empress mentioned earlier (Fujitsubo), but Akikonomu, wife of the new sovereign Reizai.

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BEYOND JASMINE AND SPICE

Elisabetta Bartuli

Smell

If one leafs through the pages of contemporary literature in Arabic, one cannot help but notice that fragrance is an element that is both concrete and all-inclusive, and is often regarded as the basis of any kind of memory.

A single passage suffices as evidence of this, taken from *In the Presence of Absence* (*Fī hadrati al-ghiyāb*¹), the last prose work by the Palestinian Mahmud Darwish:²

Cities are smells. Acre is the smell of iodine and spices. Haifa, the smell of pines and creased sheets. Moscow, the smell of vodka and ice. Cairo, the smell of mango and ginger. Beirut, the smell of sun, sea, smoke and lemon. Paris, the smell of fresh bread, cheeses and items of seduction. Rabat, the smell of henna, incense and honey. A city, any city, that cannot be recognised by its smell, does not deserve to be remembered. [...] Smell is memory, it is sunset. (90-1)³

And we can go on listening to the echo that, winking at a lifelong friend, is a reference to Elias Khoury⁴ from Lebanon in *Sinālkūl*, his most recent novel, published in English with the title *Broken Mirrors* (*Sinalco*):

*“Things are the smell they have,” Nasri said, “and when they no longer smell of anything, it means everything is over.”*⁵

Both works return repeatedly to the smell of objects. Very often they do so because they want to describe real stenches, but also because they frequently want to use smell to define emotions that are volatile in themselves.

Darwish describes the smell of coffee, of sage, of tobacco, of bread, of rain, the smell of summer. But he also describes the smell of exile, a smell that is now breathless. And the smell of nostalgia. Or rather, nostalgia he says, is a smell itself.⁶

Khoury, on the other hand, describes apples imbued with the smell of coffee; he describes the smell of thyme, garlic, incense and fried eggs. With the same tranquillity he transmits the smell of rubbish and blood, the smell of tears and old age, as well as the smell of water “which you can only smell on people.” And he says that “the real, original smell of humanity is the smell of the earth when it has just rained.” But above all, he stubbornly insists on mourning smells that have disappeared: “How can you describe a smell to someone who has never smelted it, to someone who has never enjoyed it?”. Grieving because some smells have changed: “The smell of the district had disappeared, the old combination of jasmine and ground coffee had been replaced by a new smell, almost like decaying rubbish.” And declaring how some smells, which are less real, are able to overpower others: “Wash your hands well with soap and water because tomorrow, when I kiss them, I want to smell them, and not your aftershave.”

This last concept – a natural smell *vs.* an artificial one – also appears in a novel by the Tunisian writer Alia Tabaï,⁷ *The Flower of Indian Figs* (*Zahrat al-subbār*). In this case it is a litmus test of the cultural misunderstanding between a Tunisian and a French woman. The pair are in a lift together and the young boy, who sees the woman’s detachment as an expression of disdain, is silently just as contemptuous: “This one has absolutely no smell at all. She washes herself so much that, with all the soap and heavy perfume she uses, she manages to extinguish

any velleity. Obsessed with cleanliness, that she is. And a dirty conscience” (34⁸).

In the above-mentioned passages – as well as in countless others – the Arabic word that is translated here as ‘smell’ is *rā'iha*, a cold term that is not necessarily either pleasant or unpleasant. Basically, a natural, permeating term that indicates what is carried by the wind. In Arabic it is therefore not just a perfume, which is the word ‘itr (pl. ‘utūr), meaning a nice smell, essence, aroma, fragrance, the product of distillation or some kind of production. Not a perfume, but not necessarily a forced, horrible smell.

In Arabic culture smells, including corporeal ones, are not perceived as smelly but simple emanations. They are an integral part of the individual that Arabic authors frequently describe quite openly

For example, the smell of sweat is regarded as a way to identify someone. In Khoury’s *Broken Mirrors* (*Sinalcol*), a woman’s husband, who disappeared during the Lebanese civil war, is allowed to return home for a couple of hours after weeks’ imprisonment; the wife says: “And all of a sudden, I realised it was him,” “I recognised the smell of his sweat, the whiff of his breath.” While the protagonist in *The Scents of Marie Claire* (*Rawā'ih Marie Claire*) by the Tunisian writer Habib Selmi⁹ has no qualms admitting that “my nose [...] was not repulsed by this unusual aroma of lilac mingled with the scent of a woman’s sweaty body. In fact, I found it delicious, actually exciting and provocative” (141).

The smell from one’s armpits is also often evoked as a source of pleasure and intimacy, almost like a refuge, a sort of private place that we can find in the enjoyable novel-divertissement by the Syrian writer Salwa al-Neimi,¹⁰ the much lauded and/or vilified *The Proof of the Honey* (*Burhān al-asal*): “I remain silent, I hang on to him and bury my face in his armpits to fill myself with his smell.”

However, once again it is Selmi – while narrating the lengthy

love story between Mahfudh, a young Tunisian living in Paris, and Marie Claire, a French girl – who shows just how different their relationship with smell is:

Once she finished her cigarette, [Marie-Claire] would lift her arms, and press her head with her interlocked fingers, revealing her underarms to me. Ever since then I become obsessed with looking at women's underarms. [...] When I nuzzle my nose in an armpit and smell its odor, I am overcome by a delicious sensation [...]

The first time I told Marie-Claire about this she laughed as she arched her brows in astonishment. "You are such a pig. What do you like about underarms, the hair or the smell of sweat?"

(2-3)

There we are: the odour that Mahfudh finds so pleasing is irremediably smelly for Maria Claire. This thus confirms not only a sense of totally 'western' irritation regarding smells, corporeal ones in particular, but also a clear sense of resistance to the actual use of the word. This can also be clearly seen in the various translations.

Smell or perfume?

In fact, in translations into Western languages, *rā'iha* is usually only translated as smell if a negative connotation is attached to the word or, at best, if it wrong-footedly deviates from the original. This is evident in at least two novels that use it in their titles. The first is one of the key works of Arabic literature today, *The Smell of It (Tilka al-rā'iha)* by the Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim,¹¹ in which the specific reference is to the continually overflowing sewers of the capital, understood here as a metaphor of the economic and social system that is contaminating the air. The second is a collection of tales from prison by the Syrian Ibra-

him Samuel,¹² *The Smell of Heavy Footsteps* (*Rā'iḥat al-khutū al-thaqil*), which describes the sensation of suffocation of a woman who knows she is being shadowed by a regime myrmidion.

However, in nearly all other cases it seems almost obligatory for *rā'iḥa* to be translated with ‘perfume’ and not ‘smell.’ This is the case in the novels *Cinnamon* (*Rā'iḥat al-qirfa*, 2008) by the Syrian author Samar Yazbek¹³ and *The Traps of Perfume* (*Fikhākh al-rā'iḥa*, 2003) by the Saudi Arabian Yousef al-Mohaimeed.¹⁴ The title, which refers to two specific smells – roasted fat and cotton soaked in anaesthetic – confirms the titillating readiness (not necessarily the translator’s) to stimulate “those Western admirers who [...] wish to experience the subtle olfactory evocations of the Middle East” (*sic*).¹⁵

This is no subtlety. Indeed, like a sort of inevitable reference, the choice of the word brings with it a whole imagination one would be pleased to do without.

The Italian cover of Yazbek’s novel *Cinnamon* (*Rā'iḥat al-qirfa*, 2008) seems to be a good example of this kind of drift. The story is about a relationship of power – and sex – between the lady of the house and a servant, set in the present day in Damascus a couple of years ago. Nevertheless, a painting¹⁶ by the French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), famous for his oriental style paintings was chosen as the illustration: the terrace on the roof of a house that could be in Jerusalem but is probably Mārakesh or Cairo, where a naked woman is washing herself in the wind, while the servant, wrapped up in dark clothes is watching her with adoring eyes, while she continues to prepare couscous imperturbably.

And there is no denying that the reason for this is that in Western imagination, the combination of perfume and the Arab world evokes camel trains crossing the desert, sailing ships ploughing across the seas laden with valuable, fragrant spices to harems full of snow-white beauties enveloped in wafts of incense

and fragrant vapours. In other words, a world that if it ever existed, nowadays certainly has no right to do so.

What does have a right to be there, on the other hand, is perfume, in the sense of a fragrance elevated to the umpteenth power, a joy of the senses, almost a sort of reward.

Perfume

The existence of so many words that refer to the sense of smell in Arabic literature today should come as no surprise. Indeed, in Arabic culture odours and perfumes occupy an important place that has its roots, both religious and historical, in times long gone by.

“And if the deceased was of those brought near to Allah, then [for him is] rest and bounty and a garden of pleasure”¹⁷ (56: 88-89) the Koran promises its followers in one of the verses in which it deals with pleasure, as do many *hadith* in the description of the pleasant smells one can enjoy in Paradise.¹⁸

These are pleasures that are also enjoyed in this life, spent living under the heavens. It could not be otherwise in the collective imagination of the people who invented the alembic and introduced the use of alcohol in distillation. More specifically, perfumes (*itr-‘utūr*) are a classical *topos* of the Arabic sexual precepts that flourished in the Islamised world several centuries after Hegira. As it is impossible to quote them all, here it must suffice to mention one that has also been translated into European languages: *The Perfumed Garden* (*al-Rawd al-‘asal*) written by Muhammad al-Nafzāwī between the fourteenth and fifteenth century of the Christian era. Talking about perfume it says:

The use of perfumes, whether by a woman or man, stimulates coitus. Inhaling the fragrances the man has sprayed himself with, the woman begins to orgasm; and very often it is perfumes that the man uses to conquer her.

Despite its almost exclusively European success, several contemporary Arabic novels also refer to this book. One of these is *The Proof of Honey* mentioned earlier that, when describing a librarian who was a great lover of medieval erotic digests, obviously had no choice but to mention it. As is so often the case in literature, in doing so it gives us an excellent summary of what was summarised in the previous paragraphs:

Do we savour on this earth some of the reward that will be lavished on us in Paradise? An incentive to production, economists would say. It will be the waft of sex that guides me in this world. And following its traces, I will reach the perfume of Paradise. There [as Muhammad al-Nafzāwī says] “where the penis never cedes, where the vulva is never replete, where desire is endless.”¹⁹

Perfumes

However, it would be misleading to stop at such suggestions although they are, in a manner of speaking, also responsible for the oriental romantic imagery mentioned above.

And thus, continuing to leaf through the pages of contemporary literature in Arabic that refer to the universe of aromas, I would like to conclude this short excursus on Arabian olfactory culture with two examples that make topical the world we are discussing, throwing off the shackles that risk fossilising it in the past. Emphasising with particular strength the adherence to the dictates of globalised taste, no matter what the latitude, both show how the international art of perfume has undermined, if not supplanted, the most ancient traditions.

The first is by one of the most popular writers in the Arabic publishing industry, the Algerian naturalised Lebanese writer Ahlam Mosteghanemi.

Having become a sort of guru over the years for young

women in Arab countries, in addition to several romantic novels, Mosteghanemi has also published this self-improvement guide to help her readers to get over heart break and survive love and its damage: *Nissian.com*, published in English with the title *The Art of Forgetting*.

In the entire chapter she devotes to the perfume of forgetting, Mosteghanemi dispenses with several self-evident banalities and gives some good advice:

“Forgetting has no scent. The scent can only be the scent of memories... [...] In your endeavour to forget a man, don’t forget to change the perfume you wore for him. Give your friends the perfume of your previous emotional memory. Get rid of it [...]. Your sticking to a perfume that you wore for him is an unspoken act of sticking by him; your acceptance of his taking possession of your senses even after you have separated from him.” (145)

However, as she is undoubtedly a woman of the world, Mosteghanemi continues:

The most wonderful perfume remains the one mixed by Guerlain and that bears his name. In the 1940s he invented a perfume for one woman for one night which he gave as a present to the woman he loved... [...] That is a perfume without promises, without a future, without commitments, a perfume without memory. Like Shahrazaad, its story comes to an end when the morning comes. (145)

The second passage is taken from *Zahrat al-subbār* by Alia Tabäï, which we mentioned earlier when talking about cultural misunderstandings. In this last passage, the speaker is a young woman who did not emigrate to France like the young man in the lift, but remained in Tunisia, taking on all its possible contradictions.

But also with all the possible succinctness:

No, I still use Rochas, and it is with Rochas that I want to be washed when I die. Because that is how I want to appear before our Lord: signée, wearing a famous brand.

Notes

- 1 In the original Arabic titles and in the transcription of the authors' names in the notes, the consonants are transliterated as follows: ' b t th j h kh d dh r z s sh s d t z ' gh f q k l m n h w y; the long vowels are written with ā ū ī.
- 2 Māhmūd DĀRWIŠH (1942-2008), unanimously regarded as one of the greatest contemporary poets, received countless, prestigious international awards including the Lannan Foundation Prize for Cultural Freedom (2002, USA), Prince Claus Prize (2004, Netherlands) and the Golden Wreath Award, Struga Poetry Evenings (2007, Macedonia). Numerous collections of poems and interviews have been published in English.
- 3 Together with his other two autobiographic prose works (*Journal of an Ordinary Grief*, 1973, and *Memory for Forgetfulness*, 1987), the Italian publishing house Feltrinelli published the text in a single volume (*Una trilogia palestinese*, edited by E.Bartuli, 2014).
- 4 Elias KHOURY (1948-). The author of countless novels and theatre *pièces* and essay anthologies, former director of the Beirut Theatre and the prestigious literary column of the daily newspaper *al-Nahar*, he is currently in charge of the three-monthly journal *Journal of Palestine Studies*. Several of his novels have been translated into English.
- 5 Unless stated otherwise, the translations are by C. Cawthra. Cf. DĀRWIŠH, 120.
- 6 'Alyā' AL-TĀBA'Ī (1961-).
- 7 The page number refers to the original edition in Arabic; a French edition also exists; cf. bibliography.
- 8 al-Habīb al-SĀLMĪ (1951-). Salwā al-NU'AYMĪ.
- 9 Sun'allah IBRAHIM (1937). Ibrāhīm SAMŪ'IL (1951-).
- 10 Samar YAZBEK (1970-).
- 11
- 12
- 13

- 14 Yūsuf al-MUHAYMĪD (1964).
- 15 Cf. website Colonia Intensa Oud.
- 16 The painting in question is *Bethsabée* (date not specified). If one looks carefully, the scene is emblematic. It is heavy with smells/perfumes/stenches. The fragrance/perfume of cinnamon that evokes the smell/ fragrance of food, represented here by couscous, a traditional Maghrebine dish meant for the master's dinner table. But there is also the smell/perfume of the soap that the lady is using to wash herself, a perfume/ smell that counters the smell/ stink that we cannot perceive but which pervades the many layers of the fabric covering the poor servant bustling away under the sun.
- 17 The word used is *rayḥan*, which is a variation of *rā'iḥa*. Cf. AMIR-MOEZZI 613.
- 18 *Ahlām MUSTAGHĀNIMĪ* (1953).
- 19 The dogmatic part below continues with a short passage with the advice of an elderly man to the false prophet Musaylimah Ben Qais, who wants to get rid of the cumbersome hounding of a would-be female prophet: “So the old man said: ‘Tomorrow, in the morning, erect a pavilion of multi-coloured brocade, decorated with silk. Then suffuse it with multiple perfumes: rose, orange flower, jasmine, hyacinth, carnation and viola. Place golden phials full of fragrances in it: green aloe, ambergris, musk, amber and other soft fragrances. But make sure that none of the perfumes are dispersed outside. And when their vapours are dense enough to impregnate the air, sit on the throne and send someone to tell the prophetess to come and visit you in the tent, where she shall remain with you alone. When she smells the fragrances, her each and ever fibre will let itself go; and she will faint. As soon as you see her in this state, woo her and she will cede [...]’”

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THE ALCHEMY OF WORDS IN TURKISH FROM STILLS TO A TRADITION OF FRUGALITY IN EVERYDAY MEMORIES

Giampiero Bellingeri

The alchemical process is incessant in its symbolic fervour, continuing and insinuating itself into the passages of eternal recreation: the breath it emanates is extreme, never harmless; on the contrary, it is speckled in its catharsis, it flourishes anew, sweeping over us as well. We are actually on our way back to the laboratory to distil an outline of perfumes in Ottoman and Turkish literature in the composite of other linguistic forms: modern and contemporary writings that are imbued with the echoes of extracts of tradition. It will be a compendium, condensed with its own stills by an incubated system in the years of the late Antiquity; the world we find ourselves in is one in which Islam, majoritarian after its triumph, is reactivating the furnace in the breeding ground of a civilisation that is both its wet-nurse and matrix for our cultures, testimony of ancient and revived elixirs that have been resuscitated.

Nevertheless, in the knowledge of the true hardships experienced in the corners of our world, one must add that the abstract and extracted idea of an Orient that is permeated with perfumes, as well as being their inventor, should be carried out, in its exoticising and colonised steams and vapours, along the lines of a contrast with smells and flavours, with the toil of everyday existence, which is hard, harsh, ephemeral and exhausted; it is, however, one that is immersed in the scent of an eternity and will therefore be a matter of history, public conscience and other ways of interpreting the realism of portrayals, in both prose and poetry, with diverse, perceptive sensitivity.

These are scents and senses that impact reality, first and foremost functionally and ethically and only then aesthetically. Reality may also yearn to rise up to the ardour that brings about distilled materials, made ethereal because they are, or seem, as light, incorporeal, intangible and immaterial as possible – in other words, memories of materiality. However, perfume is essentially a refined fragrance in the sense of an ennobled spirit, and for us it is inseparable, and in a blasphemous manner separated from corporeality; despite its own form, it is, however, destined to surrender and return under the rule of distilled memory, in the land of neuralgic evocations.

Hence perhaps, the liberated synaesthesia, released by a certain specific word, one that is inadequate but effective, expressive in its aspiration to brush or skim with its own humble sounds the vague idea of a mystic meaning they are impregnated with, carrying them upwards, higher and higher; they speak the names of essences, restoring the names with the value of the floundering but soaring metaphor. In the transport of such philological phonetics, the latter is intent on pronouncing more clearly the ineluctable, fatal fusion, through distillation, of verb and verse, in the realigning harmony, or rather musicality, of the trickling, chanting perfume. Relentless, and predestined even, it is ramified, thus rejoining, restoring perfume's mission to the familiar ambit of the brain: and thus, perfume and memory will always belong to something and someone 'other.' And only then does it belong to the word, writing and poetry.

As an example of such a process of interweaving, we may refer to the *nom de plume* of a great Persian poet, the mystical, paradigmatic 'Attâr ("Perfumer," author of the fundamental treatise in verse *Mantiq at-tayr*); another example could be the artistic name of the Ottoman musician 'Itrî ("The Perfumed"). Another Turkish poet, the Neo-Ottoman and Neo-classic Ya-

haya Kemal (Skopje 1884 – Istanbul 1958) – who discovered the Orient in Paris, and then went on to identify himself in it, in the Western style – dedicated the following poem to the aforementioned musician:

*The old ones declared Him Master
Of a melody that is wholly ours:
How many peoples did the Champion
Send all over in the days of dawn!
For how many ceremonies did the sky at dawn,
To the thundering booms of the cannon,
Raise hymns to Divine Majesty!*

*There, from Buda to Iraq, all the way to Egypt,
From the remote conquered lands,
A wind that blows freely over the Fatherland
Brought echoes redolent of spring.
This great genius that united us all
Heard in the rustling of the venerable plane-trees
A story spanning seven centuries.*

*From his art he beheld the faith
And beheld the existence of this land of ours;
Wherever the glorious Bosphorus flows,
With the turgid Euphrates and blue Tundza,
And our villages and our skies, our yearning
And our sadness and triumph in so many voices,
Beheld that nature, twin to us.*

*Oft have I listened to the Nevâ-kâr,
This melody has a full and joyous sound,
And in that effusion of mysteries,
Splendour rends the skies of the East:*

*Every syllable is elated, and while the soul
Sets forth from night to dawn,
Full fifty million are on the march.*

*Fate and destiny envy them: a thousand
And more of his works may have been stifled;
A good twenty have been left to us.
His "Praise", formidable and deep,
The flute, if the drums are beaten rhythmically,
With the rising dance of the Dervishes,
Raises ecstasy to the seventh heaven.*

*He who dominated a magnificent world,
With virtue and the strength of strings
And his voice, is an enigma to the learned:
But do they know who this 'Itri was?
A hidden trove, his works today,
Are they a treasure entrusted to eternity?
And who can say? But where, where are they?*

*Such wondrous sounds shrouded by death
Leave man inconsolable. My heart,
My heart cannot resign itself;
Hours and hours consumed afar,
And it slips into an enticing dream;
Maybe those pieces are still performed
In that ocean unfurrowed by any ship.¹*

Triumph, glory, the need to found a nation: this was a republic equipped with glorious memories. Another breeze had agitated the foliage of Ottoman, neo-Platonic culture in the ages, with its late ancient flavour and perfume; it had already been extolled, enraptured on rustling, submissive lines in Istanbul:

*Inebriated by aromas, we admired the racemes on the faces of
the world,
And we passed by, casting another gaze, another glance, at each
of them.²*

This is a couplet by Na'ilî (d. 1666), on how the theory of illusion flows elusively, yearning to be reconnected to the post and supra-classic tradition in literature: at the same time, divine fragrances affect the friezes of memory in our mind, and the earth's. Gusts of recollections, and here Marcel Proust could have helped refresh perceptions, resurfacing memories, in the intermittence of the heart, in the capsules of knowledge.

The Persian (but Greek) word *piyâle* was also passed down in Turkish-Ottoman tradition: ‘goblet,’ limpid, of wine and glass, which we call ‘phial’ instead. We are dealing with essences, wine, spirit and perfumes housed in such receptacles, which can rightly be described as custodians, memories of fragrances. This is what we expect of a vague, admired Orient, one that is also susceptible to being a testimony of suffering and amorous laments.

We accept such a vision, or perception, and we indulge it in the pretence of yet further pretences; for example, formalism rotating around ‘orientology’ for ascetic pretence, set out in history in truth, influencing and differentiating us all.

Let us set off again from an early eighteenth century (according to the Gregorian calendar) on the Bosphorus, to the “Bastion of Delights” (*Sa'd-âbâd*) that rose over there at the Golden Horn, at the beginning of the twenties. We are in that district of political quirks and affairs, arbiter of unheard of elegance albeit a little resentful, sensed in Versailles; singing can be heard, striking up, following the fashion introduced by Nedîm (died 1730), the great poet of the so-called “Tulip Age” (ca. 1720 – 1730). Let us listen to the cues of his amorous lyrics:

II

*Your stature stands as a measure of fineness,
Wine is filtered from glass, vermillion is your cheek.*

*Rose distilled, strip of grace extracted,
For you one is perspiration, satin hem the other.*

*In charm and magic, my quill, I steeped you,
The magician's ringlet turned to a flute for you.³*

Goblets and phials, and glass like cheek filters and perspiring crystal. Then the stones join in (ruby lips touching the edge of the goblet). In order to expand the circle of intimacy that has spread to the other figures who are involved:

III

*Admire stature of a friend: it is a cypress in the meadow, I tell
you,
And look at the mouth: it reveals a secret, an enigma, I tell you.*

*And seek no understanding from the lip's ruby, the goblet
Harkens: O merciful heart, do not throb in my throat, I tell you.*

*I am the poet, and if I say: I love not the loftiness of this theme,
Haply I suspect that it is mere gibberish that I tell you.*

*I open up my heart eye-to-eye, and that word
That I retain and that presses only if my rival sleeps I tell you.*

*No mention of that fairy's face, of the trips to the Castle on the
Bosphorus:
Do not believe, I'm certainly not rushing forwards about to tell
you...*

*A fringe, two twisted ringlets, rebellious, you see them:
Lo, dawn zephyr, that is the clear sign, I tell you...*

*... And such is the copiousness of grace bestowed by the breeze:
the rose*

Appears to you to be moving to a word in the garden, I tell you.

Vanishing, the fading colours of a subtle idea, intangible,
but still highly perceptible:

VIII

*The heart, succumbed in love, has succumbed as a free gift to
the young*

*And strength and patience are all a constant squandering of
torn collars.*

*And yet once I opened up her breast in silence, softly,
And from the breast I know not what essence flew away,
vanished.*

*And the curl and the eye and the mole: unbelievers liars rebels,
The kingdom of the beautiful ones is wholly at the mercy of the
neighbourhood in turmoil.*

Then, once again, the return to a naturalness from which the
artifice may be extracted, the breeze an accomplice:

XVI

*The odorous breeze that brushes that tuft of pure moss,
If it undoes the shirt-button, that breast smells of rose.*

*Not rose-petal: if I eat that lip, it is sugar, I believe,
Don't call it a bud, if you inhale the mouth it smells of wine.*

*In what purlieu of intimate friends did you spend the night?
The narcissus of the languid eye still smells of sleep.*

*And if it be not granted to us wretches to perceive him under
the veil,
Without a veil the rival smells that neck carved in silver.*

*There is a body called to the earth, burned by the fire of love,
There is a herb that smells of heart blazing until the judgement
day.*

*O you who distil sweat to the charm of the grace of the rose,
Your Adam's apple, with the rosebud lip, smells of petals.*

*Alas, that Nedim, still pursuing the quibbles of sense...
Meanwhile the sword-tip smells to the pen of blood and
plunder.*

And there is more: a fusion of memories, colours, fragrances, humours, in the untenable censorship of effusion:

XXI

*I still have the brand of the birthmark on my head, my head
bent,
I have a barber who opposes the gleaming forehead and refracts
the moonlight.*

*If the vase of aromas and perfumes of the beauty I love is arid,
Thank God I am entwined by curls, and bathed by the humour
of weeping...*

And it is the plant's humour that wets us ... that mortifies us. Again, flavours and shapes, the faintness of hyacinth in the

flowerbeds that are the arena of the fight, embraced by breeze and zephyr:

XXIV

*There are a thousand rings to each of her ringlets, kiss-curls,
There are a thousand heart-struck ruffled in her every curl.*

*Salt are the glances she throws, honey the smile that bursts forth,
And sweet, suave her speech, amiable her ways of gesturing.*

*Observe, in the pure white fez, that rebellious curl impregnated
with amber:*

Wall-flower that has jasmines as a tunic...

Hounding, seizing, grasping the logics of a discourse:

XLIII

*And the hyacinth aroma grasps the ideas as I tie it
To my bosom: hyacinth beds he has on his shoulders as quilts...*

We could say that what we have is a cosmetics moulded by jewellers, with long, lithe lines, twisted in and embrace:

XLVI

*The rouge daubed on the petals with splashes does not douse the
eloquent narcissus,*

*The cup-bearer who disturbs the quiet of the heart does not
forget the languor of the customer.*

*The idea of your ruby lip bestows a flavour on the softness of
sleep,*

*The seeker of the senses of love without sugar and rose cannot
taste the coffee.*

*He who does not once bind his friend to his chest
Does not gain in sharpness of humour, like an unbroken
mirror...*

And the pendulum swings, with its oscillating movements,
accompanied amidst nature and artifice:

LXXIV

*There is no reason why the fairy's face should not favour the
friend,
It matters not whether she yields by day or by night.*

*And may the spirit be free from imposture and duplicity, O self-
righteous one,
It matters not if he comes, and if the goblet replaces the rosary
in his hand.*

*I admire her loveliness, wherever, It matters not so greatly
If I pluck the dewy rose in the garden, or see her in the baths.*

*What can one do, in the act, if she reveals her breasts of oranges
and lemons, and does it matter,
In the end, if that thrill is a flower, and the eye is an almond?*

*Oh, you, idol, extract of aroma, if the scent of moss
Is flavoured with hint of amber, it matters not, and a touch of
rawness, in nature...*

In the bitter-sweet superfluity of roses, jasmine and citrus
fruits:

CXXI

I saw your breasts, I understood beauty in the body of a rose,

It is orange, and yet, I know not how, jasmine has blossomed! [...]

Pushing himself, yielding constantly to the skin, fragrant flesh, and no longer so fleeting, perishable, chosen as they are for the salvation of the ‘essences’: thanks to the notes of the most beautiful songs (*Şarkı*) that have ever been sung in the moonlight, on the ruffled mirrors of the waters of the Bosphorus, and the silver breasts:

CLIV

*Inebriated with graces, but who has bred you, so unrestrained?
Who on earth is pulling you up, so much slimmer than the
cypress?*

*More welcome than perfume, clearer than any colour is your
skin,
Stupendous rose maybe has nourished you in its lap.*

*Velvet with roses arrays you, and yet I am pricked by fear, my
love,
That the shadow of the thorn torments you... of rose on the
velvet...*

Once again, incorrigibly we thus yield to those *Şarkı*:

II

*Dazzling mirror to the eyes was that breast,
Where, where is that memento of the capricious moon?
Balm for sores and camphor for wounds,
Where, where is the cruel one who bestows suffering?*

In the hubbub of the ‘whom,’ direct, the relative particle that aspires to the absolute of Love reflected from the sky in the

waters of the cradle of the world, between two worlds, Constantinople/Istanbul:

XVI

*You, whom I love, and at whose footsteps I bow to the ground,
You, to whom I sacrifice myself, come out now that it is a
feast-day, and with your charms*

Imbue the world,

For whose love I weep and lament like a nightingale,

*You, to whom I sacrifice myself, come out now that it is a
feast-day, and with your charms*

Imbue the world...

May the sable fleece swathe the pink rose-adorned shawl,

Let the loosened black curl fall to the crystal bosom,

The snow-white neck of camphor exhale perfumes,

*You, to whom I sacrifice myself, come out now that it is a
feast-day, and with your charms*

Imbue the world...

*Nedim, open your heart to roses and flowers, there will be
wailing and the singing of nightingales.*

Let the curl become a lasso, and a noose and snare for Nedim,

Sway your hips, my soul, let Nedim be dust in your path,

*You to whom I sacrifice myself, come out now that it is a
feast-day, and with your charms*

Imbue the world...

The invitation to hide in the woods is drawn up, in the parks whose trees are threatened with felling, just when it should be them – the vegetable patches and gardens – the discreet guardians of the lovers, the kisses they exchanged amongst the evergreen maquis of the soul:

XX

*Sovereign of the handsome ones, of harmonious build, measure
for beautiful verse,*

Cut out a rose-coloured garment, a jasmine-scented shirt

Cypress that you are, you need a camisole of green twill,

Cut out a rose-coloured garment, a jasmine-scented shirt,

And come to the garden, you rose body, rosebud-mouth

Slenderest waist of fine horsehair, the sash girdles you perfectly

And the regal turban becomes your broad forehead,

A budding flower you are, and you ask the fragrant zephyr:

Cut out a rose-coloured garment, a jasmine-scented shirt

And come to the garden, you rose body, rosebud-mouth

With the odes (*Qaside*) directed at the Gran Vizir and the Sultan:

I

Debut to the virtue of a word strengthened by my ardour:

*Just so the Gulf of Aden seethes, smoulders and simmers with
pearls [...]]*

*[...] July breaks through and dons a shirt with roses,
the split*

Of the crack winds up to the embrace with the collar.

Grains lit by incense, crackling in a silver censer,

*The ardour of the cheek reverberates on the white bosom in
flames*

*The wells have been dried by the blaze of summer, and yet
That cleft in the chin, syrup-filled dimple, overbrims, floods
with juice.*

*That ruffled bud unfurls over your face, flushes it,
The hyacinth imbibes droplets, a fragrant and soft lasso of
snares...*

In such a fashion, between Persia, India, Tartaria and Europe, the ardour of the solar sovereigns was burnt: specks, grains in the dust of the dazzling light, emanating the perfumes of poor men.

Let us go forward one century, to our days of synthesis and scission, where the earthly one remains for sure, ‘alla franca,’ in the oscillations of the moths’ wings, amidst the perfumes of Istanbul and memories of Paris; and what we then hear is a succession of memories and perfume in Orhan Pamuk’s works:

[...] I remember that after my father left, I spent several days walking back and forth past the suitcase without once touching it. I was already familiar with this small, black, leather suitcase, and its lock, and its rounded corners. My father would take it with him on short trips and sometimes use it to carry documents to work. I remembered that when I was a child, and my father came home from a trip, I would open this little suitcase and rummage through his things, savouring the scent of cologne and foreign countries. This suitcase was a familiar friend, a powerful reminder of my childhood, my past, but now I couldn’t even touch it. Why? No doubt it was because of the mysterious weight of its contents. [...] (487-8)⁴

Finally, our land calls us, owing to the force of gravity, in the passage from the crackling of the lavish courtly incense burners to the acrid smoke and perfume of the memory of small frugal courtyards in Orhan Veli’s work:

The Brazier

*The brazier was burning on the threshold...
and nothing was to be seen,*

*except the fire and smoke,
in the darkness of the evening.
In the years of misery abundant coal
was a source of great joy for the child,
my friend poet Otay Rifat;
his mother Mistress Münevver,
would cook fish on the brazier,
and all the smoke,
with cardboard as bellows,
would fill my friend's nostrils with smoke.*

So is it a case of interweaving? Do perfumes evoke and rouse memories, owing to the pregnancy in the heart of the fabric of the actual letters? Almost as if perfumes and remembering are the warp and weft of the same precious fabric, on the loom of passions, affects, and pain.

Notes

- 1 Verses dated “1937, Smirne.” Unless otherwise specified, the English translations are by Gregory Dowling and C. Cawthra.
- Mustafa ’Itrî (Istanbul, 1640-1712 ca.) is a famous composer who belonged to the confraternity of the Dervish Mevlevî, founded by the poet and thinker Celâleddîn Rûmî, “Mevlâna” (“Our Lord,” 1207-1273), from Balkh, in Central Asia (Afghanistan) who came to Konya following the terror drive of the Mongolians. Going back to ’Itrî and his work, it must be pointed out that, contrary to what Yahya Kemal said here – according to whom only around twenty compositions have survived – , experts believe that the number is more than forty. Amongst his masterpieces, those that stand out include *Tekbir* (*supra*), the “Praise” exalting the Prophet Mohammed, and the *nevâ-kâr*. *nevâ* is one of the *makam*, “modes” or modal assets of classical Ottoman music, *kâr* is one of the first formal genres, originating from Persia, of classical Ottoman music, bound to the same rhythmic cycle (thanks go to Dr. Giovanni De Zorzi, ethnomusicologist for clarification).
- 2 Cf. TANPINAR, 234; Tanpinar regretted not being able to quote this couplet by Na’îlî to the famous scholar of mysticism, Massignon, who was unfamiliar with it.
- 3 Cf. *Nedîm Divani*, 249-50. From now on, as we shall be quoting many works from the same book, we shall limit ourselves to indicating the number at the beginning of each (which has no title).
- 4 It is on these pages (far away from jokes and *boutades*) that the author writes that one of the reasons he is so passionate about writing is because he loves the smell (perfume?) of the paper, pen and ink.

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GARDENS IN DRAMA PERFUMES TAKE THE STAGE

Francesca Bisutti

“Il dottor Hammond, di Nuova York, ha curato un ipocondriaco la cui pelle spandeva odore di violetta, un altro che esalava odor di pane fresco, due donne che mandavano una odor d’iride e l’altra odore d’ananas. [...] E [...] già si comincia a fare l’ipotesi che a ogni nostro stato psicologico corrisponda la produzione di speciali odori. Che perfino ogni nostro pensiero [...] si traduca continuamente in linguaggio di odori...” (Capuana 75)

“Doctor Hammond from New York treated a hypochondriac whose skin gave off a scent of violets, another patient who sent out a smell of fresh bread, and two hysterical women: one of them smelt of iris, the other gave off a scent of pineapple. [...] And [...] someone has already started making the hypothesis that every psychological condition corresponds with the emanation of special odors: even every thought [...] may correspond to a distinguishing smell-language ...” (Capuana n.p.)

This is the story from Luigi Capuana’s novel *Perfume (Profumo)*, 1890), told by the family doctor summoned to cure the protagonist, who is afflicted by an inexplicable nervous disease: her attractive young body emanates the fragrance of orange blossom that “pours into her linen, her clothes, and even invades the room during the night” (Capuana n.p.). Wanting to distance himself from the Verist school, in his own way, with the sophisticated levity of highly enjoyable irony, Capuana draws closer to the sym-

bolism of Baudelaire's "correspondances." The Sicilian writer also seems to want to refresh the air in the gloomy garden in Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), where a sinister scientist gave alchemical life to highly poisonous flowers. Of a totally different character, Capuana's affable doctor is concentrating on curing the ills of love with the perspicacity of good conversation and, at the same time, the empathetic attention of a participating observer: his therapy is a form of psychoanalysis that gently derides contemporary theories of depth psychology whilst simultaneously embracing them. The treatment works and the doctor-confidant is not only able to re-establish the harmony of the senses, and sensual correspondence, but also amorous harmony:

E dagli alberi, dalle siepi, dalle piante, dal terreno imbevuto di acqua si sprigionava una frescura così soave, un profumo così acuto, una sensazione di colori così allegri e vivaci che Patrizio e Eugenia rimasero a guardare muti, assorti, come se quella frescura, quel profumo, quella gioconda vivacità di colori, più che percepirli con i sensi, essi li godessero, spettacolo assai più bello, con il senso interiore dei loro due cuori già diventati un solo cuore. (Capuana 252)

The trees, the hedges, the plants, the soil soaked in water gave off a coolness so gentle, a smell so keen, a sensation of colours so bright and cheerful, that Patrizio and Eugenia watched silent, absorbed, as if, rather than perceiving the cool, the scent, the joyous brightness of those colours with the senses, they enjoyed them, a show much more beautiful, with an inner sense of their two hearts, which had already become one heart only.
(Capuana n.p.)

It is no longer the skin of the young, melancholic and dissatisfied bride that impregnates the air with a fragrance of orange

blossom; now it is the air-water-perfume-colour of the garden that exhales synaesthetic scents around the couple that have finally rediscovered their peace together. Under the Sicilian sun, a formidable reactant, and with the perfumed prose of his writing, Capuana overturned the alchemical process of Hawthorne's bleak tale, in which the young girl who was contaminated by flowers gave off lethal emanations. Nevertheless, it is from the tale by the great American writer that we would like to imagine Capuana drew inspiration for his fragrant fairy tale with a happy ending.

There is no doubt that a significant portion of nineteenth-century literature left behind it alluring olfactory trails. The most persistent was probably Émile Zola's novel *Abbe Mouret's Transgression*, (*La faute de l'abbé Mouret*, 1876) with the lengthy ecstasy-agony of an abandoned Albine, who dies suffocated by the fragrance of the flowers with which she has intoxicated the room: “But what was she to gather now? She had stripped the parterre bare” (331). Jam-packed with flowers and with even the tiniest cracks having been sealed with “the southernwood, the mint, the verbenas, the balm” (333), the airtight room literally becomes a *hortus conclusus*. Albine lies down on “the florescence of hyacinths and tuberoses” (333) as if it were a mystic catafalque and begins her *rêverie*: “Ah! How she had loved there! And how happily she was going to die!” (333).

Both an alcove and funeral chamber, the bedroom is soon transformed into a music room for the young dying girl, an *odeum*-greenhouse where, inebriated, she “listens to the whispers of the perfumes” being transformed into notes, in what is a sublime union of the senses with the arts:

[E]lle continuait à sourire, elle écoutait les parfums qui chuchotaient dans sa tête bourdonnante. [...] D'abord, c'était un prélude gai, enfantin: ses mains, qui avaient tordu les verdures odorantes, exhalaien l'apréte des herbes foulées, lui contaient ses courses de gamine [...]. [...] Mais elle suf-



John William Waterhouse, *The Soul of the Rose*, 1908. Private collection

foquait davantage, la passion arrivait avec l'éclat brusque des oeillets, à l'odeur poivrée, dont la voix de cuivre dominait un moment toutes les autres. Elle croyait qu'elle allait agoniser dans la phrase maladive des soucis et des pavots, qui lui rappelait les tourments de ses désirs. Et, brusquement, tout s'apaisait [...]; elle glissait à une douceur plus grande, bercée par une gamme descendante des quarantaines, se ralentissant, se noyant, jusqu'à un cantique adorable des heliotropes [...]. Les noces étaient venues, les fanfares des roses annonçaient l'instant redoutable. (320-321)

[S]he continued smiling, while she listened to the whispers of the perfumes in her buzzing head. They were singing to her a soft strange melody of fragrance [...]. At first there was a prelude, bright and childlike; her hands, that had just now twisted and twined the aromatic greenery, exhaled the pungency of crushed herbage, and recalled her old girlish ramblings [...]. But she began to stifle as passion drew nigh with the clove-like breath of the carnations, which burst upon her in brazen notes that seemed to drown all others. She thought that death was nigh when the poppies and the marigolds broke into a wailing strain, which recalled the torment of desire. But suddenly all grew quieter; [...] she glided into greater serenity, lulled by a descending scale that came from the throats of the stocks, and died away amidst a delightful hymn from the heliotropes [...]. The nuptials were at hand, the trumpet blasts of the roses announced them. (333-334)

This lengthy description is highly suggestive: it is narcotic-like in its writing. One could say that the dense list of fragrances saturating both the room and the page are an attempt by Zola, the positivist, to offer a taxonomy of perfumes. However, the passage is also remarkable because of the many things it helps us sense regarding the theory of olfaction. Through a word-perfume veil, the reader not only perceives the physical nature of the senses, but

also the presence of passion, and the sublimation of passion itself, cleansed of its worldliness and distilled until it achieves the purity of its *fifth essentia*; the reader perceives the power of the olfactory memory that makes something in the past alive and present; he/she also perceives the bond between the ritual solemnity of the scene (as if on the stage) and the purificatory rites *per fumum* of ancient times.

Both Capuana's intuitions and Zola's echoes are an invitation to enter the "scented imagination" (Stamelman 22) of other authors. And since the world of perfumes, with its extremely unstable borders, is a kingdom of subjectivity and offers room for free associations, we can follow unhindered the traces of some of the fragrances evoked in the late-romantic gardens of the two writers. With this as our starting point – like an ideal matrix – we will look at four plays from the twentieth century, each of them differing greatly as regards inspiration, setting, thought and technique, in an attempt to recapture their perfume.

"Fragrance of verbena"¹

What prevails in Zola's amazing passage is the exaltation of the affinity between the sense of smell and the sense of hearing, in other words, between the two arts of evanescence: perfume and music. Composers were quick to observe this and Giacomo Puccini asked Zola for permission to base an opera on his novel. However, Jules Massenet² was quicker, and Puccini had to wait before he was able to combine music and flowers on the stage of his opera. The right subject came from America: David Belasco's one act play *Madame Butterfly* (1900) – based on the tale of the same name by John Luther Long (1898) –, which the composer saw at the Duke of York's Theatre in London in the summer of 1900. Although Puccini spoke no English he was enraptured: clear proof that – when present – the dramatic power of a play

has its own universal language that everyone can understand. The success of *Madama Butterfly* (1904) was equally universal, and today it is one of the best-loved operas in the world.

The curtain has just gone up and we already know that ‘perfume’ and ‘flower’ will be words that evoke feelings of love, fervid hope and, in the end, tragic desperation. Let us start to look for these words – like gems – in the libretto and score. A smile is the “perfume of the gods,”³ says Suzuki, Butterfly’s servant. For the broker Goro, the young bride to be is as fair as “a garland of fragrant flowers.”⁴ Pinkerton himself uses the vocabulary of flowers, when he boasts that “he’s not satisfied with life / unless he makes his own / the flowers of every shore”⁵ up to when he says farewell to the “flowery refuge.”⁶ In one of the concerted pieces in the first act, what is striking when talking about Butterfly is that he says: “Yes, it’s true, she’s a flower, a flower! / Her exotic fragrance has turned my head! [...] Yes, it’s true, she’s a flower, a flower, / and, upon my honour, I’ve plucked her!”⁷ This olfactory-action short circuit in the cynical officer and *viveur* is self-evident. The good consul Sharpless, on the other hand, describes Butterfly in auditive-emotive terms: “The mystery of her voice / touched me to the heart. / True love surely / speaks like that.”⁸ A little later, we hear Butterfly’s voice-perfume offstage before she enters: “Over land and sea there floats / a joyous breath of spring.”⁹ “Look at all that sky, / all those flowers,”¹⁰ her girlfriends reply; and they themselves look like flowers, having arrived to celebrate her wedding together.

However, it is with the Butterfly-Suzuki duet in the second act that flowers and music really create a visual, auditive and olfactory relationship between objects and soul, when, announced by a cannon blast, the white ship sails into the port. Overcome with joy, Butterfly asks Suzuki: “Shake that branch of the cherry tree / and rain down / blooms on me. / I want to plunge / my burning brow in its fragrant rain. [...] Everywhere / must be full

PICC: BIBL: DI SCIENZE MOD: N° 42
G.B. BACCIONI
NEL REGNO DEL PROFUMO



G.B. Baccioni, *Nel regno del profumo*, 1902, frontispiece

of flowers, / as the night is of stars. / Go and pick the flowers!”¹¹ The garden is therefore stripped bare as if the wind had swept through it and all the flowers are scattered, decorating the threshold and room in welcome. In this marvellous scene “music [is] breathing the very sweetness of the blossoms with which the two women adorn the house” (Carner 377).

The composer thus finally succeeded in recreating the floral exaltation that had attracted him so much in Zola’s novel, giving life on stage to the French writer’s lavish allegory with music and song. An indirect transposition one could say, in which the source, evoked only allusively, leaves an unmistakable trace. Of course, the flowers that should have welcomed Pinkerton were also present in Long’s and Belasco’s works, but Puccini, who regarded himself first and foremost as a man of the theatre and only in second place as a musician, could not help but re-evoke the intense dramatic fragrance of Zola’s climatic scene. Thus, desperation is already inscribed in Butterfly’s wistful yearning and the abundance itself of the flowers being offered seems to be an ill-fated omen. However, two lines alone are able to summarise the entire, sorrowful episode, telling us everything we need to know about the protagonist: “The long-awaited one has come, I ask nothing more of the sea, / I gave tears to the soil, it gives its flowers to me!”¹² What is revealed here is not the exotic/erotic woman-flower that the sensitivity of the period had created and taken to exhausting perfection. Quite simply, *Butterfly* is a flower and the flowers she offers are an offer of herself. However, the entire opera – music and words – is an evocation of her spontaneous natural grace.¹³ The “fragrance of verbena” surrounding her is not a seductive device but rather a pure aura, a spiritual emanation of her innermost being, and the sweet perfume is a metaphor for the essence of her femininity and innocence. It is her ‘artless charm’ that makes *Butterfly* so irresistible. This is what Pinkerton says has won him over, just as

the audience has been won over by the transparency and freshness of her invincible naivety.

The “brazen notes”¹⁴ of the carnations

Puccini and his librettists might have associated their protagonist with the natural fragrance of verbena because they also knew just how difficult it was for perfumers at that time to distil it and capture its essence in a bottle.¹⁵ However, it is time for us to abandon the orientalist elegance of the Belle Époque and turn to the harshness of the American West in the period of the Great Depression. We thus leave the subtle sweetness of verbena behind us, and instead our attention is caught by the sensual aggressiveness of the carnation’s ‘heavy’ perfume, which is much easier to extract and produce via synthesis and much less valuable. The pungent scent we smell comes from rural California, where *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is set, a three-act play by John Steinbeck based on his novel with the same name. On a large ranch manual workers have come from afar perhaps for just a month’s wages, before heading for another ranch, worn down by fatigue but driven by the hope that one day they will have their own piece of land. There are carts, beasts of burden, sleeping shacks where they can rest and recover, ready to work once again the following day. In this world, one that is only for men – single men –, an incredible young girl is slinking around like a cat from one shack to the other; she is the only female character and the only one that the author does not give a name. Lacquered nails, a floral bathing-robe, slippers with flashy ostrich feathers all jar with the manual workers’ garments, and she seems totally out of place: instead of a character, the author seems to have wanted “Curley’s wife” to stylise femininity as a threat. Two weeks earlier she married the rowdy son of the ranch superintendent – a loveless match; discontent and wishing to get away, she restlessly seeks the workers’ company and is followed obsessively by her hus-

band: “*CURLEY [...] suddenly sniffs the air, like a hound*: By God, she’s been in *here*. I can smell... By God, she’s been in *here*” (111-112). For their part, the men can scent the danger of her seductive sexuality and they eschew it: “You know, seems to me I can almost smell that carnation stuff that goddamn tart dumps on herself” (109). It is the sense of smell, not sight, that acts as a warning of danger and triggers the alarm. Furthermore, the very first time the two protagonists met the woman, the ‘intelligence’ of the sense of smell was decisive: “God Almighty, did you smell that stink she’s got on? I can still smell her. Don’t have to see *her* to know she’s around” (61-62). The manual worker who has just arrived on the ranch is struck by this unpleasant impression, and his soul darkens quickly. It is vulgar perfume, extremely strong and applied with the intention/instinct to please that arouses in him an immediate, definitive sense of repulsion, together with the intuition that the woman will bring misfortune: “Don’t you even smell near her!” (62) is the harsh warning that a shrewd George wastes no time in giving his companion Lennie to protect him, because although he is as big as a bear, he is mentally fragile and irresistibly drawn to the woman. Tragedy is inevitable and a fatal chain of events will strike the two characters who are irremediably ‘out of place’ and unable to fit into the surroundings: the woman who smells too much like a woman, and the giant child who is unable to control his own strength. With its archaic smell of a myth, in this twentieth-century tragedy perfume and stench swap places more than once, sharing the stage. On the one hand, the scent of carnations expands and amplifies the dark powers of female sexuality with its aura; on the other, for the men who are at the prime of their lives, a decrepit, smelly dog is a symbol of the end. The dog will also be killed, in what is a very human attempt to carry out an act of mercy, as well as a way of exorcising the fear of death by eliminating the smell.

One might wonder why Steinbeck gave olfaction so much more importance in his stage adaptation *Of Mice and Men* than

he did in the novel. The author was forced to forego the naturalistic descriptions that were an essential framework for the story as they could not be staged; he thus had the ingenious idea of replacing them with the perceptions of smell – the most primitive of the senses – whilst managing to endow them with all the power of dramatic language. It is therefore, above all, the perfumes and smells that emphasize the deep tie with the primordial roots of human existence and action that was the basis of the original novel.

“A delightful hymn from the heliotropes”¹⁶

In Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938) perfumes are also used to evoke the deep ties with the cycles of nature that modernity seems to have forgotten. However, the gentle fragrance of the heliotropes that comes from the gardens in an imaginary town in New England – the allegorical centre and mirror of the bigger world – is not just a delicate allusion to the spring myth of regeneration. In the crystalline glow of the moon, the perfume that everyone can smell is the invisible background enveloping the whole small community, keeping it together just like the hymn, “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds,” which the women and men are singing in the choir:

A choir partially concealed in the orchestra pit has begun singing ‘Blessed Be the Tie That Binds’. SIMON STIMSON stands directing them. [...]

STAGE MANAGER: You can hear choir practice going on in the Congregational Church.

SIMON STIMSON: Now look here, everybody. Music come into the world to give pleasure – Softer! Softer! Get it out of your heads that music’s only good when it’s loud. You leave loudness to the Methodists. You couldn’t beat ’em, even if you wanted to. Now again. Tenors! (41)

The collective celebration of the magnificent beauty of the event is also the context for individual growth: at a magical moment, when we think we can discover the traces of an ancient rite of transition, inebriated by the perfume and fascinated by the moon she thinks is both “wonderful” and “terrible,” the adolescent protagonist feels her femininity blooming, perceiving both the enchantment and the agitation¹⁷:

EMILY: My, isn’t the moonlight *terrible*? And choir practice going on.

[...]

MR WEBB: Why aren’t you in bed?

EMILY: I don’t know. I just can’t sleep yet, Papa. The moonlight’s so *won-derful*. And the smell of Mrs Gibbs’s heliotrope. (42; 47)

In concordance with the melody of the hymn and the reappearance of the moon, perfume sublimates and almost sacralises an important moment of the protagonist’s early youth. But this fragrance also acts like a gentle spell: on the petulant child who is having more profound thoughts; on the young man in love who is distracted from his homework by his enchanting dreams; and on the pair of adults who find a moment’s intimacy: “*MRS GIBBS:* [...] Come out and smell the heliotrope in the moonlight. (*They stroll out arm in arm along the footlights*) Isn’t that wonderful?” (45). With the essentiality of gestures and a language with a strength of spontaneity that is disarming – simple words that are used with tenderness and modesty – the play manages to describe the eternal motifs that make up the lives of men and women. It is the innovative figure of the stage director-narrator who accompanies the characters from one stage of life to another, acting as an instrument of reflection on the enigma surrounding our existence, on beauty and pain.

In the last act, on the wind-swept hill, amidst the “mountain

laurel and lilacks" (75) the dead are speaking with a detachment, which we find heart-breaking, of the enchantment of life that they themselves had not understood. There is no need for a grand past full of heroes, myths, and traditions in order to feel the dead as if they were alive. On the contrary, it is the trivial events, those that are always the same yet always different in the microcosm of Grover's Corners, that bind the living and the dead, and the living with those yet to be born, in a tenuous, but indissoluble chain. The Platonism that can be felt clearly in this play – a legacy of the transcendentalist tradition Wilder is evoking – finds in perfume its most effective symbolic expression, almost as if that breath were the intangible 'objective correlative' of the link between things on earth and things of the spirit.

"The truth of roses"¹⁸

She was in a beige skirt and a white satin blouse, and her hair hung down to her shoulders, parted on the right side, and the sight of her was something like pain, and I knew that I must flee or walk into a doom beyond all knowing. With all her radiance she was surrounded by a darkness that perplexed me. [...] Flying homeward, her scent still on my hands, I knew my innocence was technical merely, and the fact blackened my heart, but along with it came the certainty that I could, after all, lose myself in sensuality. (Miller 1987, 307)

The woman Arthur Miller is remembering in this passage in his autobiography is the Marilyn Monroe of their first meetings, when they were still just friends, when he was still overwhelmed by her perfume lingering on his hands. One wonders whether it is possible to rediscover some of that perfume in the controversial play *After the Fall* (1964), which was staged two years after the death of the actress who had been his wife from 1956 to 1961.

In this complex introspective play – mostly autobi-

graphical – “with stream-of-consciousness evocations of characters, abrupt disappearances, and transformations of time and place” (Miller 1987, 536), the author feels the need to justify his new affective life and defend himself from the waves of disapproval coming from the entire country, which accused him of having caused the actress’ unhappiness. He constructs the positive figure, outlining the person who was to go on to become his third wife, having her appear with a large bunch of field flowers in her arms. She says they will perfume their car and repeatedly during the first act she appears fleetingly with these fresh, natural and beautiful flowers, inhaling their perfume: a persistent, open stratagem to ensure the audience feel the character’s cleanliness and truth. In the playwright’s hands, the meaning of the flowers and their perfume becomes an important instrument to emphasise the contrast between the characters and situations. Being the expert he is, he also makes sure that Maggie-Marilyn has her flowers, but what he does is attribute a totally different meaning to them. When Quentin (Arthur Miller’s alter ego) enters her apartment for the first time, what he sees is a profusion of flowers. Maggie-Marilyn does not touch them as they are the testimony of the desire of some mysterious worshipper whom she brusquely calls an idiot. The flowers are also involved in the disdain of this dry, coarse language and they seem to lose their splendour and perfume, leaving her impoverished as well. In the final scene of the play, the viewer sees her with a bottle of liqueur and a phial of tablets in her hands, not the flowers.

Marilyn was so enchanting and seductive that she took one’s breath away, but she fell into the abysses of her anguish that became darker and darker; the playwright certainly loved Marilyn – but he was unable to remember *how* he loved her. And thus, he compares a love that has ended to a rose he remembers in a dark room:

Or can one ever remember love? It's like trying to summon up the smell of roses in a cellar. You might see a rose, but never the perfume. And that's the truth of roses, isn't it – the perfume? (Miller 1964, 97)

It seems that with *After the Fall* Miller also wanted to rob Marilyn of the aura of the myth – a rose that has lost its scent. But she remained a legend, and the drops of *Chanel n. 5* she wore became a myth as well. Speaking about this perfume, which was to become her most famous, Coco Chanel said – while she was having it prepared – that it was meant to be “as artificial as a dress, or rather the fruit of fabrication, a woman’s perfume that smells of woman, because a woman should smell like a woman and not like a rose¹⁹” (Munier 137).

Of all the possible perfumed trails, those we have chosen to follow that crossed the Atlantic in both directions between the nineteenth and twentieth century, have shown us that the elusive realm of fragrances is in the inextricable domain of passion the senses, thought, memory and even the sacred. It comes as no surprise that in the *Dictionnaire amoureux de Marcel Proust* the entry dedicated to olfaction is entitled “Olfaction (et emotion),” thus underlining the inevitable tie with states of the soul.

In our brief journey from the prodigious resonances in the literary gardens of the *fin de siècle* to the individual blooms that are evoked in twentieth century plays, what is striking is how the fragrances that are summoned onto the stage by words and gestures actually seem to lose their immaterial quality; instead, by a magnificent paradox, the very fleetingness of theatrical illusion appears to confer upon them permanence and persistence. While neuroscience is just beginning to solve the enigma of the relationship between humans and perfume, the theatre has been able to give it both body and substance.



Ed Feingersh, *Marilyn Monroe*, 1955

Notes

- 1 ILLICA, GIACOSA n.p.
- 2 Massenet never actually composed the opera. Cf. CARNER 171.
- 3 “Profumo degli dei” (29).
- 4 “una ghirlanda di fiori freschi” (34).
- 5 “La vita ei non appaga / se non fa suo tesor / i fiori d’ogni plaga” (33).
- 6 “fiorito asil” (100).
- 7 “Sì, è vero, è un fiore, un fiore! / L’esotico suo odore m’ha il cervello sconvolto.[...] Sì, è vero, è un fiore, un fiore, / e in fede mia l’ho colto!” (42).
- 8 “Di sua voce il mistero / l’anima mi colpì. / Certo quando è sincer / l’amor parla così” (35).
- 9 “Spira dal mare e sulla / terra un primaveril soffio giocondo” (37).
- 10 “Mira / quanto cielo, quanti fior” (37).
- 11 “Scuoti quella fronda di ciliegio / e m’innonda di fior. / Io vo’ tuffar nella pioggia odorosa / l’arsa fronte. [...] Tutto sia pien di fior, come la notte / è di faville. / Va pei fior” (88).
- 12 “Giunse l’atteso, nulla più chiedo al mare, / diedi pianto alla zolla, essa i suoi fior mi dà” (89).
- 13 Differently, in Long’s novella, the protagonist’s grace/malice was calculated: “She begged Yamadori, with the most charming upward inflections, to put away his cigarette [...] with a resistless movement toward him. She let him touch her hands in the passage of the cups. She enveloped him with the perfume of her garments. She possessed him wholly in one dizzy instant” (LONG 9); “Then she made herself pretty with vermillion and powder and perfumes” (LONG 18).
- 14 ZOLA 333.
- 15 Cf. BACCIONI 131.
- 16 ZOLA 334.
- 17 Certain anthropological considerations may prove useful here: “[I]n every culture in the world, the presence of smells

evokes [...] a universally founded intrinsic relationship between olfaction and the rites of passage. This association lies in the fleeting, evanescent nature of smell: its presence marks an on-going transfor-

mation process, effectively symbolising the ambiguous situation of those subjected to the rites of passage" (CAVALIERI 56).

18 MILLER 1964, 121.

19 Translation by C. Cawthra.

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Mouret's Transgression, translated by Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, Project Gutenberg EBook).

SACRED AND PROFANE PERFUME SENSORIAL MAZES AND PATHS OF MEANINGS IN ITALIAN AND FRENCH RENAISSANCE

Magda Campanini

Our path will be one of reflection, going down different roads that appear to be remote whilst following the impalpable web of perfume and its reflections in Renaissance literary imagination in Italy and France.

The premise for our journey is the often acknowledged, two-fold correlation between perfume and the pleasure of the senses, and between perfume and spirituality, in its rituality forms that are associated with the divine.

The value and connotations of essences and perfumed oils in the classical world are emblematic. Evocative of images of luxury, amorous pleasure, and dissoluteness but also a means of union between the human and divine, linked to religious sacrifice and funeral rituals, perfume found favour with myths and wielded considerable influence on classical thought. Its sacred and profane values are intertwined in a bond whose reflections radiated in the Renaissance universe, which was profoundly imbued with ancient culture.

This symbiosis between the divine and terrestrial is symbolically portrayed in a famous and enigmatic painting that we shall take as a starting point for our reflections. Without looking at this particular field of study which is not ours, we shall use this evocation from Renaissance painting as our starting point.

The painting in question is the famous *Sacred Love and Profane Love* by Titian. It has been the object of countless famous and contrasting interpretations that we will not dwell on. In the

centre is a sarcophagus that has been transformed into a fountain, and Cupid's hand is splashing in the water; on the edges two enigmatic female figures are seated, one naked and the other lavishly dressed, according to Panofsky the personification of *geminae Veneres*, the terrestrial and the celestial.¹ On the sarcophagus surface is a red rose, whilst in front of it a white rose bush is growing; the dressed female figure is also holding a bunch of roses in her right hand. As observed by critics who documented the close relationship between Veneto literary culture and figurative culture, decorated with a bas-relief, the sarcophagus fountain is a faithful reproduction of an illustration in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, an allegorical novel and printing masterpiece of the Venetian Renaissance, depicting Adonis' tomb.² Colonna's novel dwells on the details of the rite that is carried out every spring when, accompanied by her son, Venus goes to pay homage to her deceased beloved and covers his sepulchre with roses, thus evoking the *rosalia*, a Roman commemoration ceremony when tombs were decorated with roses. According to *Hypnerotomachia*, during commemorative rituals, Venus emerges naked from the water and carries out the mystery of the dyeing of the roses, in other words, the metamorphosis of the roses devoted to her: the white ones turn red with the blood that she herself lost when she hurt herself on a rose bush whilst trying to defend Adonis, and which Cupid collected in a shell. In Titian's painting there is a trace of this in the red rose on the sarcophagus.

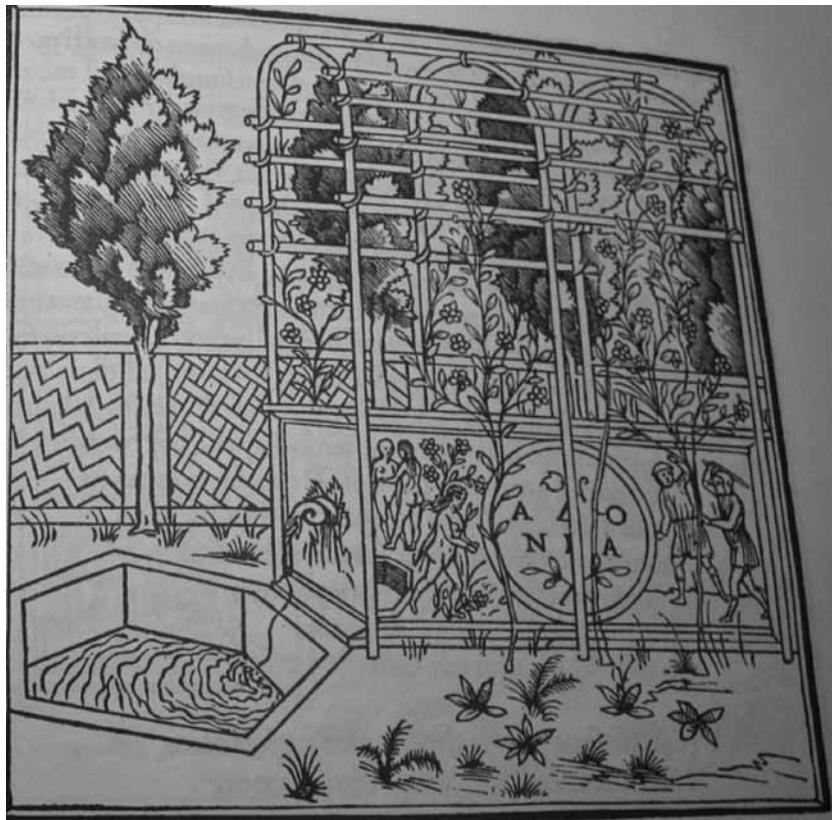
Whilst not intending to be an illustration of the novel, the painting contains sufficient references to the myth of Adonis celebrated in *The Dream of Poliphilus* so as to allow us to establish a relationship between these two works. And that is therefore where we shall start: Adonis, Venus, roses and perfume.

The myth of Adonis takes us to his mother Myrrha who, as Ovid writes in *Metamorphoses* (411) gives birth to him in the country of Saba the land of perfumes³ – after having been trans-

formed into an aromatic bush. In a certain sense the bewitching young man, the lover of Venus and Persephone, shares the same origins with myrrh, blending with the myth of the origin. Owing to his double relationship with Venus and Myrrh, in the Greek world Adonis is indissolubly associated with perfume, and the pleasure of the senses. According to Marcel Detienne (84-93), the figure of Adonis is one of the myths of erotic seduction; clear references are to be found in the *Palatine Anthology*, where the name itself summarises the meanings of lover and perfume, as in *Epitaph of Adonis* by Dio Chrysostom, which expresses the identity of Myrrha's son as both a lover and perfume.⁴ Adonis' seductive power is that of myrrh, which inflames passion. His figure incarnates the union of an aromatic substance and erotic pleasure.

Next to the myrrh is the rose: a flower sacred to Venus, symbol of sensuality and seduction, a source of imagination that remains throughout the French Renaissance, as can be seen by Ronsard's *Odes*, when he sings about the rose ("Sur tous parfums j'aime la rose") and says that: "La Rose est l'honneur des Charites / [...] / La Rose est le parfum des dieux" (142).

On Adonis' tomb, perfumed roses – as perfumed as Aphrodite⁵ – are the second element that, together with the motif of the sarcophagus-fountain, takes us from Titian's canvas to Francesco Colonna's novel, printed in Venice by Aldus Manutius in 1499; the latter was adapted in French for the first time with the title *Le Songe de Poliphile* in 1546 by Jean Martin for the publisher Kerver in Paris, after circulating in the original version in *italiani-sants* circles, above all in Lyon. Perfume plays an important role in this work, imbued with humanistic culture, narrating Poliphilo's oneiric, esoteric and allegorical journey; it is a journey of the soul that takes him to the dark compulsions of the *voluptas* towards the kingdom of Venus Mother to find once again in a dream his beloved Polia, who is also actually Wisdom. Let us look at some



Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Milan, Adelphi, 1998. *The Sepulchre of Adonis*, woodcut from the Aldine edition dated 1499

of the key moments in which the presence of perfume reveals itself in this work with a wealth of symbolism, marking an itinerary of the senses that also proves to be an itinerary of meanings. The meeting point that unites the earthly and sacred sphere in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is transmitted in Jean Martin's adaptation and from there it emanates, following oblique paths in other examples of sixteenth-century French literature.

Let us take a brief look at the text, with quotations from the

1999 English translation and from the modern French version edited by Polizzi, which also includes the text of Martin's adaptation.

Let us start with the evocation of the thermal baths where Poliphilo goes together with five beautiful nymphs. Here the perfume that impregnates the air and fills the water with fragrance acts as a medium of the pleasure of the senses:

Not far away there was a fissure in the ground, continually vomiting fiery matter. They took this and filled up the vase with it, placing on it certain gums and perfumed woods so as to make an indescribable fumigation, as fragrant as the best pastille; then they closed the double doors, which were of pierced metal filled with translucent crystal that gave a wonderful and multicoloured light. These piercing of transparent knotwork illuminated the scented bath, while keeping the fragrance and the heat from escaping outside. [...] we had happily entered into such fragrance as could never have grown in Arabia [...].

Assez près de là, en la terre, il y avait une veine de matière brûlante de laquelle ces nymphes, mes conductrices, mi-rent quelque peu en ce vase, et par-dessus aucunes gommes et bois odorant, dont se fit un parfum beaucoup plus souef que celui d'oiselets de Chypre. Après elles fermèrent les portes [...] Et si n'en pouvait issir la fumée du parfum, ni l'exhalation d'icelle douce odeur. [...] Je me trouvai en grand plaisir [...] parmi ces parfums et senteurs, plus odorants que tous les simples que l'Arabie Heureuse saurait produire. (82-3)

The perfume saturates this area of sensual blissfulness, preparing the following scene with its erotic nuances: the nymphs' bathing indicates the correlation and functionality of aromatic substances and seduction, of which perfume is one form. In the passages above, the *topos* of the *Arabia felix* ("Arabie Heureuse" in Jean Martin's version), land of indescribable fragrances and

exotic fascination, is united in the French text with a reference to Cyprus, thus immediately evoking the cult of Venus. In the image of the *oiselets*, small bird-like incense burners, the motif of perfumed exhalation takes shape, rising in the air as smoke being offered to the divinity. Although in a less concentrated form, here one can see the sacred meaning of perfume as a tie between earth and heaven, blending with the sensual and profane value, which we shall look at later on; in Colonna this is also present as a site of the mysterious identity of the sacred and earthly. Using synonyms, comparisons and synonymous pairs (“parfums et senteurs,” “odeur”), the French translation magnifies and underlines the uses of the word perfume, which permeates the rewriting of Colonna’s work with even greater pregnancy.

In countless places in the text, too many for us to look at here in detail, perfume appears repeatedly, almost cyclically, and it is always associated with Venus, the “divine Mother” (II, 353) who takes in Poliphilo and Polia in Kythira, carrying out the initiation into her mysteries. Perfume is extended to all the elements: the earth – with its fragrant gardens and perfumed fruits – the air pervaded with these fragrances, the perfumed water of the thermal baths, Venus’ fountain⁶ and the rain of exhilarating essences that sprays the triumphal procession following Cupid’s chariot. The following passage is particularly interesting because it presents an asperges ritual, describing the different stages and tools of the perfuming:

Next came the perfume-bearers with their golden flasks of a workmanship never seen before, and with golden incense-pans or censers, distributing a marvellous fragrance exceeding even that which was diffused throughout this happy place. Some had golden bottles with tiny mouth through which they constantly shook drops of perfumed liquor over everyone. (342)

[...] les osmophores [*portant odeurs*] encensières, portant cassolettes et autres parfums, desquels sortait une odeur incroyable. Il y en avait d'autres qui portaient des vases d'or à col étroit, pleins d'eau de senteurs, qu'elles répandaient sur les assistants, menu comme petite pluie. (309-10)

Particularly significant in *Hypnerotomachia* is the tie between perfume and the *topos* of the garden as a *locus amoenus*, a place of delight and harmony, where the natural element blends with the architectural element and pagan fantasy creating the matrix of the Renaissance garden with its interweaving of symbolic values linked to the revival of classical sources. This portrayal of the garden reaches its peak with the description of Kythira, the island of Venus, the paradisiac, symbolic place of cosmic harmony. Here the perfumes triumph in the detailed description of the flowers, herbs and fruits that make the goddess' garden a place where "everything was fragrant in this happy, blessed, delicious and delightful place" (345). As we can see, perfume is the characteristic of the celestial, the essence of the 'blessed site.'

It includes the lengthy, exquisite description of the amphitheatre of Venus. In addition to its detailed architectural descriptions, the evocation of the gardens also shows us an almost infinite variety of flowers of different shapes and colours, all joined together harmoniously in this 'blessed site' (357). A motif that is full of symbolic implications already in early Christianity, the outline of the paradise-garden is evident here; the fragrance of the flowers refers to the *odor suavitatis* and perfume as the spiritual nutrition of the souls of the blessed.⁷ In the Christian worldview, the most favoured essences are incense, ambrosia and nectar.

Furthermore, the evocation of perfumed smoke continues in sixteenth-century religious poetry; one example is Jean de La Ceppède's sonnet XXIII *L'Autel des vieux parfums*, a reference to book XXX of the Exodus, which evokes the altar God wanted to "burn incense upon:"

L'Autel des vieux *parfums* dans Solyme *incensé*,
Fait or' d'une voirie un Temple vénérable,
Où du Verbe incarné l'Hypostase adorable
S'offre très *odorante* à son Père offensé.

The altar censed with the old perfumes in Solyma now makes of a place of slaughter a temple to be venerated, in which the adorable hypostasis of the Word Incarnate is offered sweet-smelling to the offended Father. (Brereton, 121)

Dominated by the figure of Venus, Colonna's paganish universe maintains the centrality of perfume albeit with different intentions and values. The earthly sensual pleasure it introduces blends with its innate sacredness, as we can see in the description of the pergola of roses of "a ravishing scent" (371) next to Adonis' sepulchre and the sacred fountain of Kythira, on the site where Venus will appear and the mystical-erotic initiation ceremony is to take place. The French translation describes these roses as "naturelles, toutefois trop plus odorantes que les communes" (334)⁸ because they have been consecrated to the love of Adonis and to the goddess; it is their heavenly perfume that will accompany the apparitions of Venus, and the places where she appears, becoming a sign of the goddess' presence in the same way that Isis, makes her presence felt in book XI of *The Golden Ass*, probably the source of Colonna's inspiration: "All the perfumes of Arabia floated into my nostrils as the Goddess deigned to address me" (chap. 17). In both Colonna and Apuleius, perfume is a form of the sacred and the sign of a theophany; it indicates the goddess' presence and induces olfactory pleasure.

In the French Renaissance, this motif appears repeatedly in both poetry and prose in writings infused with classic culture and pagan imagination. For example, unction perfumed with balsams to heal wounds or to make the hero invincible, as in the first of Jeanne Flore's *Contes amoureux*, published

around 1540, in which – perhaps reminiscent of the *Aeneid* – Venus oils the body of a young knight with an ointment that smells of ‘celestial ambrosia’ (118) to make him invulnerable. Another example is a *mascarade* by Pierre de Brach from 1567, in which Cupid appears holding a torch made of “of musk, amber and other fragrant essences mixed over an artificial fire that filled the whole room with a sweet, pleasant smell.” In the same work, in the following scene four characters described as Pilgrims of Love offer fragrant myrtle and smoke from the burning of aromatic substances on the altar of the god of love. The perfumed smoke transmits the communication with the divine whilst also being the metaphor of a love that burns and consumes:

Lors chacun d'eux mit par trois fois le genou en terre, puis
le premier Pelerin s'avancant, posa la coupe de senteurs sur
l'autel: le second sa branche de myrte: le tiers son panier:
et le quart le vase. Et apres avoir fait un tour par la salle, le
premier retourna a l'autel, qui posa son bourdon en terre; et
avec une grande ceremonie prit des poudres de senteurs,
qu'il jeta dans un vase, ou il y avait des charbons ardents,
ce qui parfuma la salle d'une odeur fort douce et plaisante,
et au pied du vase posa ces quatre vers.

Comme de ces senteurs l'odorante fumee
Temoigne qu'au dessous un feu les va brulant:
Ainsi de mon amour le tourment violent,
Temoigne mon amour vivement enflammee. (141)

Each of them rested their knee on the ground three times, then the first Pilgrim came forward and placed the goblet of essences on the altar, the second his myrrh branch, the third his basket and the fourth a vase. After having walked around the room the first then returned to the altar, placed his stick on the ground and with the utmost solemnity picked up some of the aromatic

powder; this he threw in a vase containing glowing coal, perfuming the room with a very sweet, pleasant fragrance.

He placed the following four lines at the foot of the vase: Like the sweet-smelling smoke of these fragrances Is a sign that beneath a fire is burning them; The same for my love and its violent torment Is a sign that my love is burning thanks to a blazing flame.

A similar association between the divinities of love and perfume can be seen in an epithalamium of the second day of Rémy Belleau's *Bergerie*, in which Cupid is asked to pour all the perfumes of the Orient on the wedding that is being celebrated:

“I beg you to let flow on this beautiful day /all the perfumes that Assyria / offers us as benevolent aid.”

“Verse à ce beau jour je t'en prie / Tous les parfums que l'Assirie / Nous donne pour benin secours” (II, 127).

Let us go back to *Hypnerotomachia*, where the intensity and pregnancy of the perfume becomes stronger and stronger as one approaches the fountain of Venus. Noteworthy are the pages dedicated to the goddess' amphitheatre, with the arrival of Cupid's procession, walking on a carpet of flowers sprayed with “spraying scented water” (346). Below the first pergola with the simple, natural perfume of “flowering myrtle” (355), there is another perfume, one that is more artificial, rich and intoxicating, made of a blend of essences on the floor. The perfume pervades the scene of the amphitheatre, emanating - also materially - through different substances: water, flowers, smoke, and material. The result of this last metamorphosis is an ancient, lavish, incredible decoration made of pearls, flowers, small birds and animals; it becomes the vital breath of an unrivalled ornament, a sort of animated

grotesque, the contemplation of which awakens all the senses. The original text emphasises this in particular, highlighting the stupefaction caused by the intensity of the perfume as an element that perturbs the senses:

"The ground beneath the first pergola not only stupefied the mind but confounded the senses, for the entire circuit was paved with dusky-coloured, fragrant mastic, condensed with a judicious mixture of amber, musk, storax and benzoin." (355)

[...] pavé d'une pâte ou ciment composé de musc, ambre, benjoin, labdan et storax de couleur noirâtre. (320)

Several pages later, once the mystery rite paying homage to Adonis has come to an end, in the surroundings of the luxuriant, fragrant garden, Poliphilo has succumbed to his desire and embraced Polia, in a sort of enchantment of the senses induced, and dominated by Polia's sensual perfume, which is pervading the scene. The topical motif of *Arabia felix* returns, in the form of an addition, in the French version, enriching the use of adjectives for perfume and reworking the structure.

"[...] I breathed in the unaccustomed scent of my sumptuous Polia, who smelled not only of her own clean and pure fragrance but also retained the dewy balsam that had pervaded her delicate clothing [...]" (376)

[...] je me jetai au giron de Polia, des habits de laquelle parvint à mes sens une odeur trop plus suave que le baume, ni toutes les autres senteurs exquises que produit l'Arabie Heureuse. (339)

In this sort of grammar of the senses, which outlines Poliphilo's oneiric itinerary, perfume takes on a decisive role on

the last page, when Polia and Poliphilo's love is sealed with a kiss, an experience that is as intensive as it is ephemeral as it takes place in a dream and marks the moment of reawakening. In fact, it is precisely amidst the perfumed smoke of celestial essences – taking us back, in the French version of the text, to *Arabia felix* yet again – that the image of Polia disappears and Poliphilo wakes up:

“This deified, celestial image then dissolved in the air, like the smoke, perfumed with musk and ambergris, that rises to the ether from a stick of incense, to the great delight of the heavenly spirits as they smell the strangely fragrant fumes.” (464)

[...] celle digne figure s'évanouit, montant en l'air ainsi qu'une petite fumée de benjoin et laissa une odeur tant exquise que toutes les senteurs de l'Arabie Heureuse ne s'y sauraient comparer. (407)

Polia's kiss, which seals the two lovers' union, is as intoxicating and ephemeral as perfume; it is also an ecstatic experience that affects all the senses and it is perfume that is the medium. In its volatility, the intensity of its sensorial stimulus and the evocation of the divine it transmits, perfume is a concentration of the ecstasy of the senses, an oneiric vision and mystic communication with a divinity.

While Polia is associated repeatedly with perfume, for example “her nectar-and cinnamon-scented lips” (462) or her “her balmy breath” (*ibid.*), and perfume is, as we saw earlier, the symbol of Venus, we can say that, after the initiation in the temple of Venus Physizoa, Polia herself participates in the sacred. The spiral of perfumed smoke that ends the evocation of the dream represents a manifestation of the sacred, the divinisation of Polia in a perfumed epiphany that shapes the literary *topos* of reawaken-



Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Milan, Adelphi, 1998. *The Triumph of Cupid*, woodcut from the 1499 Aldine edition

ing.¹⁰ In the last lines Polia is described with epithets that evoke the sacred, the goddess and knowledge through mystic initiation. What remains once both she and the dream have disappeared, is the perfume of the goddess that was contemplated in the oneiric vision.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise specified, quotations have been translated by C. Cawthra from the original texts, the pages of which are indicated in brackets.; Cf. PANOFSKY 196-235.
- 2 Cf. HOURTICQ, 127-30 and PÄCHT, 95-7.
- 3 In the third book of *Stories*, Herodotus writes that “in [Arabia] alone of all lands grow frankincense and myrrh and cassia and cinnamon and gum-mastich” (III, 107), and “from the land of Arabia there blows a scent of them most marvellously sweet” (III, 113). Tibullus, Propertius and Pliny all write about Arabian perfumes as does Virgil in the *Georgics*.
- 4 “Cover him with ointments from Syria, cover him with perfumes. May all the perfumes die. He who used to be your perfume, Adonis, has perished” (DETINNE 169, note 25).
- 5 *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* de-
- 6 scribes the semblance of Venus “that seemed to exhale a fragrance of musky ambrosia” (362).
- 7 The original describes it as “there was a foam that gave off the scent of musk” (362); the French translation develops the effect of the perfume even further, talking of “musc fondu avec l’ambre” (327).
- 8 See Valerio di Bierzo’s description, which evokes a paradise in which “straordinariamente olezzante si spandeva un dolcissimo profumo d’incenso e un profumo d’ambrosia esalava aromatico in una scia di nettare” (extraordinarily fragrant, it emanated an extremely sweet perfume of incense and a perfume of ambrosia was fragrantly diffused in a trail of nectar) (CIACCARESE 283).
- 9 “noble roses with [...] a ravishing scent” (371).
- The unction of Aenea’s wound with a liquor made of ambrosia and perfumed panacea

prepared by Venus (*Aeneid*, XII; vv. 416-9) also appears in OVID (XIV, 605-7) where it is interpreted as the divinisation

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of the hero. Cf. COLONNA, II,
1162 note 5.
Cf. POLIZZI 33-4.

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(MODERN) GREEK AROMAS AN OLFACTIVE ITINERARY

Caterina Carpinato

With the help of just a few drops of essence, taken from some exemplary passages that differ not only in period but also in context, we might be able to perceive to what degree perfume is actually present in Greek literature and poetry, and what role it plays. I shall not be talking about the natural perfume given off from flowers, fruit or wood, but about perfumes produced in the laboratory using complicated and often mysterious procedures. Balsam, oil, myrrh, incense, aromatic blends of all kinds using tiny dosages, rare and delicate plants, secret formulae and recipes from the East to the West have been passed down to us, and they have also left their trace in literary testimonies. The history of perfume preserved in ampullae, in equally rare and invaluable small bottles, is not just connected to luxury and caprice, but also to the fatigue of work, commerce, trade, danger and death. It insinuates itself into men's and women's private lives, their love affairs and separations: it has effects that are not only perceived by the sense of smell; it affects and upsets all the senses. This is why I decided to prepare a small personal anthology of texts, drawing on the literary, cultural and linguistic production that is closest to me, without worrying about philological, academic or historic-literary aspects, and without adopting a strict critical-textural attitude; instead, I will mix the high prose of Michele Psello's *Chronography* (1018-1078) that describes Empress Zoe concentrating on the art of distilling essences, with a composition from the poetical *corpus* by Konstantinos P. Kavafis (1863-1933); I shall also include the

fragrance of “rose water,” the title of a song that was popular in Greece in the second half of the twentieth century, in a success (2012), sung by Elefteria Arvanitaki, one of the most interesting figures on the contemporary Greek scene. The aim of his mixture of high prose and poetry with music and cinema is to describe diverse olfactory perceptions through words, images and music. The challenge is to create a text that involves the other senses: through a formula of words, sounds, odours, images, and flavours, I hope I will be able to offer a product that will help the reader perceive the perfume in lesser known Greek literature as well.

The words

There are different words in modern Greek for the word ‘perfume’ and they have different meanings. They do not always correspond directly when translated: άρωμα, μυρωδιά, ευωδία, οσμή, όσφορηση, μοσχοβούλια.

I shall follow in the footsteps of Petro Markaris¹, whose police protagonist called Kostas Charitos also resorts to the Dimitrakos dictionary of Greek language² to ensure the investigation commences properly; I shall therefore start with the dictionary, summarising some of the words that are used in Greek to indicate the word ‘perfume’:

Άρωμα, *a pleasant odour; the artificial product that causes a pleasant smell, used as a cosmetic; Etymon unknown;* Μυρωδιά, *any kind of odour, pleasant or unpleasant, caused by something or someone; the pleasant odour that develops somewhere and stimulates the sense of smell;* ευωδία, *a pleasant smell;* οσμή, *anything that stimulates the sense of smell;* όσφορηση, *one of the five senses; ability to foresee or perceive something in advance or in its absence;* μοσχοβούλια, *a sweet, pleasant smell.*

The Greek language makes a clear distinction between the words that indicate a natural perfume or a pleasant fragrance from a ‘perfume’ that is produced in the laboratory: ἀρωμα. The words are not interchangeable: the specific ones used in modern Greek to distinguish between ‘perfume’ and ‘artificially produced perfume’ are a sign of a civilisation that was imbued in the fragrances of Mediterranean and Oriental plants for centuries, and that tried to trade, develop and produce the essences required to make ‘aromas’ in the laboratory for centuries. We shall therefore start from here: in the Greek language there are clearly different words to indicate a ‘nice smell’ and a ‘synthesised perfume produced in the laboratory.’ The stages of my olfactive itinerary will include the presentation of Zoe, the perfume-maker empress; the unhappy Emis; Fedra the enchantress in the 1962 film version; and a nameless voice who dances on the fragments of a broken perfume bottle that was destroyed on purpose to drive away once and for all the memory and presence of one’s beloved.

The practice and science of perfume-making and the aspiration to the divine

Michele Psellos (1018-1078) describes Empress Zoe as follows:

Εκείνη γυναικείων μεν παντάπασιν ἔργων απείχετο,
ούτε γαρ ατράκτω ποτέ τας χείρας ησχόλησεν , ούτε
ιστουργείν επεβάλετο, ούτε ἄλλου τινός επελάβετο.
Κατωλιγώρει δε και βασιλείων καλλωπισμών, ει μεν
και εν ώρᾳ της ακμής ουκ οίδα, παρηκμακνία δ ’ουν
το φιλότιμον ἀπάν κατέλυσε, περὶ τούτο δε μόνο
επόνει και την πάσαν πραγματείαν συνέτεινε, τας
των αρωμάτων φύσεις μεταβάλλειν, και μυρεψείν, τα
δε πλάττειν τε και τυπούν, τα δ’ ἄλλως εργάζεσθαι,
και ο αποτετμημένος αύτῃ οίκος εις ευνήν ουδέν τι

σεμνότερος ην των επί της αγοράς εργαστηρίων, εφ' ων αι βάναυσοι των τεχνών και εμπύριοι την ξυντέλειαν ἔχουσιν, πυρά γουν πολλά πέριξ του δωματίου αυτής υπανήπιτο, και των αμφιπόλων εκάστη η μεν τα μεγέθη των αρωμάτων διήρει, η δε ταύτα συνέπλαττεν, η δ' ἄλλο τι τοιούτον ειργάζετο. Του μεν ουν χειμώνος εδόκει τι προς εκείνης είναι τα υπουργούμενα, και το πολύ πυρ τον ψυχρόν εκείνη αέρα διήμειβε, θερείας δε ούσης της ώρας, τοις μεν ἄλλοις βαρύν τι και αγχού παριέναι εκείσε εδόκει, η δε ώσπερ ανασθήτως του καύματος ἔχουσα υπό πολλοίς εδορυφορείτο πυρσοίς. Άλλόκοτος γαρ αύτη τε και τη αδελφή η φύσις εδόκει³ (VI. 64, 1-21)

The tasks that women normally perform had no appeal whatever for Zoe. Her hands never busied themselves with a distaff nor did she ever work at a loom or any other feminine occupation. Still more surprising, she affected scorn for the beautiful dresses of her rank, though I cannot tell whether she was so negligent in the prime of life. Certainly in her old age she lost all desire to charm. Her one and only concern at this time, the thing on which she spent all her energy, was the development of new species of perfumes, or the preparation of unguents. Some she would invent, others she improved. Her own private bedroom was no more impressive than the workshops in the market where the artisans and the blacksmiths toil, [138] for all round the room were burning braziers, a host of them. Each of her servants had a particular task to perform: one was allotted the duty of bottling the perfumes, another of mixing them, while a third had some other task of the same kind. In winter, of course, these operations were demonstrably of some benefit, as the great heat from the fires served to warm the cold air, but in the summer-time the others found the temperature near the braziers almost unbearable. Zoe herself, however, surrounded by a whole bodyguard of these fires, was apparently unaffected by the scorching heat. In fact, both she and her sister

seemed naturally perverse. They despised fresh air, fine houses, meadows, gardens; the charm of all such things meant nothing to them. On the other hand, once they were inside their own private rooms, one sealing off the flow of the golden stream, the other cleaning out the channels to make it flow faster, then they really enjoyed themselves. (Book VI, 64, 1-10)

Zoe is therefore not an empress who enjoys luxury and perfumes, but a powerful woman who despises clichés and spurns anything that is deemed suitable for the weaker sex and her status: she does not weave and sew as we have been accustomed to seeing women do ever since Penelope, whether the wife of a king or not, but she herself prepares perfumes, without paying any heed to her ‘image’ or the weather.

Zoe is not so much occupied with the elaboration of recipes to create an exquisite, unique product that will increase her fascination and power yet further, but rather shows an industrial ‘frenzy’ and ‘chemical’ demand in her experimentation with the elements needed to develop new essences and fragrances. Zoe adopts the spirit of ‘scientific research;’ for her, achieving the synthesis of a new fragrance is as important as an intellectual conquest. Achieving such a result is the most valuable thing on earth. Political power and the mere ambition of elegance and luxury aside, for the empress it is imperative to work on “the development of new species of perfumes” thus becoming the “creator of essences and aromas,” and therefore reaching one of the steps closest to the divine. Disregardful of futile luxury, to do so Zoe transforms her private room into a laboratory that seems like, as Psellos says, the “workshop of a blacksmith’s at the market.”

In his attempt to disparage the daughter of Emperor Basil II the Bulgar-slayer, Psellos himself saved the image of this woman forever: whenever she can withdraw in private and not worry about the biggest, most powerful empire of the period, she applies herself to the laboratory production of essences, not expect-



Zoe, the empress perfume-maker, detail from eleventh-century mosaics. Istanbul, Aya Sofia

ing any financial advantage but intellectual satisfaction (as if she were saying ‘I managed to synthesise something that had never been created before’). In addition to the human and concrete dimensions of perfume, there is also a divine one in the evanescent preciousness of perfume, and Zoe, on the highest step of human power seems to be aiming at reaching a kind of ‘divine’ power through her research.

Psellos’ description a little further on is an invaluable testimony of the empress’ extraordinary religious devotion which is closely linked to this practice. Zoe, a woman who is now sterile and at the apex of human power, produces perfumes to take on the dimension of creator and thus draw closer to a divine dimension.

Perfume as merchandise: migration from the East to the West and the West to the East. In the past and the present from one land to another in search of a better life

This was how Konstantinos P. Kavafis (1863-1933)⁴ presents Emis, a fictitious character who has arrived in a Syrian port on a ship from the island of Tinos, with the hope of becoming an expert in the art of perfume production, but who died shortly after coming ashore:

Νέος, είκοσι οκτώ ετών, με πλοίον τήνιον
έφθασε εις τούτο το συριακόν επίνειον
ο Ἔμης, με την πρόθεσι να μάθει μυροπώλης.
Ομως αρδώστησε εις τον πλουν.
Και μόλις απεβιβάσθη, πέθανε.
Η ταφή του, πτωχοτάτη, έγιν' εδώ.
Ολίγες ώρες ποιν πεθάνει, κάτι
ψιθύρισε για «οικίαν», για «πολύ γέροντας γονείς».
Μα ποιοι ήσαν τούτοι δεν εγνώριζε κανείς,
μήτε ποια η πατρίς του μες στο μέγα πανελλήνιον.

Καλλίτερα.

Γιατί έτσι ενώ κείται νεκρός σ' αυτό το επίνειον,
θα τον ελπίζουν πάντα οι γονείς του ζωντανό.⁵

Emis – young, twenty-eight – reached this Syrian harbor in a Tenian ship, his plan to learn the incense trade. But ill during the voyage, he died as soon as he was put ashore. His burial, the poorest possible, took place here. A few hours before dying he whispered something about “home,” about “very old parents.” But nobody knew who they were, or what country he called home in the great panhellenic world. Better that way; because as it is, though he lies buried in this harbor-town, his parents will always have the hope he’s still alive.

In the few lines of this work, word by word, like an essential distillation, Kavafis shows us the whole world of places, sensations, feelings, history and the stories of a twenty-eight year old; on an unspecified date, at an unspecified moment in time, an aspect Kavafis, with his obsession with dates and numbers, usually lays great importance on, Emis arrives in a port in the Middle East on a boat from Tinos (one of Cyclades), coming from an unknown area from the ‘great panhellenic world.’ The fate of his brief existence does not allow him to reach professional perfection as a perfumer as he had hoped at the beginning of his voyage. Here, he was at an age when he is no longer a workshop apprentice, but a professional in the field who strives to reach new horizons of his science, the knowledge of essence production. We do not know where he set out from, where his homeland was or his initial position, not even who his elderly parents are: the aspiring perfume maker lies in a pauper’s tomb in a foreign port, far away from everything that was close to him before he set out to become μυροπόλης (‘perfume maker and perfume merchant’). Before the eternal silence Emis had managed to utter the word “home” and “elderly parents,” using his last breath to remember what was

most precious to him. An essence far away from the tepid perfume of that unknown home remains imprinted on the reader's memory as well. The desperation of an unmourned death seems to be blunted by the compassionate unawareness that surrounds the evanescent figures of his elderly parents, who will continue to hope he is alive as long as they live.

The character of Emis that Kavafis outlined with his poetical nib could be regarded as a symbol of the migrations from East to West, of the spice and aroma roads, the individual initiatives undertaken over the centuries to improve one's own existence and that of one's loved ones. Over the centuries journeys in search of a new condition, new, more refined perfumes, and a new reality have led to (up to the most recent, tragic shipwrecks of refugees from Syria and the Middle East along the southern coasts of Eastern Sicily) a path that is marked by death and suffering, although not enough to stop the flow of migration entirely.

All we know about Emis, the aspiring producer and merchant of essences, is his filial devotion and his project to become skilled in the art of fragrance; a fictitious character created by Kavafis, Emis summarises all the preciousness of affection, the need to leave home to progress professionally. With the adversity of his death, moreover he is testimony to the immense struggle, yesterday like today, by hundreds of thousands of people (whose names are often forgotten, together with their homeland and personal background) who challenge fate in the hope of finding a better future. But journeys, often with no return, have also been undertaken in search of new essences, new recipes for valuable perfumes. A perfume, an essence, a distilled aroma is not just an act of vanity, be it expensive or not; a superfluous ornament that goes with the fashion; a product from a craftsman or from whatever spice is on the market... They are also a concrete testimony of places, dangerous and arduous journeys, carried out across sea and land (yesterday and today); a real attempt at synthesising dif-

ferent experiences, a fusion between nature and culture. Behind every essence we not only have the skill of its maker and the preciousness of its raw materials, but also a complicated intermingling of commercial exchange, meetings and conflicts, negotiations and dangers.

A dab of perfume satisfies our vanity but also transmits the extraordinary fragrance of many people's labour (and often sacrifice).

Perfume, as is generally known, has the ability to interrupt the chronological sequence of time: for brief fractions of a second it is able to revive the memory of facts or people who were once close to our hearts. Similarly, with Kavafis' words, one perceives the scent of the memory of how much effort had gone into the rarefied distillation of an essence, as well as the scent of successful, happy undertakings that are hidden in the recipes of our favourite perfume.

“Rose water, verbena and rosemary essence”: homemade perfume production in popular Greek songs

In Greek cultural tradition, poetry is a multimedia phenomenon that has been associated with music and performance ever since it first appeared. The root of the word ‘poetry’ (ποίησις in ancient Greek, ποίηση in modern Greek) coincides with the root of the verb ποιέω, which literally means ‘do,’ ‘create;’ thus, etymologically speaking the word already contains the sense of ‘creation,’ and it is the English suffix equivalent to ‘-ation’ in words such as globalisation, creation, liberalisation, etc. in Greek παγκοσμοποίηση, υλοποίηση, ελευθεροποίηση.

For the Greeks, ever since the famous “The wrath sing, goddess, of Peleus' son, Achilles,” in the incipit of the *Iliad*, poetry has represented a concrete reality that is present in everyday life.⁶ It should therefore come as no surprise that today the poetic word

is still much more widespread through other arts (such as music, cinema, theatre, photography, etc.) than in other linguistic and cultural contexts. As a conclusion to these reflections on ‘perfumes in lesser known Greek literature’ I would therefore like to look at two poetical texts that focus on the value that perfume-related objects have in private life. I must point out straight away that these are two simple ‘drops’ taken from an almost endless sea of quotations about the function of perfume, essences, and aromatic mixtures present in Greek songs and folk music (that, ever since the middle of the nineteenth century, aroused great interest). Two drops or pearls of modern poetical texts that can not only be imagined as perfumes, but also listened to and viewed, thanks to internet.⁷

In 1961 the director Jules Dassin (1911-2008) revived the myth of Fedra, setting it in a modern context with screenplay by Margarita Liberaki (1919-2001).⁸ With Anthony Perkins (1932-1992) and Melina Mercuri (1920-1994), the film was a considerable hit and more than fifty years later, the soundtrack and the songs are still very well known and popular with the Greek public. Nikos Gatsos (1911-1992),⁹ the author of the most famous song Σε πότισα ροδόσταμο (*I sprinkled you with rose water*), with music by Mikis Theodorakis (1925), added to his verses motifs of popular Greek song, with an allegorical reworking of the theme of Fedra’s unhealthy love for her stepson. The reason for the journey to the afterlife and the transfiguration of death is mixed with the evocative strength of rose water, a perfumed, delicate essence prepared at home and used frequently, associated with the smell of home and a mother’s love. The use of rose water to conquer the young stepson’s love was to no avail, so it was replaced with a mixture of verbena and rosemary, creating a web of sensorial interconnections that worked their seduction. Fedra, the protagonist who is in love with her husband’s son, insists on singing to the young boy that she ‘gave him rose water to drink,’ hoping to

make him smell a maternal, homely and protective fragrance and awaken in him an intense feeling (love). This seduction technique proves futile because the young man refuses the woman's offer, and simply pours "poison." In the second line the step-mother then suggests producing another essence that is also easy to produce at home: a perfume of verbena and rosemary, in the hope that this mixture, made with plants that are attributed with aphrodisiacal qualities, might have the desired effect. As is generally known, the protagonist of the tragedy – which is a revival of the ancient myth of Potiphar that might go as far back as the tenth century BC – does not succeed. The perfumes in this composition are therefore associated with maternal love above all; with death and the trip to the after-world; and with sensual and illegitimate love generated in the domestic sphere. Made with plants that are commonly found in the gardens in the Mediterranean, the fragrances proposed – rose water and a mixture of rosemary and verbena – are simple, cheap, relatively easy to produce and do not require any special instruments; at the same time, however, they are also highly evocative and able to arouse emotions or unleash feelings. They are mixtures that, owing to their chemical characteristics, can not only be used on the skin or fabrics, but can also be consumed as food, making their intake even more complete as the sense of taste is also involved. The reason behind the preparation of perfumes as a magic art, as a technique used by female enchantresses, is evident in the following lines:

Στον άλλο κόσμο που θα πας
κοίτα μη γίνεις σύννεφο
κοίτα μη γίνεις σύννεφο
κι άστρο πικρό της χαραυγής
και σε γνωρίσει η μάνα σου
που καρτερεί στην πόρτα.

Σε πότισα ροδόσταμο

με πότισες φαρμάκι
της παγωνιάς αητόπουλο
της ερημιάς γεράκι.

Πάρε μια βέργα λυγαριά
μια ρίζα δεντρολίβανο
μια ρίζα δεντρολίβανο
και γίνε φεγγαροδροσιά
να πέσεις τα μεσάνυχτα
στη διψασμένη αυλή σου.

Σε πότισα ροδόσταμο
με πότισες φαρμάκι
της παγωνιάς αητόπουλο
της ερημιάς γεράκι.¹⁰

In the other world where you'll go / See you don't become a cloud / A bitter star of dawn/ So your mother recognizes you / When she is waiting at the door. // I sprinkled you with rose water / You sprinkled me with poison, / Young eagle of the ice / Hawk of the wasteland. // Take a willow wand / Take a rosemary root / Become the midnight dew / That falls at midnight / In your thirsty yard. // I sprinkled you with rose water / You sprinkled me with poison, / Young eagle of the ice / Hawk of the wasteland.

Perfume, a presence that goes beyond separation and time

In conclusion to this brief overview of Greek texts (Byzantine and modern) in which the preparation, commerce and use of perfumes impregnate the pages whilst also involving other senses such as taste, sight, and hearing, I would like to look at a music hit, sung by Elefteria Arvanitaki (1957) and published in 2012. The words are by Nikos Moraitis (1973) while the music is by Nikos Antipas.

In this case the text is not metaphorical as was Gatsos,’ but is simpler and more descriptive: he is lamenting the loss of his lover, whose presence has permeated all the places and objects around the singer. In the midst of a scene of desolation, the most persistent is the perfume, which keeps reminding him of moments and circumstances that are now lost forever. Alone amidst the shards of the perfume bottle used by the one who decided to break off a love story (or has left for ever, and is in some way dead), the narrator dances and feels all the extreme traces of this memory disappear. The success of this song was not only due to the popularity of the singer and the quality (which could be questioned) of the lyrics and music; it was also due to the sensorial experience it portrays: an experience of feelings being reawakened by perfume, evoked also by the hundreds of thousands of people who sing at Arvanitaki’s concerts. And not just by them.

Μπαίνω στον κόσμο αυτόν που
άφησες εσύ δεν είσαι μάτια μου μα
όλα είναι εδώ...

Τα βήματα που βάδισες
τα πράγματα που άγγιξες
μα πιο πολύ το άρωμα
με πνίγει στο λαιμό...

Έσπασα την κολώνια σου
έσπασα το άρωμα σου
και με τα χέρια μου αδειανά
χορεύω, χορεύω στα γυαλιά..
ατμός είναι τα μάτια σου
κομμάτια τα φιλιά σου
τώρα δεν έχω τίποτα
να σε θυμίζει πια...

Μπαίνω και ζω αυτό που άφησες πως
έφυγες και έμεινες και είσαι ακόμα

εδώ...

τα πρόσωπα που αγάπησες τα δάκρυα
που δάκρυσες
τα γέλια σου που γέλασες
εγώ τα ξενυχτώ...

Έσπασα την κολώνια σου
έσπασα το άρωμα σου
και με τα χέρια μου αδειανά
χορεύω, χορεύω στα γυαλιά...
ατμός είναι τα μάτια σου
κομμάτια τα φιλιά σου
τώρα δεν έχω τίποτα
να σε θυμίζει πια...¹¹

I'm into this world you left behind / You are not my eyes but everything is here / The steps you walked, / the things you touched, / but most of all, /the perfume drown me in my neck. // I broke your cologne, / I broke your perfume /And with my empty hands /I'm dancing, / I'm dancing on glasses // Vapor is your eyes, / pieces are your kisses / Now I have nothing to remind you anymore // I'm into and I live what you left behind / How are you gone and stayed and you are still here / The persons you loved, the tears you made / Your laughs that you laughed / I have insomnia with this // I broke your cologne, / I broke your perfume /And with my empty hands /I'm dancing, / I'm dancing on glasses // Vapor is your eyes, / pieces are your kisses / Now I have nothing to remind you anymore.

Notes

- 1 P. Markaris (Istanbul, 1937) is a famous Greek writer who writes about contemporary Greece.
- 2 Cf. ΔΗΜΗΤΡÁKOY, dictionary, the first volume of which was published in 1936; it is the most complete dictionary of ancient and modern Greece.
- 3 The monotonic system was chosen.
- 4 K.P. Kavafis is probably the most well known Modern Greek author amongst non specialised readers and the general public. His poetry corpus comprises only 154 poems; all his works, including unpublished and secret works and some prose is available on the official Kavafis Archive website, <http://www.kavafis.gr/>. For a better idea about the huge amount of bibliographic material produced until 2000, cf. the monumental work by DASKALOPOULOS. For more about Kavafis' poetry, cf. CROCETTI, PONTANI 193-203; 1680-1691. I also recommend *Hδωνή* (n. 65, 1917 in which perfume (μύρο) exercises a remarkable evocative power: “Χαρά και μύρο της ζωής μου η μνήμη των ωρών / που ήγρα και που κράτηξα την ηδονή ως την ήθελα. / Χαρά και μύρο της ζωής μου εμένα, που αποστράφηκα / την αάθε απόλαυσιν ερώτων της ρουτίνας.” (86); (“Joy and perfume of my life the memory of the hours /in which I found and enjoyed pleasure as I desired. / Joy and perfume of my life for me who spurned /Any routine amorous delight,” translated by C. Cawthra).
- 5 The work is called *Eις το Επίνειον* (n. 80, 1918).
- 6 For more about the relationship between poetry and music in Greek production, cf. CARPINATO, in particular 41-8.
- 7 For a review of perfumes in

- Italian song Cf. LOMBARDI SARTORIANI 67-73.
- 8 One of the most famous Greek female writers in the twentieth century is M. Liberaki; her most successful novel *Ψάθινα καπέλα* has been translated into English with the title *The Three Summers*. For more about a modern version of the myth of Phaedra by women, cf. RUBINO.
- 9 For a better understanding of both Gatsos' personality and production in the field of literary and poetry production cf. the numerous critical essays published in the last twenty years by CARACAUSI, a scholar at Palermo University. Gatsos is also in CROCETTI, PONTANI, 712-23; 1765-6.
- 10 Available on YouTube are numerous other interpretations of Gatsos' poem by other famous singers, by entering the song's title, *Σε πότισα ροδόσταμο*.
- 11 Cf. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axjVnA9Z_Nc.

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THE EXHILARATING PERFUME OF CINNAMON FROM THE ORIENT TO THE LUSITANIAN LANDS

Vanessa Castagna

The main extract of the plant's bark, cinnamon has warm, spicy characteristics and combines well with citrus perfumes or other spices. Documentation of the use of cinnamon as a perfume has existed since ancient times and it is said to have been the first Asian spice to be spread in the West. Owing to its olfactive characteristics, in the Bible cinnamon is mentioned together with the valuable aromatic spices and appears in some of the passages in the Old Testament, such as the *Song of Songs*, together with other spices and fragrances, associated with the exhilarating perfume of one's beloved.

Documented already by the Mesopotamian civilisations and by the Egyptians, in the civilisations of the Mediterranean basin the use of spices and incense is said to go back to at least the third millennium BC, and was used especially for religious and sacrificial purposes.¹ The history of perfume is closely linked to that of Ancient Egypt and it was there that cinnamon was one of the sacred aromatic spices used for the embalmment ritual, together with myrrh, cassia, and cedar; however, according to Plutarch and Galen the recipe for the pharaoh's favourite perfume, *kyphi*, is also said to have included not only incense, myrrh, pistachio and mint but also cinnamon. As this precious essence did not grow in Egypt it had to be imported from Arabia.

The sacred use of cinnamon in rites and sacrifices to the gods gave it the air of a divine fragrance. Perfumes and spices were also used for religious reasons in ancient Greece; however, they were

also used in the preparation of medicines, food and even had a more worldly erotic function. This spice was also used for purely physical purposes; for example the two oils used in Athens to massage the body were the famous *crocinum* and *susinon*, the latter being based on rose, myrrh and cinnamon.

Similarly, Romans used spices in their religious practices and, especially in the imperial age, used a great amount of incense and aromatic resins. Perfumes and ointments then became common in the Christian religion, despite the initial caution shown towards products that might be associated with the pagan world. This taste for spices was passed down from antiquity to the Middle Ages, in particular those that were difficult to find and extremely rare, from a part of the world that was little known at that time and was thus associated with a prodigious imagination. In Christianity in the Middle Ages their sweet-sour fragrance was regarded as a breeze of the smell of the afterlife, a breath of the divine on earth. In this period spices therefore had the symbolic value of holy perfume, evoking the perfumed air of Paradise, the fragrance or smell of myrrh given off from the martyrs' and saints' bodies after their deaths; and yet this symbolic value went hand in hand with more earthly functions.

As early as the ninth century, the sea republics of Venice and Genoa built their own prosperity on the trade of spices, in particular from India and China, thanks to their contacts with the Levant and the creation of the mythical "Spice Road," for centuries the supply route for Europe. In this period spices were not only associated with pleasure and luxury but were also used increasingly in food, in particular to season meat; however, according to the menus of that period known to us, they might have been used in every course from the beginning to the end of a meal. The most commonly used in cooking were pepper and cinnamon.

The therapeutic characteristics attributed to spices also deserve mention; cinnamon, for example, was used to alleviate a variety of

ailments such as liver disease, angina pectoris, fistulas and headache. It was also believed to offer protection against epidemics: for example, as was the case during the black plague that decimated Europe in the fourteenth century, when its use as ‘prophylaxis’ consisted in the administration of a preparation based on cinnamon and other spices.

Already from the eighth century on, there are frequent references to the importation of cinnamon; for example, in the more specific case of Portugal it is mentioned together with other spices and medicines in an inventory of the Royal Palace (1278-1282) during the rule of Denis of Portugal. Its therapeutic importance is also documented in *Thesaurum Pauperum* attributed to Pedro Julião, known as Peter Juliani, the future pope John XXI.

At that time cinnamon was a rare, exclusive commodity, the origin of which was not known, thus contributing to its growing aura of mystery. Herodotus and Theophrastus claimed it came from Arabia, but neither of them was sure which country it actually came from. It was not until the Portuguese arrived in the Orient at the end of the sixteenth century that there was more precise information. In particular, on his first journey to India sailing around Africa, Vasco da Gama and his crew learnt of the existence of an island where cinnamon plants grew in abundance: it was Ceylon, today's Sri Lanka, which is still the world leader in cinnamon production.

After its discovery this island immediately aroused particular attention and curiosity; so much so that the Western world was immediately inclined to identify it as the imaginary Taprobana, belonging to the mythical Orient of ancient tradition: an unbelievable, marvellous land that was probably similar to a terrestrial paradise or an Oriental Eldorado. The first person to describe this island was the Greek geographer Megasthenes, around 290 BC, when he wrote it was covered with forests and inhabited by elephants.

Produced from the plant's bark, the Portuguese common

name ‘canela’ is derived from its cane-like shape for commerce; in reality, today the word indicates two plants of the cinnamon genus, *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* and *Cinnamomum cassia*; the former is also known as “true cinnamon” (or “queen”) or as “Ceylon cinnamon” while the latter is also called “Chinese cinnamon;” as the two names suggest, the two varieties come from different countries; however, *Cinnamomum cassia* has a less intense fragrance and is less aromatic in flavour compared to the Ceylon variety. As a matter of fact, originally from China, the *Cinnamomum cassia* cinnamon type is also called “cassia,” the initial name for this species. In fact, it is believed that the cinnamon the ancients knew was actually the Chinese type although the history of the two varieties was indissolubly intertwined in antiquity, so that it was only possible to distinguish them from one another after Vasco da Gama discovered the maritime route of the Indies and the Portuguese took over Ceylon in 1505. The alternative name of “queen cinnamon,” on the other hand, appears to be linked to a famous recipe book from the sixteenth century, written by Princess Maria, niece of King Emanuel and future duchess of Parma; the manuscript might have been part of the dowry for her marriage to the Duke of Parma and Piacenza.² This was the first Portuguese cookery book.

We have the Portuguese Garcia da Orta to thank for the first naturalistic study of these plants; he wrote *Colóquios dos simples e drogas e cousas medicinais da Índia* (published in 1563 in Goa), a work that clearly shows the Renaissance interest in botany and that played a key role in the history of pharmacology as it was known and distributed throughout Europe in the abridged, annotated version by Carolus Clusius, *Aromatum et simplicium aliquot medicamentorum apud Indios nascentium historia*. The considerable interest it was met with in Europe was probably due to the fact that it was the first treatise on tropical medicine, and not only described for the first time diseases such as Asian cholera but

also botanical species with their relative pharmacological applications, that had until then been unknown in the West. Rebutting ancient authors such as Herodotus and Theophrastus and their fanciful descriptions, the author was able to reconstruct both the commercial and linguistic history of this much-valued spice.

In particular, in the fifteenth dialogue “Da canela, e da cásia lignea e do cinamomo” [Of cinnamon, cassia bark, cinnamon] Garcia da Orta takes the floor and even goes as far as denouncing the mechanisms that regulated the organisation of the commercial circuit for this spice: in particular the fact that to guarantee exorbitant prices, the intermediaries would invent nonexistent difficulties for supplies. Sent in 1534 to the Indies as court physician, the renowned Portuguese physician and botanist spent around thirty years there, devoting himself to the study of medicinal plants and making an inventory of all the different kinds of cinnamon, the true and the ‘fake’ ones; he came to the conclusion that the one the Portuguese had sent from Ceylon to Lisbon, and from there to the rest of Europe, was actually of the highest quality. Garcia da Orta listed the therapeutic virtues of cinnamon, in particular in distillates or in oils derived from the latter, especially against digestive and nervous ailment as well as being effective against Asian cholera. For some reason the Portuguese botanist also felt the need to specify that it was a highly perfumed species that was ideal to season food, leading one to surmise that it had not yet been used to flavour food in Portugal at that time.

In actual fact, cinnamon is mentioned extensively in many of the works that make up the corpus of the so-called Portuguese travel literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, in particular in its initial stage when it was characterised by euphoria about new discoveries.

One such example are the significant references to cinnamon in the work by the court chemist, Tomé Pires, who was sent to India in 1511 with the mission of evaluating, selecting and pur-

Colóquios dos simples , e
drogas he couzas medicinais da India , e
assi dalgūas frutas achadas nella onde se
tratam algiúas couzas tocantes amediçina,
pratica , e outras couzas boas , pera saber
cōpostos pello Doutor garçia dorta : fisico
del Rey nosso senhor , vistos pello muyto
Reuerendo senhor , ho liçençiado
Alexos diaz : falcam desenbar-
gador da casa da supriça
inquisidor nestas
partes.

¶ Com priuilegio do Conde viso Rey.

Impresso em Goa, por Ioannes
de endem as x. dias de
Abril de 1563. annos.

Garcia da Orta, *Colóquios dos simples e drogas e couzas medicinais da Índia*, 1563, title page. Goa, Saint Paul's College

chasing oriental drugs to be imported in Europe. His *Suma Oriental* (1515), an extract of which was published in the renowned collection *Navigazioni e viaggi* by Giovan Battista Ramusio with the title *Sommario delle Indie orientali*,³ was the first European description of Malaysia; above all, it was also the oldest and most profuse Portuguese description of the Orient, from the Red Sea to Japan. The information it includes focuses mainly on medicinal plants and drugs whilst also incorporating commercial aspects that might have been of interest to the Portuguese. The book also describes all the products in each kingdom and port, including the origins and merchants in charge of their commerce; this summary of the spices, including cinnamon, is considered a pioneer in its field, and contains information obtained from merchants, captains and local inhabitants that was all fact-checked, regarding not only botany and geography, but also history, ethnography, economy and commerce.

Portuguese writers mention cinnamon in diverse travel chronicles, which were important to have an increasingly accurate knowledge of the Orient. Some of these works were published for the first time in the Italian language, in Ramusio's anthology, and not in their homeland. One such example is Duarte Barbosa's chronicle, which is included in Ramusio's work and was not published in Portugal until the beginning of the nineteenth century (three centuries later) when the original manuscript finally resurfaced. In the section devoted to Ceylon in *Libro di Odoardo Barbosa*⁴ (completed between 1517 and 1518) we can also find mention that on the island's mountains grows "the best cinnamon in this area" (663), on trees that look like laurels; he also describes the prerogatives in the regulations for the commerce of this commodity and instructions for how it was to be harvested.

The massive spice importation that fuelled commercial trade had a significant influence on the merchants' finances and Portuguese court, the effects of which could be seen on the entire

Lusitanian society. The Portuguese historian José Hermano Saraiva writes that in the early sixteenth century the offices of the House of India was situated on the banks of the river Tagus; from there they administrated Portuguese territories overseas and every aspect of foreign trade, including navigation, the arrival and commerce of the goods and even the royal court moved there in that period.⁵ The building, which was also used as a warehouse, gave off such a strong smell of two spices in particular – pepper and cinnamon – that the historiographer and diplomat Damião de Góis would call it the Emporium of the Aromas. In reality, the entire city was impregnated with the smell of these two spices. Furthermore, the predominance of the smell of cinnamon was confirmed by the renowned verses of the Renaissance poet Sá de Miranda who wrote in a *Letter to António Pereira* “mais me temo de Lisboa / que ao cheiro desta canela / o reino nos despovoa” (“With this smell of cinnamon / I am rather afraid that Lisbon / will depopulate the kingdom”⁶). The capital is therefore portrayed as a city that is enveloped in the fragrance of cinnamon owing to the massive presence of the spice, offering a particularly evocative image whilst also criticising the social degradation of the period as a result of an expansion policy that neglected the country’s internal conditions and the excessive interests of the commerce of goods from overseas, spices in particular.

The outstanding role of cinnamon in Portuguese commerce with the Indies is also clearly shown in a revealing metonymy used by Gil Vicente, the father of Portuguese theatre. With clearly negative connotations, in his *Auto da Índia* (1509), he refers to the country, which is the destination for great trade expeditions, as the “black cinnamon” (I part, v. 31). Here the underlying criticism of the metonymy refers less to India, or the Orient in general, than to excessive commercial ambitions; these were particularly fanatical for the trade of spices and cinnamon first and foremost, and were the cause of considerable

social changes in Portugal, which Gil Vicente did well to portray with his farce.

Another great Renaissance author who mentioned the precious spice was also the renowned poet Luís Vaz de Camões, author of *The Lusiads* (1572), an epic poem that celebrates the Lustrianian people with the narration of the discovery of maritime routes towards India, completed thanks to Vasco da Gama. Camões mentions cinnamon repeatedly in the ten cantos of the epic poem, thus revealing both its commercial and symbolic importance. The first time is at the beginning of canto II (stanza 4), when the king of Mombasa's messenger insidiously invites Vasco da Gama to enter the port; one of the reasons he uses to entice him is cinnamon, probably amongst the goods the captain and his fleet are seeking, and only then does he mention cloves and other valuables:

E se buscando vás mercadaria
Que produze o aurífero Levante,
Canela, cravo, ardente especiaria
Ou droga salutifera e prestante;
Ou se queres luzente pedraria,
O rubi fino, o rígido diamante,
Daqui levarás tudo tão sobrejo
Com que faças o fim a teu desejo.

*And if thou wendest seeking merchandise
Got in the golden womb of the Levant,
Cinnamon, cloves, and biting spiceries,
Health-dealing drug, or rare and excellent plant
Or, if thou lust for sparkling stones of price,
The Ruby fine, the rigid Diamant,
Hence shall thou bear such full, abundant store,
That e'en thy Fancy shall affect no more.*

Cinnamon reappears in canto IX (stanza 14), towards the end of the poem, crowning the list of valuable spices, such as black pepper, nutmeg and cloves that the Portuguese are taking on board before setting sail from Calcutta to return home. Once again cinnamon is associated with the island of Ceylon, which appears to owe its fame to the extraordinary abundance of the plant it comes from.

Leva alguns Malabares, que tomou
Per força, dos que o Samorim mandara
Quando os presos feitores lhe tornou;
Leva pimenta ardente, que comprara;
A seca flor de Banda não ficou;
A noz e o negro cravo, que faz clara
A nova ilha Maluco, co a canela
Com que Ceilão é rica, ilustre e bela.

*He taketh eke some Malabars aboard
Parforce, the fellows by the Samorim sent
When were the Factor-pris'oner restor'd:
Of purchased stores he taketh hot piment:
Nor is of Banda the dried flower ignor'd,
Nutmeg and swarthy clove, which excellent
Makes New Malucan Isle, with cinnamon
The wealth, the boast, the beauty of Ceylon.*

In the last canto (stanza 51), less clearly than in the others, cinnamon is still present as the “fragrant tree-bark”:

A nobre ilha também de Taprobana,
Já pelo nome antigo tão famosa
Quanto agora soberba e soberana
Pela cortiça cálida, cheirosa,
Dela dará tributo à Lusitana Bandeira,
Quando, excelsa e gloriosa,

Vencendo se erguerá na torre erguida,
Em Columbo, dos próprios tão temida.

*And, eke, the noble Island Taproban,
Whose ancient name ne'er fail'd to give her note,
As still she reigns superb and sovereign
By boon of fragrant tree-bark, biting-hot:
Toll of her treasure to the Lusitan
Ensign shall pay, when proud and high shall float
Your breezy banners from the lofty tower,
And all Columbo fear your castled power.*

As said earlier, Taprobana was the ancient name for the island of Ceylon, which became more famous after the Portuguese arrived, thanks to the abundance and quality of its cinnamon, which is the warm, perfumed bark of the native *cinnamomum* on the island. The centrality of the island for Portuguese trade, as suggested in the opening verse of Camões' poem, became even more evident in 1518 when a fortress was constructed in the capital Colombo (hinted at by the author), initially with authorisation from the king of Ceylon. In actual fact, the Portuguese then had to defend their own interests and the governor ended up becoming a tributary of the local king.

Camões' masterpiece is a celebration of Lusitanian history at the height of its glory although at that time the Portuguese dominion in Asian had already started its decline as they were gradually being ousted by the Dutch. From the beginning of the seventeenth century Ceylon became part of the latter's trade route and in 1659 the chief Rijklof van Goens, who was working for the Dutch company of the Eastern Indies, conquered it and became governor. The commerce of this island thus fell under the control of Dutch merchants, giving them the monopoly of the cinnamon trade, which they were to maintain until 1790 when they were beaten by the English.

In the meantime the search for a “country of cinnamon” had been expanded to America, where the Spanish *conquistadores* thought they would be able to find a vast territory with the valuable plant in Peru, on the other side of the Andes; in Europe, on the other hand, tastes had adapted and cinnamon had already become part of culinary tradition.

In recent centuries cinnamon has become an integral part in the cuisine of diverse countries, also in products for mass-consumption such as Coca-Cola while in Portugal it is now a fundamental ingredient in bakery and desserts, together with eggs, sugar and almonds. Although its aroma is now part of everyday life in Portugal, most people are unaware of its roots. Its perfume is sweet, warm, and comforting. Today, this spice has lost most of the symbolic value that accompanied it for over three thousand years; nevertheless, it has preserved its importance as an aromatic spice and is now particularly in demand owing to its aroma-therapeutic properties.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed description of the history of cinnamon and extensive iconographic and bibliographic references cf. LOPES.
- 2 *Livro de Cozinha da Infanta D. Maria* is a collection of sixteenth-century manuscripts that were discovered in the Naples National Library in 1895. It was not until 1967 that it was published as a volume by Coimbra University, edited by Giacinto Manuppella.
- 3 The complete title of Tomé Pires' chronicle is “Sommarario di tutti li regni, città e popoli orientali, con li traffichi e mercanzie che ivi si trovano, cominciando dal Mar Rosso
- 4 fino alli popoli della China, tradotto dalla lingua portoghese nella italiana” [Summary of all the kingdoms, cities and oriental peoples, including their trade and commerce, from the Red Sea to the peoples of China, translated from Portuguese to Italian] (RAMUSIO 711-80).
- 5 This is the title the work is given in Ramusio's *Navigazioni e viaggi* di Ramusio (537-709). Ramusio read Barbosa's chronicle in Spanish.
- 6 Cf. SARAIVA 128.
- 7 Unless otherwise specified, all quotations have been translated by C. Cawthra.

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CRÉATIONS DE L'ESPRIT. MUSIC AND PERFUME IN EDMOND ROUDNITSKA'S AESTHETICS

Diego Cembrola

La composition des parfums est l'art abstrait par excellence,
d'où sa difficile intelligence,
mais c'est aussi par excellence l'art des proportions
heureuses,
d'où l'extrême jouissance intellectuelle qu'il procure
à tous ceux qui savent ainsi l'apprécier
mais combien aussi à celui qui a appris à le pratiquer.
(Roudnitska 1977, 203)

A perfect moment in history

In the mid twentieth century, in Europe in particular, the works of composers who belonged to the so-called avant-garde were characterised by their marked exacerbation of the more abstract elements of musical language, making them difficult to enjoy not only for a non-specialised audience, but by anyone – musicians or non – who did not share their aesthetical and ideological premises.¹

However, from the eighties on, the particular need arose to revive those characteristics of music that are more immediately sensorial, or actually sensual. This need was concretised in different ways in the neo-romantic, neo-tonal and neo-modal currents, in spectralism,² in contamination with consumption genres such as rock, jazz, pop, and world music etc. not to mention continuous experimentation regarding the infinite possibilities offered by

the electronic synthesis of sound, as well as assiduous research on synaesthetic effects. An example of the latter is *Sunday (Sonntag)* by the great composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928 – 2007): the last episode of *Light (Licht)*, a mammoth operatic cycle with seven operas, each of which is dedicated to one of the days of the week, and a score that includes the audience being sprayed with perfumes that represent the seven days.³

In other words, the history of music at the turn of the twenty-first century was therefore characterised by what could be defined as a ‘return to the senses’. It therefore offers the perfect setting to make topical this brief comparison between the art of sounds and an art that, owing to its very nature, has never lost – and cannot ever lose – contact with its direct sensorial concreteness: high-quality perfumery. For this comparison my main reference will be the most complete recent development of an aesthetics of the olfactive art: the theoretical work of the perfumer Edmond Roudnitska. However, before I present this outstanding author – though not yet universally known and appreciated – I would like to reflect on the analogies between the sense of hearing and smell, and the similarities between the symbols and aesthetic meanings that these senses can convey.

Hearing and smell: similar senses?

From a biological point of view, smell and hearing have certain characteristics in common that make them different from both the sense of sight and touch.

First of all, eyes have eyelids so they can be closed voluntarily; furthermore, it is possible to avoid physical contact with objects. Plugging one’s ears, on the other hand, requires more effort, both physically (if using one’s hands) or technically (inserting objects in the auricles). On the other hand, owing to the vital need to breathe, the olfactive flow can only be interrupted for a brief moment.⁴

Secondly, unlike sight, smell and hearing both work in all

directions. While it is impossible to see behind one's head, meaning that there are even parts of our own body that are inaccessible to our eyes (unless we use technical instruments), hearing and smell can perceive signals from any direction. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe how distance and physical barriers (the presence of obstacles, wind direction, etc.) influence hearing and smell in a similar manner.

Another interesting issue is that of molecular vibrations, although we are allowed only a brief mention here.⁵ In short, the details of the biochemical functioning mechanisms of smell are not yet known, and so far two possible hypotheses have been put forward. The first, initially formulated by the ancient atomist and epicurean philosophers,⁶ was formalised by Amoore in 1963. He explains the perception of smell in terms of 'form': in practice, he believes it is the stereo-chemical characteristics of the molecules that determine the quality of the smells we perceive.⁷ The second, more innovative hypothesis was first put forward by Dyson and then by the biochemist Turin. They both believe that smell depends on the vibrations of the odorant substances.⁸ Should this theory be confirmed, and recent studies make us think it might, as Rosalia Cavalieri observed, "smell [...] would have many things in common with sight and hearing" (42). And, we might add, this would have consequences at an aesthetic level.

Going from a purely physical-biological level to a more symbolic one, we can observe that while sight and touch glide over the surface of objects, hearing and smell investigate their interior. This is because sound waves are generated from the entire body in vibrations, revealing something about the object's internal structure. Walter Ong writes the following on the subject:

Sight is at optimum only with light coming diffusely off the outside of something, off a surface perceived as such. Hence a field of sight suggests always a beyond or a beneath which is not seen. By contrast, sound gives perception of interiors

as interiors without their being opened up into surfaces: I can tap an object and learn thereby whether it is solid or hollow. Without resort to other senses [...], vision as such knows no hollows and no echoes. (122)

Likewise, smell tells us something about the material structure of a body since odorous molecules also come from their interior, a fact Lucretius had already understood when he observed that strong smells are sometimes given off from broken, worn materials and that the flavour is released from food that has been chewed like water pressed from a sponge.⁹

Finally, just like the sense of smell, the voice is connected to respiration, to *pneuma*; that is, symbolically, to the soul.¹⁰ And that is why both odorous substances and chanting have been used since ancient times as a means of communication with divinity: the deity is evoked and appeased with *incensus* (from *incendere* ‘burn’)¹¹ and with *incantus* (composed of *in* and *cantus*: literally, chant raised upwards towards something or somebody that is to be dominated, therefore a spell).¹²

Hearing and smell are therefore fairly similar. And whilst it is true that this similarity is not yet well defined, one may rightly suppose that there may be some further, unexpected similarities in the arts and aesthetics based on these two senses.

Roudnitska, perfumer philosopher

After receiving a thorough education which also included music, Edmond Roudnitska (Nice 1905 – Cabris 1996) began working in the field of perfume production as a self-taught man and in 1946 established the independent laboratory “Art et Parfum.”¹³ It was thanks to the perfumes he created for Dior, *Diorissimo* in particular, that he gained fame; the latter was based on the essence of lily of the valley, which he was able to produce artificially, since there was no known method to extract it from the flower itself.

Roudnitska was not only one of the most brilliant perfumers of the twentieth century, but also an attentive scholar and theoretician of both his art and art in general: he created as many fragrant essences as he wrote publications of considerable richness and profound thought. One of them, *L'Esthétique en question. Introduction à une esthétique de l'odorat* (1977) offers the ideal background for our observations: this remarkable book includes extensive, detailed and constant references to music so that for the author the art of sound often seems to be a source of the coordinates of his theorisation and, one could even say, of his own identity as an artist.

Roudnitska has various philosophical sources for his aesthetics which at times are not what one would expect. While his references to Bergson and Lalo appear quite natural, his interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*¹⁴ almost seems to be a posthumous challenge to the author, if we bear in mind that Kant himself, together with Hegel, is one of the philosophers who placed olfaction on one of the lowest steps of the hypothetical spiritual hierarchy of the senses.¹⁵ However, what is most relevant for us is the strong presence in Roudnitska's "conceptual universe" of Etienne Souriau,¹⁶ a philosopher with a deep knowledge of music for whom the art of sound plays a fundamental role in his comparative aesthetics, as becomes clear when reading *La Correspondance des arts*.¹⁷

Whilst admitting to the full the importance of the senses in art, Roudnitska rejects the epithet 'nose', which is frequently used to indicate a perfumer: it is a childish, inadequate metonymy that should be replaced with 'perfume composer,' an expression he uses for those who produce perfumes.¹⁸ Like all works of art, perfume is a "creation of the spirit" (Roudnitska 1977, 68 and *passim*),¹⁹ as only the spirit is able to recombine and rework olfactory memories to create a new, original synthesis. "I do not compose [...] my perfumes with my nose, but with my brain" – Roudnitska

writes with the utmost pride – “and if I were to lose my sense of smell I could still invent and compose perfumes. Beethoven was deaf when he composed the *Ninth*. ” (70)²⁰

Describing oneself as a “composer” (and not a painter or sculptor) is not a superficial, whimsical pose. On the contrary, for Roudnitska a musician’s mental categories and aesthetical feeling influence his vision of the olfactive art and the categories of his aesthetic thought; this therefore makes it possible – and we hope also fruitful – to offer a closer musical interpretation of some of the conceptual nuclei of Roudnitska’s book that deal with the compositional process in particular.

Composing with sounds, composing with fragrances

Material and matter. Art and technique

One of the fundamental concepts that Roudnitska inherits from Souriau is the distinction that the perfume composer comments and embellishes, between *matter* and *material*.²¹

Although of similar derivation, these two terms should not be confused. With “material” (*matériaux*), Roudnitska means “all pre-defined *physical-chemical* data,” while with “matter” (*matière*) he means “all pre-defined *mental* data that an [artistic] activity understands and develops further” (1977, 41).²² In other words, the material is the mere foundation of the natural elements used for the creation of the artistic object, whilst the matter is something that has already been culturally pre-selected and pre-formulated and it is into this that the individual artist’s work is inserted. For example, a perfumer’s material is the number of fragrant substances as a whole in their brute physicality; however, his matter is made up of the “essences,” which are chemical products that have already been developed using sophisticated procedures. In the same way, the matter of a music composer is not made up of mere physical phenomena that produce vibrations in the air; in fact, although it can be produced by a human voice, made

up of isochronal vibrations (with a fixed period), the sound itself usually requires culturally developed objects – musical instruments – if it is to be produced. Furthermore, sounds are organised in conceptual systems that constitute the basis of the theory and artistic practice in a specific culture and/or historical period. For example, Mozart's compositional matter is the equal temperament while Schoenberg's (from a certain period on) is the dodecaphonic series, in which the tones that make up the traditional European music scales are organised in a completely new way.

The notion of matter as a fact that has been pre-formulated culturally leads us to the delicate question of the relationship between art and technique. Such a discussion would require pages; here we shall limit ourselves to summarising Roudnitska's thoughts on the subject, which are both perceptive and knowledgeable. In perfumery, the question of what is natural and what is artificial is mainly under discussion regarding the use of the so-called synthetic substances. However, in reality perfumes have always been 'synthetic' because they have been produced by the synthesis of components that have been developed using techniques, regardless of their animal, vegetable or chemical origins. On the other hand, just like the so-called natural products, synthetic components are made with substances that already exist in nature. In other words, the actual synthesis process of the individual components is nothing other than just one stage of the process of the material being put to use.²³

After the invention and diffusion of electronic sound synthesis, a similar question was asked in the field of music. And here we can certainly add Roudnitska's opinion. In fact, a violin is just as much a product of technique as a modern electronic keyboard. Admittedly this is an older technique but, as any luthier or connoisseur knows, it is certainly no less complex and refined. On the other hand, all electronic instruments do produce vibrating



Edmond Roudnitska in his office in Cabris, 1989. By courtesy of Michel Roudnitska

air – that is, sound: the same matter produced by traditional instruments. Furthermore, in music the creation of timber is also an integral part of the artwork; more clearly in compositions based on sound synthesis, yet more implicitly in music that uses traditional instruments.

Finally, of particular note is the importance that Roudnitska places on both apprenticeship, which must be lengthy and detailed, and on the artist's technical ability:²⁴ he even states that “technique is [...] indissolubly tied to creation, and ends up being the creation itself” (191). But this is only true for great artists: while a mediocrity follows a technical handbook that unites him with the many who have the same ‘profession’ in the same time and place, for a genius technique and creation are inextricably interwoven.²⁵

Timbre

There is one aspect of musical creation in which the analogy with the art of perfume is truly meaningful and specific: I am referring to instrumentation and orchestration. And I do not believe it is a coincidence that France, homeland of the highest quality perfumery, is also the homeland of composers who paid such close attention to timbre (the names of Berlioz, Debussy, Ravel and Boulez should suffice); France was also one of the first countries where specific literature on orchestration appeared.²⁶

Roudnitska was fully aware of this analogy. He wrote that while a musician can try out what he is composing on the piano straight away, the perfumer does not have this possibility because starting with its basic elements, the creation of a perfume takes days and requires the considerable outlay of expensive substances. A perfumer's work is therefore similar to that of someone composing a symphony (and that of an orchestrator, we might add), someone who writes in his mind and only rarely can try out the timbre combinations he has in his mind in advance.²⁷

Both in perfumery and orchestration, combining with others in a synthesis that is always something more than just the total of the two, the individual elements lose their own character although some can, at times, be clearly distinguished. For example, the timbre of the oboe tends to prevail over the flute and clarinet and stands out clearly even when an entire section of strings is added. On the other hand, when part of a heterogeneous group, the clarinet often loses its individuality despite modifying the final timbre, at times in a very subtle way. In this regard, worthy of mention is the famous *incipit* of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, played by the violins doubled on the lower octaves by violas, cellos and double bass, with the addition of two clarinets in unison with the violins: they cannot be recognised individually but have the function of making the timbre of the strings 'darker';²⁸ without this invaluable expedient the famous eight notes of "Fate

knocking at the door" would not have the same imperious sense of imminent duty looming that we are all familiar with.

Another striking example of timbre development is in Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*, whose compositional development is completely based on timbre. An accompanied melody is repeated in continuation, orchestrated more and more richly, with the addition of new instruments at each repetition. However, at a certain point Ravel amazes us with a truly surprising idea: the melody in C major is played by a solo horn, doubled at a higher register by the celesta²⁹ and by two piccolos;³⁰ but one of the latter plays in G while the other plays in E major.³¹ The composer is not trying to achieve a polytonal effect here; on the contrary, he enriches and hones the timbre, highlighting by amplification some of the overtones that would be produced naturally by the instruments that play the main melody. When listening, one does not even realise that the two piccolos are playing in a different tonality; nevertheless, the overall sound combination is full, rich and brilliant, also thanks to the sparkling celesta.³²

Temporal development and notation

Roudnitska draws another close comparison with music with the delicate question of the temporal development of perfume. Both music and perfume develop with time: music, according to what is written in the score, perfume according to the degree of volatility of the individual elements it is made up of. When a perfume is vaporised, the more volatile substances, comparable to an *allegro vivace*, gradually make room for the more tenacious components. This vaporisation acts as a principle theme that, in a good-quality perfume, lasts between twenty-four and forty-eight hours – a much longer period than a lengthy symphony.³³

Although it seems to emanate with time, perfume is actually closed in itself, since owing to the action of its main theme, with the exception of some highly volatile elements, almost all its com-

ponents participate in its olfactive form. According to Roudnitska, this is the significant difference between music and perfume: while music is based on a progression of harmonies, “perfume is basically a harmony of simultaneous chords” (1977, 181).

Roudnitska also observes that while a musician has a specific form of notation for each of the composition elements (pitch, duration, velocity, etc.), the perfume composer immortalises his works using formulae in which a simple number written before each component (the proportion of the latter) has to take into consideration every factor (intensity, duration, etc.) that is part of the perfume’s olfactive form.³⁴ The harmony of simultaneous chords that make up the temporal essence of perfume thus lies in the way in which the olfactive work is put down in writing.

Representation and stylisation

When dealing with the question of representation and stylisation, Souriau and Roudnitska also show their profound knowledge of the aesthetics of music, which discussed the matter of absolute and representational music at such length.³⁵ Roudnitska returns to Souriau’s interpretation of the question: there are (prevalently) non representational arts and (prevalently) representational arts: “In the non-representative arts [‘absolute’ music, arabesque, dance, abstract painting], [...] the formal organisation of all the information that makes up the universe of the work, is [...] completely inherent to the work itself, its real and unique reference subject” (Souriau, 165). While in representational art there is a formal and ontological duality owing to the fact that the artwork refers to (suggests, portrays, evokes ...) a second-degree reality, that is different from the internal organisation of the artwork.

For example, if I draw a cube, the intrinsic organisation of the work (also called ‘primary form’) is made up of lines that are organised on the flat surface of the piece of paper as a square and two trapezia. However, the drawing portrays a solid geometrical

figure in a hypothetical three-dimensional space; this portrayal is its ‘extrinsic’ or ‘secondary form.’³⁶

In actual fact, the representational and non-representational element co-exist very often in art. And if it is successful and gives both the intrinsic structure and the representational function a certain degree of independence, the result of this coexistence is called “stylization.” When drawing a stylised flower, for example, the artist does it in such a way that the formal organisation of the lines and curves he is drawing are artistically valid whilst also making sure that the drawing does actually portray or evoke a real flower.³⁷

Roudnitska applies the distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic form to perfume: the former regards the harmonious arrangement of the proportions of the components while the latter regards the ability of perfumes to evoke objects or settings. In perfumery, stylisation is anything but uncommon since, for example, floral aromas in small bottles evoke the smell of real flowers but are not identical to them.³⁸

Music does not allow a direct representation, so the evocation of extra-musical elements has no choice but to undergo an elaborate stylisation process. Examples of this from the classical European repertoire include Adriano Banchieri’s *Battaglia*, Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, Beethoven’s *Sixth Symphony* and the scene of Richard Strauss’ symphonic poem *Don Quixote* in which the winds evoke the bleating of sheep.

Let us conclude...

... with a brief comment on the opening quotation. It is the conclusion of *L’Esthétique en question*, but it could just as well come from a book on musical aesthetics. In fact, just like perfume, music is an abstract art and that is what makes it difficult to understand. And, as Pythagoras once said, it is an art of harmoni-

ously combined proportions, which gives a special kind of joy to both those who perform and those who have learnt to appreciate it. Here, perhaps without even realising, Roudnitska is talking of a profound, original affinity between two arts that rarely encounter one another, in which reciprocal knowledge and awareness could enrich the aesthetic sensitivity of artists and the public considerably. For example, by reminding perfume composers that one can and must create an art that is as abstract and spiritual as all the others; and reminding music composers that the sensory universe is the unavoidable premise for any kind of intellectual abstraction.

Notes

- 1 The exemplary experiments by the psychologist Robert Francès, carried out already in the fifties, proved scientifically that the dodecaphonic series cannot even be perceived ‘by ear’ by musicians who have been trained in that composition technique (Cf. FRANCÈS). As regards the infinite literature available on twentieth century music I recommend the recent *The Rest is Noise* for its superb narration and decidedly non-ideological tone; for more about the development of the music avant-garde, cf. the first part of the first volume of *Musiques: une encyclopédie* edited by J.J. NATTIEZ.
- 2 Synonym of “spectral music,” the term refers to an artistic current that developed in the nineteen-eighties, especially in France, based on the consideration of sound in its physical components as shown by spectroscope analysis (hence the expression).
- 3 Cf. Ross 827.
- 4 Cf. also MUNIER 13.
- 5 For more about the subject, cf. CAVALIERI 38-42.
- 6 Cf. LUCRETIUS, book IV, *passim*.
- 7 Cf. AMOORE 271-2.
- 8 Cf. CAVALIERI 41.
- 9 Cf. LUCRETIUS, book IV, *passim*. Cf. also LE GUÉRER 161.
- 10 Cf. MUNIER 19.
- 11 Cf. *ibid* 15.
- 12 Plutarch compares *kyphi*, an Egyptian perfume (the recipe of which was engraved on the walls of the Edfu temple), with the notes of the lyre that the Pythagoricians would listen to before falling asleep to sharpen their imaginative faculties. Cf. MUNIER 58-9.
- 13 The laboratory still exists and is managed by Roudnitska’s son, Michel, who is also a photographer and graphic designer.
- 14 Cf. ROUDNITSKA 1977, 204.
- 15 For an interesting historical review of philosophers’ judge-

- ments on the sense of smell, cf. LE GUÉRER 161 (190-3 for Kant and Hegel in particular).
- 16 Born in Lille in 1892 and died in Paris in 1979, son of the philosopher Paul, Etienne Souriau attended the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and taught at the University of Aix-en-Provence (1925-1929), Lyon (1929-1941) and the Sorbonne in Paris where he was given a chair in aesthetics in 1941.
- 17 Published in 1947, *La Correspondance des arts. Éléments d'esthétique comparée* strives to define the architectural laws and organise a common lexis that sees art works as something that goes beyond the individual artistic disciplines.
- 18 Cf. ROUDNITSKA 1977, 64, 196 and *passim*.
- 19 The expression upon which the title of this essay is based comes from the legal language of French law regarding copyright, as Roudnitska was asking that it be applied to the full to high quality perfumery as well. The author also uses “construction of the spirit” (cf. 1977, 197 for example), which emphasises the technical aspect of the artwork even more.
- 20 My translation, as well as for all other passages by Roudnitska. The image of a deaf Beethoven who is composing and conducting also appears in *ibid.* 96.
- 21 This is not the place to go into the concept of ‘form’ that Roudnitska also took from Souriau; for more see cf. ROUDNITSKA 1977, 42.
- 22 My italics.
- 23 Cf. *ibid.* 82.
- 24 Cf. *ibid.* 67-8, 190 *passim*.
- 25 *Ibid.* 190.
- 26 With the exception of several forerunners, most of whom were French, the first real orchestration treatise was by Berlioz (*Grande traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*, 1844). Worthy of mention are also the treatises by Gevaert (1863, 1885 and 1890), Guiraud (1892), Widor (1904) and Koechlin (1935-43 in four volumes). For a systematic bibliography on the subject, cf. PERONE.
- 27 Cf. ROUDNITSKA 1977, 197.
- 28 Cf. Beethoven, *Symphony no. 5* in C minor op. 67, I. *Allegro con brio*, bars 1-4.
- 29 A keyboard instrument whose keys are connected to bells, with a high, sparkling timbre.
- 30 The *piccolo* (abbreviation of the Italian *flauto piccolo*, “small flute”) is a small-sized flute, an octave higher (hence its alter-

- native more common Italian name *ottavino*) than the normal one. It is the highest musical instrument used in classical symphonic orchestras or concert bands.
- 31 Cf. RAVEL, *Boléro*, bars 149-165.
- 32 The effect obtained is very similar to the *plenum* of the organ that is nearly always equipped with a series of accessory pipes tuned according to the harmonics of the principal register.
- 33 Cf. ROUDNITSKA 1977, 180-1; 1980, 37.
- 34 Cf. ROUDNITSKA 1977, 197.
- 35 A distinction has traditionally been made between “absolute” music, i.e. without elements
- that might evoke an external, extra-musical reality (e.g. a sonata or symphony) and “representative” music, such as the opera, which stages in theatre a drama based on the musical score. This subject is discussed in the famous essay by EDUARD HANSLICK, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen (The Beautiful in Music)* written in 1854 in which the Viennese critic and theoretician supports Brahms, a composer of absolute music, and takes a stand against Wagner’s melodrama.
- 36 Cf. ROUDNITSKA 1977, 47; SOURIAU 163.
- 37 Cf. ROUDNITSKA 1977, 49.
- 38 Cf. *ibid.* 57.

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THE PERMANENCE AND NOMADISM OF PERFUMES A MIGRATORY METAPHOR

Carmen Concilio

Permanence. The perfume of love

In Western canons, the *Song of Songs* is a great model of love poetry. In the biblical poem, the enamoured couple, the bride and groom, exchange reciprocal compliments, giving voice to their joyful love. The reference to perfumes is evident from the very beginning:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth:
for thy love is better than wine.
Because of the savour of thy good ointments
thy name is as ointment poured forth,
therefore do the virgins love thee. (I, 2-3)

The beloved is characterised by an intense perfume; his very name is perfume. And there is more:

[...] my spikenard sendeth forth the smell thereof.
A bundle of myrrh is my wellbeloved unto me;
he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.
My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire
in the vineyards of Engedi. (I, 12-14)

The “spikenard,” “myrrh” and “camphire” are perfumes. Engedi is an oasis on the shores of the Dead Sea surrounded by palm trees and balms. Both the protagonists are wearing a par-

ticular perfume; of particular interest is the air of sensuality in the description of the myrrh perfume, which lingers, as if it were imprinted on the woman's skin.

Similarly, in English sonnets in the Renaissance the description of the beloved is often characterised by her perfume, in particular the smell of her breath, which is associated with the most delightful perfumes and was one of the conventional comparisons that Shakespeare was mocking in Sonnet 130: "And in some perfumes is there more delight / Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks" (1986, 129).

Edmund Spenser devoted an entire sonnet to a woman's perfume: 64 of "Amoretti," and it deserves quoting in its entirety:

Comming to kisse her lyps (such grace I found)
Me seemd I smelt a gardin of sweet flowres,
That dainty odours from them threw around
For damzels fit to decke their lover's bowres.

Her lips did smell lyke unto Gillyflowers,
Her ruddy cheekes lyke unto Roses red;
Her snowy browes lyke budded Bellamoures,
Her lovely eyes lyke Pincks but newly spred;

Her goodly bosome lyke a Strawberry bed,
Her neck lyke to a bounch of Cullambynes;
Her brest lyke lillyes, ere theyr leaves be shed,
Her nipples lyke yong blossom'd Jessemynes.

Such fragrant flowres doe give most odorous smell,
But her sweet odour did them all excell. (141)

In this curious *blazon*, the conventional description of the beauty of the female body is compared to everything that is the most beautiful and precious in nature; not without considerable

emphasis, it is constructed on the theme of perfume for each part of his beloved's body. The result is a perfume that is made up of eight essences: an extraordinary "gardin of sweet flowres."

Shakespeare, on the other hand, does not seem to be immune to a certain 'orientalism' in his memorable description of the last queen of Egypt:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne
Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them;
[...] From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs.
(II. ii)

This vision, one that Shakespeare actually inherited from the ancient classics he drew inspiration from, goes back to Plutarch; he read it, however, in the mediated form of the English translation from the French by Sir Thomas North (1579):

She disdained to set forward otherwise, but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes, hautboys, citherns, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparellled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture: [...] Her Ladies and gentle-women also, [...] some steering the helm, others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge, out of the which there came a wonderful passing sweet savour of perfumes, that perfumed the wharf's side, pestered with innumerable multitudes of people. (33-4)

In the almost Baroque-like descriptions, in the novel by the Roman author Ahenobarbus and before him Plutarch, Cleopatra appears triumphantly, in a synaesthetic exultation of sensorial confusion. Her appearance stirs all the senses without distinction, without favouring sight in a hierarchical order. Thus, even the magic (“invisible”) perfume given off as she proceeds down the river, coming from both her regal vessel and figure, has a role that is anything but secondary in impressing on our memory a certain image of the Orient: gilded and purple, perfumed, harmoniously musical, beautiful according to Baroque aesthetics, because it is bombastic, excessive and exaggerated. More effective than North’s prose, Shakespeare’s blank verse creates alliteration between “purple” and “perfumed,” thus paving the way for and anticipating the syllabic sound of the word that will appear just two lines later. The double repetition of the words “barge” and “perfume” makes one understand that this bewitching perfume is associated with the vessel itself. There are countless examples of alliteration in these lines (“will-tell,” “barge-burnish’d-burn’d,” “winds-we-re-with,” “barge-strange”), and the complex chiasmatic sonorities are repeated (“purple sails-so perfumed,” “the winds-with them”), almost as if they were creating a melodically incantatory formula. Thus, thanks also to the structural complexity of the verse, Cleopatra’s perfume becomes one of love, and it even makes the port winds and wharf fall in love: it stirs inanimate objects. On the other hand, other memorable passages are evoked from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, for example when Lady Macbeth exclaims: “Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes / of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (V.i), it only confirms a vision of Oriental lands that is associated with intense perfumes; similarly, another olfactory reference is to be found in Michael Drayton’s *Ideas Mirrour*: “My Smelling wonne with her Breath’s Spicerie” (99).⁴

Thus, what are the responsibilities and choices that a writer coming from the ‘Orient’ is faced with, when he finds himself having to describe places that have been gone through by Western history with a fine-tooth comb such as paradises of spices, perfumes and precious stones, as the colonial history of the island of Sri Lanka has taught us?

After emigrating to England and then Canada when he was very young, Michael Ondaatje, Sri Lanka’s most famous writer¹ wrote an emblematic poem about one of the island’s perfumes: “The Cinnamon Peeler” (1989). In this poem the perfume of cinnamon is not perceived through the sense of smell; it is not transported by the air. The perfume is impregnated in the skin, the entire body through the sense of touch. Just like Cleopatra, it is a perfume of love:

If I were a cinnamon peeler
I would ride your bed
and leave the yellow bark dust on your pillow.
Your breasts and shoulders would reek
you could never walk through markets
without the profession of my fingers
floating over you. The blind would
stumble certain of whom they approached
though you might bathe
under rain gutters, monsoon.

[...]

You will be known among strangers
as the cinnamon peeler’s wife.

I could hardly glance at you
before marriage
never touch you
— your keen nosed mother, your rough brothers.
I buried my hands

in saffron, disguised them
over smoking tar,
helped the honey gatherers...

[...]

You touched
your belly to my hands
in the dry air and said
I am the cinnamon
peeler's wife. Smell me.

A hypothetical sentence, the first line of the poem describes the yellow powder of cinnamon that the lover would leave on the pillow of his beloved. It is only in the second stanza that the sense of smell is evoked. “Reek” has a slightly unpleasant connotation and does not really refer to a perfume but rather a smell that has been impressed on the woman’s body. The second stanza is almost a warning, a threat: walking through the market even the blind would know that the cinnamon picker’s wife is near them, as if he had branded her as his property with an indelible, unmistakeable sign of identification.

With few lexemes (“cinnamon,” “markets,” “rain gutters,” “monsoon”), Ondaatje refers to Sri Lanka: “the cinnamon peeler” is certainly a person who emerges from the caste system and native memory; “walk through markets” is another image that is typical of oriental countries and hot, or temperate climates; “bathe under rain gutters, monsoon,” bathing or washing oneself with rain water is another recurring image in Ondaatje’s prose when describing a scene of rural life on the island.

Further on, the pair of lines that ends the third stanza emphasises and makes explicit the olfactory image: “You will be known among strangers / as the cinnamon peeler’s wife.” The poem is developed between a past, a before, and a present, an after. The premarital past of the period of courtship is character-

ised by the absence of any physical contact and therefore also of perfume; this is in particular owing to the vigilance of the “keen nosed” mother, an ambiguous description that alludes to both the mother’s keen sense of smell and the shape of her nose, making her appear even more suspicious.

Furthermore, to allay her suspicions the lover delves into the saffron with his hands, he lets the smoke of the hot tar disguise any other smells, and helps the people gathering honey. This all means that the man really has become a cinnamon picker although at the beginning of the poem he began with the hypothetical “If I were.” Or else, all the activities he listed might be just seasonal, cyclic, transitory ones, just as transitory as other women can be in a man’s life: “this is how you touch other women / the grass cutter’s wife, the lime burner’s daughter.”

The woman, described as the “lime burner’s daughter,” speaks in the last stanza of the poem. By now the situation with her man has changed as she is now his wife. In the last stanza it is the woman who displays a new awareness: “I am the cinnamon / peeler’s wife. Smell me.”

“Smell me” is a proud command, an olfactory imperative. The perfume of cinnamon is a tangible sign, “like a wound,” “like an expression of love that has reached its recipient,” giving the woman a certain aura of belonging to a man, an island, but also a specific caste. Ondaatje evokes a string of trades: “the cinnamon peeler” (*salagama* in South Singhalese – cinnamon growers), “the honey gatherers,” “the grass cutter” (*panna* in the Singhalese system of the Kandy area), “the lime burner” (*hunu*, in the Singhalese system of the Kandy area; *kadeyar* in the Tamail system in the South), an allusion to specific social hierarchies or castes of workers.

In this original love poem, sight – the favourite sense in this literary genre – makes way for the sense of smell, not as one of the five senses that guarantees knowledge, but as an actual replace-

ment for sight. The woman is not recognised thanks to the sense of seeing but through the senses of touch and smell. It is saying here that favouring the nose, the sense organ used by the blind, means a hierarchic inversion as, ever since Plato, the eye was the privileged sense organ for knowledge, the eye helps the *ratio*.

But Ondaatje's poem is not a contemplative one; the hierarchical inversion of the senses means that the love being praised is not only carnal, but also physical, sensual and sensorial. In the examples quoted so far perfume seems to seal marriage, union and passion, contradicting the posits underlying Denis de Rougemont's *L'Amour et l'Occident*, the premise of which is love and death, impossible love or adultery, which would characterise the love extolled in the West (*Romeo and Juliet*).

To a certain extent this is also a love poem for Sri Lanka although it is not as nostalgic as others that are more explicitly dedicated to the distance, loss of one's homeland and its history: the permanence in the Canadian poet's memory of the olfactory *imago* of cinnamon becomes a metaphor for his being a migrant.

The Canadian writer Shree Ghatala set her latest novel *Thirst* in India and Wales. India is neither an exotic country nor one to regard with nostalgia; it is simply an infinite source of stories and individual creativity. In India, however, she set a love story that was both tender and cruel, making perfume a metaphor for separation:

Then one day, when he was perhaps thirteen, while resting his head across Ramabai's lap, he held her wrist up to his nose and asked why she never smelt of his father. Nanasahib's rose attar was his signature scent and Baba had often carried his fragrance after a day spent with him. No sooner was the question uttered than he felt his mother's body stiffen, and when he looked into her face he knew he had touched a raw nerve.

"I like roses," he mumbled.

'And I like sandalwood,' she said, her tone uncharacteristically cold. He resolved never to speak of roses again, or of flowers, smells, of any kind. (2012, n.p.)

As in Ondaatje's poem, perfume is associated with intimacy, with the physical proximity of a man and woman – in this case the parents of the young boy who asks an innocent question. The father is characterised by the perfume of roses, the mother by the perfume of sandalwood. Transgressing a mental stereotype that leads us to associate the rose with the female and sandalwood with the male sphere, the writer creates a gender short-circuit that is the key to the story. In fact, many years later the boy goes on to discover that his mother and father have actually been living separately and that the reason for his father's lengthy absences, when he was allegedly looking after his horse estate in the country, was a homosexual relationship.

The taboo concerning perfume, or rather his mother's censorship of the subject, grows to such an extent that the boy cannot even mention the perfume and aroma of food, a fundamental characteristic of the spicy Indian cuisine:

And from that time on, even if he wished to describe the mouth-watering aroma of green chilies in the cook's potato preparation, or the heavenly pungent tang of aubergines cooked in oil, he restrained himself. He did not refer to bad smells either: the putrid, mildew odour of the canal in the dry months, the mouth-gagging stench of meat in the markets on the way to school. If smells were a taboo topic for Ramabai, they would be taboo for him too. (2012, n.p.)

Nomadism. The perfume of nostalgia

Following in Ondaatje and Ghatare's footsteps, the writer Anne Michaels interweaves references to perfumes in her work that are related to both the sphere of love and nostalgia.

In this regard, Ondaatje offers an eloquent example of the sense of loss felt by a migrant. In his latest novel *The Cat's Table*, a sort of fictitious biography that narrates the voyage of an eleven-year old boy from Colombo, Sri Lanka to London, the sense of nostalgia appears unexpectedly:

And then, one day, I smelled burning hemp on the ship. For a moment I stood still, then moved towards a staircase where it was stronger, hesitated about whether to go down or up, then climbed the stairs. The smell was coming from a corridor on D level. I stopped where it seemed strongest, got on my knees, and sniffed at the inch of crack under the metal door. I knocked quietly.

“Yes?”

I went in.

Sitting at a desk was a gentle-looking man. The room had a porthole. It was open, and the smoke from a rope whose end was burning seemed to follow a path over the man’s shoulder and out the porthole. “Yes?” he asked again.

“I like the smell. I miss it.” (2011, 61-2)

Like a bloodhound, the young boy could smell something in the air and he followed it, ‘smelling’ and ‘sniffing’ it through the crack between the cabin door ad the floor, before finding the courage to knock and enter. The cord that is burning and giving off an incense-like smell that the migrant is familiar with and realises reminds him of home and gives him a sense of homeliness, of belonging. But what he has left behind him, what he is missing and is nostalgic for is also the reason for his awareness of a geographic interruption, between the temporal here and there, between the paradise of a childhood that has been lost for ever and the uncertain, unknowable, existential future, between the child at home and the adolescent travelling alone towards adulthood.

Here the smell of hemp therefore refers to the involuntary

memory that cannot be controlled or understood rationally; it manifests itself as the instantaneous vertigo felt by a person suspended between two worlds, two states of being, between the permanence of an olfactive *imago* and his own nomadic state.² It is revealing how perfume characterises a trait or identity: in Ondaatje's works his home and the woman he loves, in Ghatage's novel the ambiguous sexual identity of a man. The sense of smell thus becomes the dominant one and olfactive memory becomes a ghost, a nostalgic trace of objects and people we have left behind us.

Anne Michaels is another successful writer, with middle-European Jewish cultural roots, and her work shares so many similarities with Michael Ondaatje that she could almost be his pupil. The feature that characterises them the most is their lyricism, their ability to evoke poetical, moving images of particular aesthetic impact. In the novel *The Winter Vault*, the female protagonist Jean is busy, obsessively and desperately planting small plants in the cracks in the pavements, in gardens and public parks. Traumatised as the result of numerous deaths, after studying botany she devotes herself entirely to this clandestine activity. When Lucien, a Polish Jew from the Warsaw ghetto, meets her and asks her about her mysterious silent gestures, Jean replies:

When I'm planting, said Jean, I'm leaving a kind of signal. And I'm hoping that the person it's meant for will receive it. If someone walking down the street experiences the scent of a flower they haven't smelled for thirty years – even if they don't recognize the scent but are suddenly reminded of something that gives them pleasure – then, maybe I've done something worthwhile. (202)

Jean hopes to bring comfort and pleasure to people through pleasant olfactive memories, the perfume ('scent'), of herbs, flowers and shrubs. A Holocaust survivor, Lucien warns her that such

olfactive ghosts could remind someone of a painful, distressing experience. However, Jean stubbornly continues with her aesthetic-olfactive project because its aim is beauty and pleasure although it is fuelled by nostalgia and evokes memories, in particular for people who do not belong there as they are migrants:

On the way home from the university one afternoon, Jean came across a man, perhaps forty years old, well dressed in a good suit and tie, asleep on the grass in a public garden. It was startling to see someone so nicely dressed sprawled on a lawn [...] he lay next to an old woman who must surely have been his mother. [...] She did not know what detail made her imagine the woman had emigrated, left her home in the last years of her life to join her son, yet Jean felt certain it could not be otherwise. [...] it was then that her plan first came to her. Very early the following morning, she returned to the spot and planted, quickly, a trespasser, in the existing beds, cuttings that would grow unnoticed except for their fragrance. If she had known their homeland, she could have planted with precision, flowers that would have reminded them of Greece, Lithuania, Ukraine, Italy, Sardinia, Malta... so that if they came back there to sleep on the grass, familiar scents would invade their dreams and give them an inexplicable ease. But *she* had not heard them speak and so had no idea from where they had come. So she planted wild sorrel, which grows in every temperate country, and which is both edible and medicinal. (195-6)

Here, wild sorrel, which grows in all temperate climates and is used in both cooking and medicine, appears as a universal, consolatory symbol for refugees, immigrants, and defectors from any country from East Europe to the Mediterranean. In its own way, this kind but painful act of transplanting this little plant, one that is so humble and common, might not even be noticed; it is as ‘in-visible’ as the couple lying on the grass in the park as if in an Im-

pressionist painting – it is an act of love. For them the fragrance of wild sorrel has to take root and remind them of something familiar, memories of their distant homelands, now that they are in a foreign land; just as significant is the fact they are lying on the grass, touching the ground, as if they had no other home, but are too well dressed and dignified to be homeless. Bewildered and nomads, it is there, lying on the ground that they might be able to find a labile tie with the homeland they were forced to leave, thanks to Jean's gift of a nomad perfume that has been transplanted and that spreads furtively in the air, thanks to the little sun that Canada has to offer.

Notes

1 Cf. BRUSASCO.

2 Cf. CHIALANT, RAO.

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“WHO ARE YOU, INCOMPREHENSIBLE: YOU SPIRIT”¹ PERFUME IN NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMAN LITERATURE

Massimiliano De Villa

When following the traces of perfume in German literature, one inevitably stops at Jean-Baptiste Grenouille with his super-human sense of smell. Translated into every possible language, with staggering sales, adapted for both the silver screen and in songs, since 1985, Patrick Süskind's *Perfume (Das Parfum. Die Geschichte eines Mörders)* has caught the attention of anyone who is looking for a book about perfume on German bookshelves, thus restricting perceptions to the last thirty years. Without detracting the slightest from Süskind's post-modern words and fantasy, there is more however. Perfume has always been present in German literature.

Inconsistent and volatile, perfume does not easily let itself be forced by words. Nevertheless, despite or perhaps precisely because of this, from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century and beyond, perfume has accompanied distance and proximity, melancholy and memories, a desire of the remote, above all in poetry.

The sense of smell features in many German poems and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries abound with examples: Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's *Summernight (Sommernacht)*, with the fragrance of lime trees, the lemons in Goethe's enigmatic Mignon,² and the romanticism of Novalis with his blue flowers and their “richest perfume.”³

With its torments, restlessness and sharp yearning, better and more than anywhere else German Romanticism dedicates

pages and pages to fragrances; they range from Novalis' unreach-able blue flower whose perfume is carried away by the winds, and the epigones of the Swabian school with the “fresh scent” of the “Spring Faith” (“Frühlingsglaube”) by Ludwig Uhland and the pleasant smells of grapevines and wheat in “Wine and Bread” (“Wein und Brot”).⁴

In between is the entire season of the second Romanticism: whilst the universal, progressive poetry of the first Romantic sea-son is entangled in blood and the earth, perfume endures with daffodils, hyacinths, lavender and rosemary in *The Boy's Magic Horn* (*Des Knaben Wunderhorn*), the famous collection of popu-lar songs edited by Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, opening the gate to the later Romanticism; moreover, with its forests, castles, full moons and subtle nocturnal restlessness Joseph von Eichendorff's poetry also perseveres with a succession of olfactory sensations, where “the lilac has a sultry scent,” (103)⁵ (“Can't you hear the Forest rustle?” / “Hörst du nicht die Bäume rauschen”) and the migrating birds bring with them “the smells of spring,” (209)⁶ (“Above the Gardens and Across the Sky” / “Frühlingsnacht”).

Extinguishing the flame and the blazing passions of the Ro-mantic period, the *Biedermeier* season holds the sense of smell in check as it blooms like ““sweet aromas well familiar,” (49)⁷ as her-alds of spring in “It's Him” (“Er ist's”) – one of Eduard Mörike's small scenes – or like ‘reseda scent’⁸ (146) that enters through an open balcony door in Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's “A Sum-mer Day's Dream” (“Sommerstagstraum”), bringing confusion. Lastly, in “Tristan,” an unfinished poem by Count August von Platen, the flowers smell of death in perfectly-sculptured musical lines that are the forerunners of the sick flowers of the Decadent Movement.⁹

During the second half of the nineteenth century, realist po-etry itself made room for perfume but probably with less grati-

fication: in Theodor Storm's "Apart" ("Abseits") for example, the perfume of the moorlands of his native Holstein rises upwards in the blue summer sky.¹⁰

Gradually, we then come to the *fin de siècle* when the subject of perfume takes on a greater meaning and substance. In the last decades of a closing century, the rift with mimesis gradually brings sensitivity and aesthetic arousal in the foreground. This is the restless new Romanticism that darts across Europe causing an explosion of the senses nearly everywhere. The late nineteenth-century man's nerves are exposed and literary creations take place in the network of such impressions. This therefore marks the beginning of a path that leads to the foray of the various expressions of Decadent Movement, Symbolism, neo-Romanticism and Aestheticism. Purged by Realism, emotions once again become the centre and criteria. Literature at the end of the century breaks the thin crust of the phenomenon and delves deeper to find harmony. Things are no longer objects to be described, but symbols to be deciphered through an evocation of overlapping senses. What we have is no longer reality with its implacable webs of determinism but a current of impressions.

In this context, perception is not placed along a single axis but is seen as a simultaneous whole of all the senses, where perfumes, sounds and colours interact: a unification that finds expression in all the branches of the European Decadent Movement in new literary techniques, first and foremost synaesthesia.

In this period German literature cannot vie with the wealth of symbols, brainwaves and disorder of the senses in French Symbolism, but it does have its own substance and characteristics. The rebellion against bourgeois Realism and to a greater extent against the clinical insight that naturalism had opened up on poverty and the asphalt of the metropolis, deviates attention from the positive reality towards the depths of the soul, towards floral culture instead of harshness, and from misery towards interior oscillation.

There is no denying that German Symbolism was influenced by Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé, but the result is not a weaker version of its French matrix. On the contrary, it draws on its own sources: for example, German Romanticism. Primarily Novalis, with his dream of reconstructing the world with words. However, the most famous name in German Symbolism is that of Nietzsche.

In spite of being an adversary of *décadence* and its weariness, an advocate of the fullness of life and strength, in the end Nietzsche is to become one of the main reference points for German symbolists. Beyond the borders of Germany and Austria, Nietzsche's thoughts are to circulate in a variety of forms, but it is within the borders that they are to be the most fruitful. Proclaimed in *The Gay Science* and elsewhere, the autonomy of art finds its place in the exclusive aesthetics of German symbolism, where form is given an absolute value. It can be observed that throughout German literature, the borders are anything but clear and there is no attempt at a clear separation between Impressionism, Symbolism, neo-Romanticism and Aestheticism. The styles reflect one another and converge.

The danger of an art that seeks form is of precipitating into the decorative. This is a danger that German symbolism is not always able to avoid and it sometimes verges on squiggles, curls and sinuous lines. In other words in the *Jugendstil* flowers. But this is the worst result: in its most authentic expression, from 1890 onwards, Austro-German symbolism corresponds to the French model and its aesthetics of the senses: all of them, including the sense of smell.

An analysis of the literature in this period should not limit itself to the much-hailed symbolist triad George-Hofmannsthal-Rilke, but should also seek elsewhere, amongst forerunners and inspirers such as Nietzsche.

The Gay Science ends with "To the Mistral" ("An den Mis-

tral”), a song to the Provence wind, a cry of happiness to the north-westerly wind that is wreaking havoc with the skies, sweeping away lies and false virtue, whirling “the dusty hazes / right into the sick men’s noses”¹¹ (117). In “From High Mountains” (“Aus hohen Bergen”) a poetic passage in *Beyond Good and Evil*, from his lofty, icy abode Nietzsche talks of a word that no longer exists, a word of friendship that once smelled of roses but that has now faded and grown old. Written when on the verge of madness, another example are the verses of *Dionysian-Dithyrambs*, in which perfume returns in the disjointed Asian dithyramb “Ha!” where the poet is making his way in the desert, surrounded by young cat-like girls and sphinxes, smelling ““the best air, / verily, air of paradise,”¹² going ahead with neither a future or memories, “my nostrils swollen like goblets”¹³ (185-7).

Still part of naturalism but going beyond and achieving impressionist overtones, Detlev von Liliencron’s lyric poetry also deserves mention: in “Moorland Pictures” (“Heidebilder”), the midday autumn is pierced by a heron that “glides through the fragrant fog /with mighty wings.”¹⁴ Then there is Richard Dehmel, a convinced heir of Nietzsche’s legacy, whose works mark the transition from naturalism to a symbolism that is characterised by musicality and decoration. Perfume is present here, too: for example, in “Summer Evening” (“Sommerabend”) where “dew escapes from the warm earth scented.”¹⁵

Stefan George was the first of the pre-war poetic triad. A theoretician and composer of pure poetry, exclusive and reserved for only a few initiates, a lover of beauty and perfect forms, George kept his distance from reality and the general public. A great traveller and assimilator, in France he discovered the young symbolist school. Although he met and translated its exponents, he was not influenced by them all: very little by Mallarmé and Rimbaud, a lot by Verlaine and Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, and considerably by Baudelaire. When he returned to Germany, he surrounded him-



Gustav Klimt, *Fischblut*, illustration in *Ver Sacrum*, I, 3, 1898

self with a carefully chosen circle of fellow poets: George was their elder brother, a devotee, teacher and lover. The *George-Kreis* published its works in the journal *Pages for Art* (*Blätter für die Kunst*) that was issued regularly from 1892 on. It was in these columns that George diffused his precious, detached poetry - a poetry in which sound, form and energy encompassed in the individual word play a fundamental role, followed later by marmoreal, classical monumentality.

Traces of perfume are to be found in his various collec-

tions, starting with *Algabal* (1892), with its late romantic, symbolist and decadent influences. Constructed around the figure of a sovereign-priest in a late empire of decadence, artifice and absolute counter-nature, *Algabal* is a highly refined celebration of pure form, the autonomy of art and an aestheticism that has reached its furthest borders. Thus, in “My garden needs not air nor warmth” (“Mein garten bedarf nicht luft und nicht wärme”¹⁶) on meadows, fields and flower beds there are “dusty wreaths of almond oils.”¹⁷ Standing out against everything is a huge, unnatural flower of black, hard lava: a black flower that openly copies and negates the blue flower of the Romantics.

Three years later, *The Book of the Hanging Gardens* (*Die Bücher der Hirten- und Preisgedichte, der Sagen und Sänge und der hängenden Gärten*) contains the famous poem “The Lord of the Island” (“Der Herr der Insel”) in which the bird-poet,¹⁸ on his island of gold and spices in the southern seas comes to the beach at dusk and “in the cool breeze of salt and seaweed”¹⁹ attracts the dolphins with his song.

The collection *The Year of the Soul* (*Das Jahr der Seele*) from 1897 – divided into four cycles, one for each season – features some true poetry, one that is full of symbols, music and evocation. George goes beyond aestheticism, which is as precious as it is empty, and follows an elegiac line that produces authentic results, despite occasionally losing itself in twirls. The autumn cycle *After the Harvest* (*Nach der Lese*) begins with the poem “Come to the park they say is dead” (“Komm in den totgesagten park”). There are no explicit olfactory sensations here but rather a series of colours and images that evokes them: the blue of the clouds, a dull yellow, the light grey of the birches, the last roses that have not yet withered and the purple of the vines.²⁰

The reference in “Let us stroll around the pond” (“Umkreisen wir den stillen teich”), on the other hand, is clear, with shrivelled leaves that emanate a light, new perfume, as if it were spring.

Another is in “We won’t walk in the park today” (“Wir werden heute nicht zum garten gehen”) with its opening “An odour rising on the breeze”²¹ heralding the approach of winter. Further on, in “In the ascendant year there laughs for you” (“Es lacht in dem steigenden jahr dir”), the smell of the year that is coming to an end interweaves ivy leaves in the hair.²²

Three years later, at the beginning of the new century *The Tapestry of Life* (*Der Teppich des Lebens*) was published, marking the beginning of George’s classic phase. He overcomes, or at least believes he has, the art of nerves, the symbolic and floral, and instead delves into an architectural, monumental poetry that is often rigid. A sort of writing that no longer alludes to something but contains a secret message that only the poet understands, transmitting it to a chosen few: a remote place of being exists, a primordial territory that sends uninterrupted signals that are perceived by poetry. And as time goes by, more and more often this territory will be the Germanic civilisation. This marks the beginning of the esoteric and oracular phase that is destined to more obscure developments.

The sense of smell is present in both phases in many areas of *The Tapestry*, some more direct than others. In the first of the twenty-four poems of the *Prologue* (*Vorspiel*), an angel is at the door, surrounded by roses, with a wreath of lilies in its hand, and fingers like almond trees in bloom: all the poet has to do is moisten his face in this floral glory.²³ In “Primeval Landscape” (“Urlandschaft”) the first father and first mother are preparing the land for the progeny to come: the poet senses the lineage “in the odour of the clod,”²⁴ subtle for him, disquieting for us.

The years that come after *The Tapestry* are the darkest season: a descending parabola, with inspiration that is increasingly clouded by murky evocations of a secret Germany and dark prophesies of grandeur.

Now let us look at Hugo von Hofmannsthal; he had already



Arnold Böcklin, *Idyll*, 1866. Zurich, Kunsthaus

been immensely popular in Viennese cafés when he was just seventeen, in particular at the Griensteidl, a traditional venue in the Austrian *fin de siècle*. Overnight Hofmannsthal became the most original poet of the entire, electrified *Jungwien*, “the young Vienna.” The ephebic delicacy of this *enfant prodige*, who signed his perfect poems with the name Loris, enchanted the whole city. Refined and hypersensitive, a citizen of imperial Vienna and therefore also of Europe, he stopped writing poetry at the age of twenty-five when he had already become a myth. Like Rimbaud, but with less furore. His early poetry marks one of the climaxes of German Symbolism.

His lyric poetry is highly polished, sad with perfect musicality even if linguistically traditional. Hofmannsthal is probably the symbolist who had the closest ties with Romanticism, and not just regarding language: the romantic influence is also evident

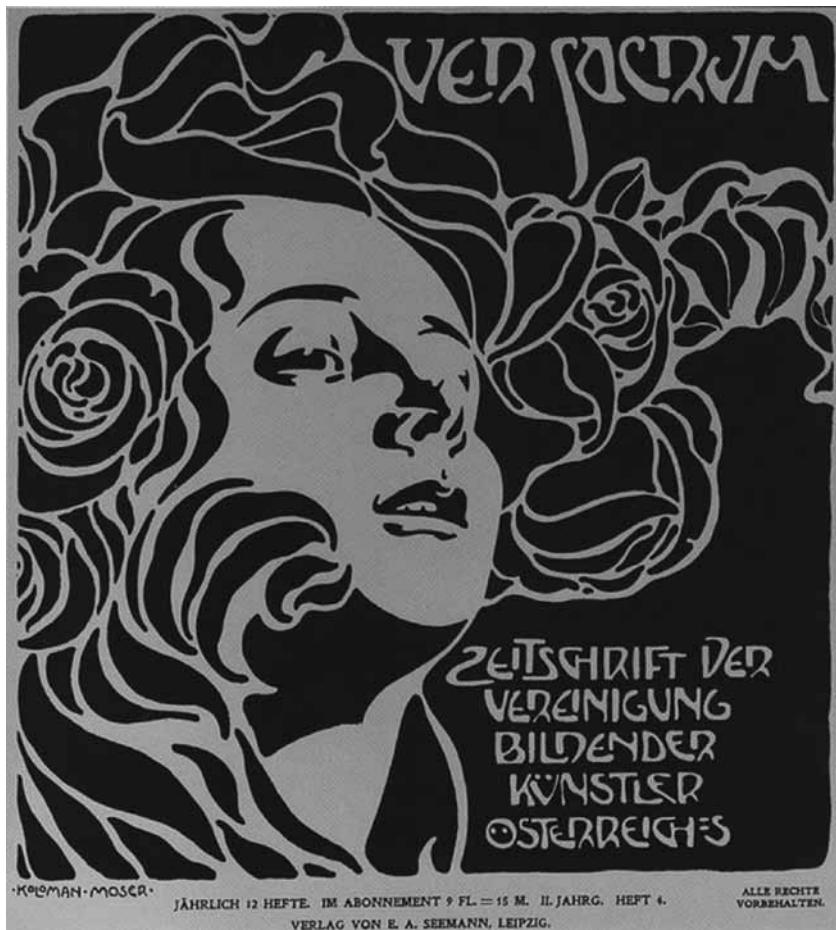
in his themes. For example, pre-existence was invented by him but is basically a romantic trickle. It is an impersonal and fluid life, circulating in the world and prior to any identification, or a generalised past in which dreams belong to everyone. One must revert to childhood if one is to grasp this background, to merely sense it, and to re-experience one's past in the present: it is only through a child's eyes that one sees things as they really are, only a child preserves the indistinct memory of earlier dreams and lives. Like a child, like a delicate, hyper-sensitive poet, like an aesthete. The poet-aesthete-child is able to rediscover the passage to pre-existence. But it is a matter of instances, experiences that take place in flashes, flickers of a being that can only be communicated through figures and sounds.

Hence Symbolism, hence evocative words, hence musicality. These are all instruments that open the depths of reality towards the expanse of the pre-existing. In the sound-symbolic game of this light, immaterial language, the sensorium also has its rightful space. The sense of smell can also open the door onto the indistinct, making the depths of life flash for a moment.

Traces are to be found in his early poetry. Starting with the famous "Early Spring" ("Vorfrühling"), where the wind races down bleak avenues, agitating acacia flowers and bearing perfume.²⁵ In "Experience" ("Erlebnis"), in a valley submerged in the fragrances of dusk, flowers are showing their bleak red chalices and walking along one "smells /the scent of the lilac bushes."²⁶ In *Before Day* (*Vor Tag*), with its wake of pre-existence, night colours dawn, everything reawakens and "in the barn / the young cow now flares its mighty nostrils."²⁷

And later on in "The Young Man in the Landscape" ("Der Jüngling in der Landschaft"), an autobiographical song in which the poet walks through a garden to go and meet children playing and when passing smells "the strong scent of the weak flowers in spring."²⁸ Further examples are to be found in "The Ship's Cook"

(“Schiffskoch”) who, huddled under the lamp, is rummaging amongst “sweet, sharp odours,”²⁹ in “Christmas” (“Weihnacht”) where the night bells evoke childhood and the “pine-cone scented hair,”³⁰ in “A Boy” (“Ein Knabe”) where this poet-child is at one with the world and reflected in it like Narcissus amidst shells and “the scent of hyacinths.”³¹ These are all examples of his subtle, tender poetry in which sensations go from one to the other.



Kolo Moser, *Mädchenkopf*, front page of the magazine *Ver Sacrum*, II, 4, 1899

The Symbolist season comes to an end at the beginning of the new century and a rift appears in Hofmannsthal's production: the artist discovers he has lost his voice. His inexorable flow of writing dries up. After such prolific, fluid flows of poetry, he no longer has any words. They collapse in his mouth, are deprived of meaning, and no longer have any connection to things. This crisis, which he describes in *A Letter* (*Ein Brief*), the famous letter of Lord Chandos in 1902, marks a turning point. Other things are yet to come, numerous and very different.

The transition from Hofmannsthal to Rainer Maria Rilke is natural with the latter's acute, rampant sensitivity. Rilke exposes himself to sensations, allowing them to assail him, go through him. And it is with the precision of a diamond that he then records these sensations, each and every oscillation. Recorded and associated: a maestro of synesthesia, he is probably unrivalled in German literature.

The sensations that Rilke brings together are not transparent, in the form of clear states of the soul; on the contrary, they gather into symbols that are hard to interpret. They are like hieroglyphics asking to be deciphered but ultimately obstructing any attempt. But this flow of impressions and instantaneous transformations do not create a sense of anguish as in Hoffmannsthal's work: the early Rilke blocks the impressions in his poetry; he dominates them as a sovereign. The ease with which he writes and a creativity that gushes forth are powerful tools and he uses them with sound mastery. His poetry, the early works in particular, contain and express everything in an endless happiness of expression that embraces the whole universe. There is no crisis, no fracture, no anguish for a reality that cannot be perceived or if it does, only for fleeting moments. In Rilke's early works everything is light and speakable, in a festive fusion with objects where music and words share the space, often tumbling into the volutes and sinuosity of *Jugendstil*. An uncontested mastery of the senses: the

sense of hearing, taste, and smell more than sight. Sight, which outlines and severs objects by detaching them from one another, is overcome by the erotic and indiscriminate flow of the sounds, colours, and perfumes that Rilke was overwhelmed by. And this constant flow is transformed into both writing and melody.

Rilke met the sculptor Auguste Rodin on 2 September 1902 and stayed with him for four years. It was in his workshop that he learnt to see. And this apprenticeship was transformed into writing, in the two-year period with *New Poems* (*Neue Gedichte*). Now his writing is no longer linked to the miraculous moment of inspiration with wave-like fluidity, but rather understood as a discipline and a trade. Like manacles to be tamed.

Rilke sculpts his flitting sensitivity and becomes an observer: first observer and then a portrayer of things in their essence of a body and volume, division and separateness. These are the things that crowd his *New Poems*. Here, in theory at least, he takes his leave of Impressionism and melody. In theory, though, because in *New Poems*, Rilke borders on the blunt and dry in exiguous spaces, surrounding them with formal perfection. And with a refined technique. There is also an equal happiness that comes from his looking inside things, penetrating them. In the same way that things pierced his soul in his early works, just the other way round. A sensuality of embracing and penetrating still prevails, although Rilke will gradually leave it behind him. In the collections that come after *New Poems*, Rilke will travel down the last stretch of an impassable road that curbs talent and limits the Olympic supremacy of the word. His poetry will lose all its sensuality rejecting any kind of tenderness while objects will lose their materiality, becoming instead abstract symbols, almost as if they were mathematical formula. This is the evolution of Rilke's work, in a synthesis that takes no account of its complexity, but frames the content.³²

Perfumes abound in Rilke's works. With the exception of

Malte, in which the sense of smell (more often unpleasant than pleasant) is given ample room and helps convey the confusing violence of Paris, Rilke's lyrical corpus has the sense of smell to thank for many images, especially but not only in his early, smooth verses.

Examples include cascades of roses in *Early Poems (Frühe Gedichte)* published in 1909, and a wealth of perfumes: shoots, vines, winds, mandarins, and, of course, roses. The undisputed power of the word over things and floral style in abundance. His three books of the *Book of Hours (Stundenbuch)* also offer a profusion of fragrances such as cyclamens, almonds, amber and sandalwood.

In the *New Poems* from 1907 (the second part was published in 1908), room is also made for smells: the perfume floating in Abishag's³³ biblical room, the perfume coming from the bedside table in "A Faded Woman" ("Eine Welke");³⁴ above all, in "Persian Heliotrope" ("Persisches Heliotrop"), interwoven with synaesthesia, with "the fragrant vowels' raised violet" "perfuming all the silent four-post bed"³⁵ and the stars that "blend [...] / silence with cinn'mon and vanilla scent"³⁶ or in "Pink Hydrangea" ("Rosa Hortensie"), where the colours go from one to another and evaporate in perfumes that will be gathered by angels (683). *The Sonnets to Orpheus (Sonette an Orpheus)* from 1923 offer us the example of the triumphant rose in splendour in "Rose, you majesty" ("Rose, du thronende"), the perfume of which is immobile in the air and "has been calling its sweetest names / in our direction, for hundreds of years"³⁷ while we do not even know what to call it.

There are also countless poems that are not part of collections, such as the beauty that Narcissus exhales, dense "like the scent from heliotrope"³⁸ or the "lime tree fragrance"³⁹ that the lovers inhale in "Birth of Love" ("Liebesanfang"). Another magnificent example is the poem "The Scent" ("Der Duft"), which

he wrote in 1907-1908 in Paris and Capri. Perfume is treated succinctly: origin unknown, its nature “incomprehensible [...]”⁴⁰ and its arrival unexpected. As immaterial as music and, like music, as elusive as sight. Capable, moreover, of blinding the other senses, of making the distant come closer and of throwing open the spaces of imagination and memory.

The paths that the sense of smell opens up in German literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are ramified and concurrent and a lot remains to be said about them. For example, in Arthur Schnitzler’s works, fragrances accompany the description of objects and places, discretely but without fail. While in Thomas Mann’s early works of note are the smells of life and death that imbue *Buddenbrooks*, where the sense of smell becomes even keener as the protagonists become sicker and sicker. Another example is the novella he wrote in 1906 but published later, *The Blood of the Walsungs* (*Wälzungenblut*), where an aesthetics of smells sets the scene for incest between two twins.

Other lesser known writings also deserve mention: in the poetry collections *Neurotica* and *Sensationen* by the Viennese writer Felix Dörmann, it is the fragrances of laurel, violet and lavender that mark the time of Viennese *décadence*; then there is *Heimatkunst*, writings of a local nature in which smells are used to cure the ills of *décadence* with the candour of the old and healthy German ballad. This takes us to the rural pride of Lulu von Strauß and Torney and Börries von Münchhausen’s historical evocations, ending with the first steps of the new Expressionist movement, where the sense of smell perforates its opposite, resulting in the wreckage of beauty and its ruin in the miasma of the cities. But this is not the place for such things.

Let us conclude by going back to Rilke. The abundance of fragrances in his works, his keen sense of smell, did not escape parodic imitations. In December 1975 the one hundredth anniversary of his birth was celebrated with considerable, varied

solemnity. The Austrian writer Ernst Jandl, a word wizard and experimenter with words prepared a poem cycle for the occasion called *The Usual Rilke* (*Der gewöhnliche Rilke*) with a passage entitled “rilkes nose” (“rilkes nase”⁴¹). Let us end our journey with Rilke’s all-powerful nose, with a light-hearted note that is not out of place: “entrance and exit / of the air / it knew / stench / scent/ aroma / handkerchief / sniffles.”⁴²

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise specified, quotations from the original are translated by C. Cawthra.
- 2 Although it is not named, fragrance runs through Mignon's famous song "Do you know the land where the lemons bloom" ("Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn"), reawakening the desire for far off countries.
- 3 ("köstlicher Geruch") in *Henry of Ofterdingen: A Romance*.
- 4 Cf. "Odours such as these revive me" in *The Songs and Ballads of Uhland* 52.
- 5 ("Der Flieder duftet") http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=5226
- 6 ("Frühlingsdufte") in FERRIS 129.
- 7 ("Süsse, wohlbekannte Düfte") in GRAVES n.p.
- 8 "Resedaduft," MÖRIKE 146.
- 9 Cf. PLATEN 94-5.
- 10 Cf. STORM 12.
- 11 ("Wirbeln wir den Staub der Strassen / Allen Kranken in die Nasen") *The Gay Science*, 375.
- 12 ("Die beste Luft schnüffelnd, / Paradieses-Luft wahrlich") in *Dionysus-Dithyrambs* <http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/works-pub/dd/dd.htm>
- 13 ("mit Nüstern geschwellt gleich Beichern") in *Dionysus-Dithyrambs* <http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/works-pub/dd/dd.htm>
- 14 "Bricht mit starkem Fluegel / Der Reiher durch die Nebelduft," PAOLI 69.
- 15 ("Ein Duft von Tau entweicht der warmen Erde") <http://www.poemswithoutfrontiers.com/Sommerabend.html>
- 16 George never used capital letters for nouns in his poetry; he also had his own, highly personal use of punctuation.
- 17 "Und staubige dünste der mandelöle," PAOLI 185.
- 18 The evocation of Baudelaire's image of the *Albatross* is clear.
- 19 ("Im kühlen windeschauch von salz und tang" SANTAGOSTINI 186) in BURNSHAW 125.
- 20 Cf. PAOLI 188-90.

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| 21 | (“Dies leichte duften oder leise wehen”) in FORSTER 79. | 34 | Cf. RILKE, <i>Poesie</i> 619. |
| 22 | Cf. SANTAGOSTINI 44-6. | 35 | (“Aus der Vokale wachem Violett / hindüftend durch das stille Himmelbett” in <i>Le poesie</i> , 679). http://www.thebeckoning.com/poetry/rilke/rilke.html |
| 23 | Cf. IBID. 55. | | |
| 24 | (“In der scholle zeugendem geruch”) in STRATHAUSEN 244. | | |
| 25 | Cf. <i>Canto di vita</i> 18. | | |
| 26 | (“Riecht / den Duft der Fließerbüsché”) http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/de/Hofmannsthal,_Hugo_von-1874/Erlebnis/en/32750-Experience | 36 | (“mischen die Stille mit Vanille und Zimt”) http://www.thebeckoning.com/poetry/rilke/rilke.html |
| 27 | “Nun streckt / die junge Kuh im Stall die starken Nüstern” in IBID. 23. | 37 | (“Seit Jahrhunderten ruft uns dein Duft”) The poem is called “Narcissus” (“Narziß”) in <i>The Duino Elegies</i> 145. |
| 28 | (“Starke[n] Duft der schwachen Frühlingsblumen”) in <i>The Lyrical Poems of Hugo von Hofmannsthal</i> 41. | 38 | (“wie der Duft vom Heilotrop”) in <i>Uncollected Poems</i> 59. |
| 29 | “Süß- und scharfe[n] Düfte[n]” in <i>The Lyrical Poems of Hugo von Hofmannsthal</i> 45. | 39 | “Duft der Linden,” in RILKE, <i>Poesie</i> 245. |
| 30 | “Mit tannenduftigem Haar” <i>Canto di Vita</i> 87. | 40 | “Unbegreiflich [...]” in RILKE, <i>Poesie</i> 181. |
| 31 | “Der Duft der Hyazinthen” from the poem “A Boy” [Ein Knabe] in MARTENS 135. | 41 | In both Jandl and George's works, nouns are written in lower case. |
| 32 | Giuliano Baioni's essay offers an excellent overview of Rilke's development. “Rainer Maria Rilke. La musica e la geometria” (Rilke, IX-LXXIV). | 42 | (“rilkes nase // eingang und ausgang / kannte sie / ges-tank / geruch / duft / taschen-tuch / schnupfen”) https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/detail/89725 . |
| 33 | Cf. RILKE, <i>Poesie</i> 463. | | |

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PERFUME IN THE AMERICAN DECADENT MOVEMENT

JAMES HUNEKER'S "THE EIGHTH DEADLY SIN"

Simone Francescato

The cultural history of perfume in the United States needs to be interpreted against the backdrop of the myth of democratic exceptionalism that characterized the nation from its very beginning. Starting with the achievement of its independence at the end of the eighteenth century, the country asserted itself as a bastion against the moral corruption of the *ancien régime* and the aristocratic lifestyle. The ideology of the 'classless society' and 'upward mobility' shunned, at least theoretically, the divisionist symbols that fuelled the rigid division and impermeability of the European social classes. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, when an authochthonous beauty industry also began to spread in America,¹ perfumes as well as clothing and other objects meant for beautifying the body were regarded with suspicion; they were seen as superfluities that somehow restricted and conditioned individual expression.

In those years those American writers and artists who drew inspiration from European movements such as Aestheticism and the Decadent Movement, had no choice but to disagree with this kind of vision. Rejecting the Puritan vision, which disapproved of sensual experience and was still highly influential at the time, and also worried about the advance of an increasingly pragmatic and narrow-minded Capitalism, these artists sought inspiration from the European cultural tradition believing it to be an antidote capable of saving the country from the monstrosities of modernity. As the scholar David Weir rightly observed, what they had in

common was their determination to slow down, if not actually sabotage, the process of modernisation that was taking place in the United States, by cultivating and spreading artistic and sensual elegance.² This is why they were attracted by any theory, linked to social Darwinism and the pseudo-scientific paradigm of atavism, that postulated the persistence or return of self-destructive drives in the society and culture of that period, such as the ones formulated by the famous Hungarian sociologist Max Nordau in his book *Entartung* (1892).³ These theories tended to interpret some of the new phenomena, such as the greater visibility and presence of minorities of gender, sex and class in social life, and the diffusion of more disinhibited and consumer-related lifestyles, as dangerous regressions.

Similar to those who reverted to Naturalism, these writers studied the unstable border between rationality and instinct in ways that went beyond, for example, the canons of moral realism of an optimist and appeasing kind as preached by influential authors such as William Dean Howells.⁴ The reassessment of the sense of smell played a key role in this project in as much as from Darwin on, it was considered the most archaic of the senses, and thus the one that was closest to the animal-like and irrational dimension of man.⁵

It was probably James Gibbon Huneker⁶ who was most fascinated by the subversive potential of olfaction. Two of his tales focus heavily on the subject, “Nosophilia: A Nordau Heroine,” which appeared in the magazine *M’lle New York* in 1895, and “The Eighth Deadly Sin,” from the 1905 collection *Visionaries*. The first tale, conceived as a parody of Nordau’s ideas, is about a woman who, after reading Huysmans *À rebours* (1884), is overcome with a mad passion for smells which makes her neglect her husband completely, up to the point of regressing atavistically so much as to turn into a sort of human animal. Critics interpreted this transformation as a parody of the negative effects of the mate-

realistic drives in post-Darwinian modernity on the male-female relationship, and on women in particular.⁷

The second tale, greatly appreciated by the renowned critic H. L. Mencken, who described it as the only paean dedicated to perfume in the English language,⁸ is based on a ‘vision,’ on an olfactory hallucination undergone by a New Yorker dandy. As is the case with the other tale, this one also plays on the anxieties of the time as regards degeneration and atavism; however, what it stands out for is its unique reflection on perfume as the greatest of all arts. It is structured in three, clearly distinct parts narrated in the third person, and analysed below.

Entitled “The Sermon,” the first part introduces us to the thoughts of Irving Baldur,⁹ a New York aesthete who hears a sermon on the seven cardinal sins, one spring evening. Disgusted by the vulgarity surrounding him and overcome with a permanent nostalgia for Paris, which he regards as his spiritual homeland, Baldur tries to satisfy his constant desire for new, exotic sensations by seeking refuge in a Catholic church and by watching the rites being celebrated there. However, for him there is absolutely no difference between a church and a mosque: the “morbidezza” of the spirit, called “Kef” by Muslims and the Catholics’ “pious ecstasy” (24) are similar, in that both represent something that is far removed from the narrow-minded everyday reality of American cities.

From the very beginning of the tale, a phenomenon typical of late 19th-century aestheticism and decadence emerges: a fracture with the consequent transfer of emphasis from the signified to the signifier. Sitting close to the beautiful pulpit with its marble engravings, Baldur seems to be less interested in the content of the sermon; instead he “idly wonder[s]” (23) why nearly all the words that describe the seven sins are monosyllabic, while those describing the virtues are polysyllabic (“the sins were, with few ex-

ceptions, words of one syllable, while those of the virtues were all longer” *ibid.*).¹⁰ In these monosyllables he finds something that is more intense and primordial than in the words describing the virtues, as their polysyllabic nature makes them seem a sort of impoverished derivative, a secondary creation that evokes norms and conventions.

Baldur’s idle reflection has a profoundly defiling function because it takes place whilst listening to the liturgy, almost as if to demolish its function of moral orientation towards what is good.

The aesthete sees mass as a mundane occasion, devoid of any sacred meaning, which involves the rich and poor in an exhibitionist and voyeuristic game in which odours play a fundamental role (“The smell of poverty was mingled with the heavy scents of fashionable women” 25). Interested not in the slightest in what is being preached, the rich take advantage of the occasion to show off their “attitudes of superior boredom” (*ibid.*) while the poor tend to find “bitter consolation” (*ibid.*) in being able to admire, albeit furtively, the elegance of the more fortunate and indolent.

This defilement reaches its peak when Baldur perceives the delicate scent of iris, the most “episcopal” (*ibid.*) of all perfumes, which he immediately associates with the presence of a priest, or a beautiful lady. Here, however, the scent is coming from a rather insignificant woman, who stands out amongst the worshippers only because of the particular fragrance she seems to be emanating. It is interesting to observe how, throughout the entire nineteenth century the perfume of both the iris and the rose was associated with virginity and purity of the soul. However, the woman attracting Baldur’s attention does not correspond in the slightest to a young virgin girl with a pure soul; on the contrary, her physical features show a toughness that seems to challenge the spiritual atmosphere of the place. The woman in question is neither slender nor beautiful; her age is indefinable and her hairstyle is decidedly masculine. There is not even anything special about

her face, and it seems to be more reminiscent of a “stern mask” (26). In the aesthete’s consciousness, the gradual substitution of the priest’s figure with that of the woman, whose physical features are already an expression of oppressive (but mysterious and fascinating) materialism, is the explicit sign of Baldur’s ‘apostasy,’ which distances itself from the *logos* of the divine word to follow the non-verbal suggestions of the senses.

The attraction the unknown woman exerts on the protagonist is as strong as it is incomprehensible. Slightly wandering and as magical as Eleonora Duse’s, “her eyes [are] symbols of a soul-state, of a rare emotion, not of sex, nor yet sexless [and her] pupils [seem] powdered with a strange iridescence” (27). There is nothing of the *coquette* or the *cocotte* about her, but she has a magnetism that involves sensuality and intellect in an unheard-of synthesis of nuances that easily take hold of the aesthete’s neurotic and highly sensitive temperament.

The first part of the tale ends with the priest reading a passage from the *Psalms*, which seems to alert the protagonist to the dangerous illusions of the senses.

In the second part, “The Séance,” the scene moves from the church – a metaphor of spiritual elevation – first to the streets of New York and then down to a cellar in a house near Madison Avenue – a metaphor of the moral degradation looming over the protagonist. This part revolves around the dialogue between Baldur and the woman who smelled of iris, Mrs. Lilith Whistler,¹¹ who turns out to be a renowned medium with telepathic talents. It is interesting to note that she bears the name of Adam’s ‘first’ wife in the ancient Hebrew traditions, Lilith – the one who was not shaped from a rib like Eve, but who existed before the creation of the first male on the earth. Being the firstborn, Lilith is a figure that is not subject to the symbolic linguistic regime of patriarchal tradition, and instead belongs to the sphere of the non-verbal un-

consciousness associated with the cults of the matriarchy that was a source of such fascination for writers at the end of the century.¹²

Revived in nineteenth-century literature and iconography by writers such as Goethe, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Collier, in those years – and also later in the twentieth century – the mythical figure of Lilith became a symbol of female emancipation and of the so-called ‘New Woman;’ the latter embodied the ideal of an intelligent, free and independent female that was to become so popular from the eighteen nineties on, on both sides of the Atlantic.

In addition, Mrs. Lilith also had the same surname as the famous painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), who was not only a great moderniser and promoter of the transition from Realism to Impressionism in painting at the end of the century, but also a key figure in Anglo-American Aestheticism. In short, in the tale this mysterious woman seems to emerge like the incarnation of a subversive modernity that is striving to overturn tradition, restoring everything that society and culture have neglected and repressed; in other words, the dimension of the material and sensorial universe that cannot be expressed with words.

The conversation between Mrs Whistler and Baldur – which is almost like a short treatise on the ideology and aesthetics of the Decadent Movement in the late nineteenth century in the form of a dialogue – begins with a clarification of the woman’s particular talent. Denying the existence of the supernatural, Mrs Whistler explains to her interlocutor that her powers are “super-normal” (29) and what is usually called “the spirit [is] ... the material masquerading in a different guise” (*ibid.*). Mrs Whistler’s materialist credo makes her demolish the concept of sin: “I don’t believe in sin at all” (30), and affirm the inanity of a distinction between good and evil. For her, and for many others, too, going to church is just a way to relax, whilst “a bad conscience is the result of poor digestion” (*ibid.*).

In the same way that there is no good or evil, there is no difference between black and white magic, or between a moral and an immoral art. Mrs Whistler scorns Baldur's simplistic, elitist conceptions of art as an elevation, and of vice as a brutification. Could this aesthete's literary passion not be a little edifying and not particularly 'patriotic' form of vice,¹³ just like the alcoholism he so much despises in others? This confusion, Mrs Whistler claims, stems from the fact that in a modern society that is obsessed with profit and consumption, the arts have been deprived of their main characteristic, which is basically that of being of no use: "All great art should be useless" (35). The impoverishment of the arts finds its epigone less in the exploitation, than in the negation, – the abeyance (36) – of the finest of the senses, the sense of smell, as well as of the most refined of the arts, perfume. Having been relegated to oblivion instead of having been subjugated for practical or pseudo-moral purposes (such as in the kitchen, used for the healthy sustenance of the body¹⁴), this art thus presents itself as the one that can vindicate all the others, since it is the only one to have survived the utilitarian collapse of the aesthetic sphere. In Mrs Whistler's words, the anti-bourgeois rhetoric of Aestheticism and the Decadent Movement blended with a more careful aesthetic reassessment of the olfactory sphere, which seems to anticipate theories that are much closer to us, such as Alain Corbin's; the latter believes that, ideally at least, perfume could have an extremely high subversive potential. Being a volatile substance that is dispersed and disappears, perfume could actually be a symbol of a dilapidation that is intolerable for the logic of accumulation that dominates the capitalist and consumerist society.¹⁵

According to Mrs Whistler, what makes the sense of smell the most 'aesthetic' of all the senses, and perfume the most powerful of the arts, is the evocative power that allows them to produce sensations that are both specific and vague, reconciling the particular and universal. The body part delegated with this kind of

art is not only (or so much) the nose, but rather memory. The direct connection between olfaction and memory is also the “secret of spiritual correspondences” that makes it possible to reduce the distance that civilisation has imposed between men (“Memory is a supreme factor in this art... It is also the secret of spiritual correspondences – it plays the great role of bridging space between human beings” 36-7). In the same way that perfume is able to trigger memory, the latter, if stimulated appropriately, is also able to evoke perfumes. The fragrance of iris that Baldur had smelled earlier in the church, Mrs Whistler explains, was actually the fruit of an evocation she had caused: it was therefore not a real perception but an extraordinary case of olfactive hallucination.

Mrs Whistler offers to show Baldur an ‘artificial paradise’ that will confirm both everything she has said so far and the potential of perfume as a ‘new’ art endowed with its own scientific dignity. In a basement that is not in the slightest esoteric and looks more like a “physician’s office” (34), she therefore takes a cup and mixes the contents of a dozen phials. When Baldur asks ironically, almost amused, whether there is a formula to accompany this bizarre rite, Lilith replies, reciting several disenchanting and decidedly atheistic lines from “The City of the Dreadful Night” (1870-73), a famous work by the Scottish poet James V. Thomson, one of the key exponents of the European Decadent Movement.¹⁶ These lines, which describe the austere gait of a disillusioned, melancholic man in the inferno of a modern metropolis, juxtapose with the priest’s words at the end of the first part of the tale, accompanying Baldur in the abyss of an overwhelming experience.

The third and last part of the tale, “The Circle of Candles,” stages the powerful effect of the aromatic mixture that Mrs Whistler has prepared for poor Baldur. Unlike the coils of the smoke of incense that guide the believers’ souls to God, purifying them,¹⁷

in him this mixture provokes a sort of sensorial withdrawal: although vigilant and aware of the reality around him, he perceives the interior of his brain like a melancholic, illuminated cathedral.¹⁸ His consciousness therefore begins to be inundated with fragrances and perfumes without causing stupefaction, but rather an intensification of his aesthetic faculties, making him experience synaesthesia, mixing not only fragrances and visions, but also, and above all, smells and sounds.

Below is a brief passage that shows the virtuosity with which Huneker is able to dramatise the protagonist's vertigo, and exemplifies his 'panoramic' prose, as the scholar Arnold T. Schwab called it, as it is able to create "highly colored, richly textured catalogues of sound-evoking odors" (54):

A mingling of tuberoses, narcissus, attar of roses, and ambergris he detected in the air – as *triste* as a morbid nocturne of Chopin. This was followed by a blending of heliotrope, moss-rose, and hyacinth, together with dainty touches of geranium. He dreamed of Beethoven's manly music when whiffs of apple-blossom, white rose, cedar, and balsam reached him. Mozart passed roguishly by in strains of scarlet pimpernel, mignonette, syringa, and violets. Then the sky was darkened with Schumann's perverse harmonies as jasmine, lavender, and lime were sprayed over him. Music, surely, was the art nearest akin to odour. (38-9)

Huneker, who was also a passionate and competent music, theatre and art critic, soundly believed in the possibility and need for the arts to merge, as did Mrs Whistler.¹⁹ One can see in this extract how he used perfume to perceive and transmit the essentiality of the music of great composers. Unlike the others, the olfactory metaphor would be particularly suited to express such a fusion in that it is intrinsically multisensorial, able, in other words, to activate memories and non-verbal sensations generated

by all the senses, including sight, touch, and hearing,²⁰ just like real perfumes. This characteristic would not only justify the inclusion of perfume in the arts,²¹ but would also mean that it is superior to the others.

Huneker therefore appears to be moving against an olfactophobic tradition, as exemplified by philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, and towards positions that are closer to the *fin-de-siècle* vitalist theories such as those of Nietzsche and Bergson.²² Moreover, the accumulation and display of combinations of fragrances and essences in the text produce an ekphrastic effect following and developing olfactively what was a typical convention in decadent fiction, as for example in Huysmans' *À rebours*, or Wilde's *Dorian Gray*.

In the tale, this strange symphony of olfactive evocations then flows into the chaotic vision of a procession that unites Dionysian rites and the witches' Sabbath, preparing for the arrival of a "Black Venus" whose face will be that of the real Lilith, daughter of the ancient snake, and her successive incarnations, such as the enchantress Aenothea, priestess of torture and forbidden pleasures (Oenothea in Petronius' *Satyricon*).

These apparitions trigger in the protagonist iconographic memories of painters he calls "satanic," such as Brueghel, Böcklin, Rops and Stuck.

The terrifying creature thus urges Baldur to abandon all hope and enter her satanic kingdom ("Despair, and you will be welcomed!" 42), but with great will power and clutching a small gold cross in his hands, he is able to dissipate the smoke of the vision. Smiling at him in pity, the medium then lets him go.

The tale returns to the initial scene of the sermon, to the moment when the priest is talking about the evil of perfume. Baldur can still smell a scent of iris in the air and turns around, only to see the mysterious woman staring at him nearby. Wondering whether it had all been a disquieting dream, he wets his fingers in



Franz von Stuck, *Die Sünde [The Sin]*, 1893. Munich, Bavaria, Neue Pinakothek

the baptismal font, asking for forgiveness for his “insane pride of intellect” (43). The priest’s words repeat the names of the seven cardinal sins with a regular, monotonous rhythm, urging the believers to pray. Replying with a solemn “amen,” Baldur seems to join the priest in wanting to banish the ‘eighth’ cardinal sin – perfume – from the regime of the *logos* and conception; perfume is therefore once again relegated to a merely ‘visionary’ dimension – the one that granted the protagonist the chance to sin, without actually sinning.²³

And it is precisely this inexpressibility of perfume,²⁴ the manner in which it eludes the capability of human symbolisation so that its mechanisms can sometimes be meddled with, that generates this elegant and perverse game of metaphors, periphrases and evocations that the Decadent aesthete appreciated so much, and that has become an example of supreme art in this tale.

Notes

- 1 Cf. FARR 133-4.
- 2 Cf. WEIR XIII.
- 3 For more about the differences of the ‘degenerative’ theories in European and American circles, cf. IBID. 6-11.
- 4 Cf. IBID. 19.
- 5 Cf. CLASSEN, HOWES, SYNNOTT 89-90.
- 6 A friend of George Moore, Joseph Conrad and Theodore Dreiser, Huneker (1857-1921) was one of the founders of the American Decadent Movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Together with Vance Thompson (1863-1925) he founded *Mlle New York* (1895), one of the movement’s most important journals, contributing to the diffusion in America of European literature, French in particular, from the end of the century. He was an esteemed music and art critic who wrote for the paper *The New York Sun*.
- 7 For more about this tale cf. WEIR 45-6 and SEITLER 237-9.
- 8 Mencken mentions it in *The Book of Prefaces* (cf. WEIR 155). For Mencken Huneker was a model and mentor.
- 9 This character offers a first version of the protagonist of the mostly autobiographical tale, *Painted Veils* published in 1920. Cf. SCHWAB 154.
- 10 For example, the monosyllabic ones include *pride*, *lust*, *sloth*, or *envy*, while the virtues include *humility*, *meekness*, *temperance* and so on.
- 11 Huneker’s inspiration for this character came from a true experience he had with the famous medium Leonora Piper (1857-1950), according to a letter he wrote to Conrad (cf. SCHWAB 153). Renowned for her telepathic powers, Piper attracted the interest of people such as William James and the Society for Psychical Research in the eighteen eighties; cf. TYMN.
- 12 For example, novels such as *One That Wins* (1887) by

- Mona Caird and *Lilith: A Romance* (1896) by George MacDonald.
- 13 Cf. HUNEKER 1905, 32.
- 14 Cf. IBID. 35.
- 15 Cf. Corbin qtd. in MUNIER 122.
- 16 The fourth verse of the poem: “As I came through the desert thus it was, / As I came through the desert: Lo you there, / That hillock burning with a brazen glare; / Those myriad dusky flames with points aglow / Which writhed and hissed and darted to and fro; / A Sabbath of the serpents, heaped pell-mell / For Devil’s roll-call and some fete in Hell: / Yet I strode on austere; / No hope could have no fear.” (cit. in HUNEKER 1905, 37).
- 17 Cf. MUNIER 66.
- 18 Cf. HUNEKER 1905, 38.
- 19 Huneker admired the painter Whistler greatly and regarded him as the perfect example of a fusion of the arts, as one can read in *Promenades*, HUNEKER 1910, 85-6.
- 20 Cf. MUNIER 89.
- 21 The ennoblement of perfume as an art had its founding mo-
- ment in HUYSMANS’*À Rebours [Against the Grain]*, in which he states that “in the science of perfumery, the artist develops the natural odor of the flowers, working over his subject like a jeweler refining the lustre of a gem and making it precious” (170). This theme was then repeated in chapter XI of *Dorian Gray* (1890) by Wilde, when he describes the protagonist’s search for refined olfactory sensations.
- 22 Cf. LE GUÉRER 190-201.
- 23 According to Baldur “the immoralist”, (43) as he himself is described in the final lines of the tale, resorting to the Catholic rite itself is only an aesthetic stance: Since there is no sin, there cannot be any true redemption. According to Munier, it was the ‘distance’ that perfume guaranteed that fascinated exponents of the Decadent Movement, cf. 90.
- 24 As Georg Simmel states, for example, there are no words that express smells. This is why one has to resort to words that are generally used for other kinds of sensations. Cf. MUNIER 92.

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GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO'S "VOLUPTUOUS NOSE" EXTRACTS FROM THE LETTERS TO HIS PERFUMER

Pietro Gibellini

When I gave a collection of works the title *D'Annunzio dal gesto al testo* (*D'Annunzio: from his Actions to his Works*) ten years ago, I wanted to express my fundamental indifference or rather distrust, towards excessive attention, and also questionable admiration, for the character at the expense of the writer, the latter being resistant to time. A useful contribution by a D'Annunzio scholar in this publication could have been the study of the sense of smell in the works of the "dilettante di sensazioni" ("amateur of sensations") – as Benedetto Croce called him – as the latter is the least studied of the five senses: the excellent sight of the art lover who describes lines and colours, the acute hearing of the musicophile and sonorous poet, the sober, almost abstemious taster of flavours, the taste and intoxication of ink ... Beginning with a feature on the pleasure of perfumes and on the perfumes in *Il Piacere*, 1899 (*The Pleasure*), the result could be a Proustian interpretation; the starting point would be the role of triggering a memory given to a perfume that Andrea Sperelli smelled – the one Marcel was to attribute to the *madeleines* at the beginning of *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*) – and it would end with the provocative perfume a woman's body leaves on a fur coat. The contrast between the flowers and the perfume of the rose and violet would highlight the differences between the protagonist's lovers: Elena Muti, an unscrupulous and sensual stripper of rose petals, and Maria Ferres, a modest, unhappily-married spiritual who smells of violets. Reflected already in the

name of the mythic Spartan who started the war of Troy and that of the Virgin Mother of Christian civilisation, the antithesis is also revealed on the floral, odorous front: the medieval contrast between the rose, a symbol of splendid, aristocratic grace, and the violet, with its humble, virtuous beauty. This contrast was then used in the diverging ethical and political visions of Pier delle Vigne and Bonvesin de la Riva.

An olfactive path also offers itself when we traverse *Alcyone* (*Halcyon*), D'Annunzio's lyrical masterpiece, evoking an exhilarating journey, from the end of spring to the beginning of autumn, in the summer season of the mythical *géante* with the vigorous limbs "odorate di aliga di rèsina e di alloro" ("scented with resin and laurel," 137) a journey whose stages are marked – also emotively and stylistically – by wafts: those of the "vesti aulenti" ("the fragrance of your dress," 36) in *Sera fiesolana* (*Evening at Fiesole*), and those of the "coccole aulenti" ("scented berries," 68) in *Pioggia nel pineto* (*The rain in the pinewood*), with the sweetish smell of the muddy pond the summer is getting ready to die in. With the outline of this itinerary the poet also reveals his botanic-olfactive skills, for example when he specifies that nut-grass juice of red barbs is "sì caro all'arte dell'aromatario" ("so precious to the working perfumer," *Envoi* 221).¹

Dedicated to olfactive delights and created under the wing of the Venice Museum of Perfume, it is appropriate that this publication looks at D'Annunzio's relationship with perfumes. As Alberto Barbieri wrote, the poet called *Acqua di Fiume* the cologne to which he had given the task of celebrating his epic adventure in the Istrian city of Fiume; similarly, when his friend Giuseppe Visconti di Modrone asked him for a name for a perfume for the Giviemme Firm he had founded, he suggested *Giacinto innamorato*. Once again the Word Wizard was playing on the semantic relationship between the water in a river and a place name, and the myth creator evoked the legendary young boy who Apollo

fell in love with and was transformed into a perfumed flower. In 1921 D'Annunzio did the same with the names for the Lepit company in Bologna, which was at its most successful in the thirties when it produced the *Pro Capillis* lotion in an elegant small bottle; in this case the name was *Profumi del Carnaro*, inspired by the undertaking at Fiume, with the addition of the Latin motto "Cum lenitate asperitas;" with its effective polysemic density, as in other cases, it was perfect to indicate the balance between sweet and bitter in a man's fragrance. In addition, it suggested that virile perceptiveness should be associated with tenderness, to make sure the bellicose spirit did not degrade into barbarism: the poet-soldier and the Fiume chief are thus the heirs of the highly imaginative aesthete – of the Italian-style dandy. Barbieri also writes that the illustrations for the advertising brochure for *Profumi del Carnaro*, and the designs for their labels and bottles (made on Murano) were entrusted to Adolfo De Carolis, the wood-cutter of *Notturno*, whilst the cases were printed in Milan by *Grafiche Baroni*. Advertising was playing on the patriotic feelings that prevailed in the turbulent period between the end of the war and the beginning of the turbulent twenties. The advertising leaflet thus concentrated on the Italian nature of these perfumes, the presentation of which was associated with Italian plant aromas and Italian art, and which might have been imposed or inspired by D'Annunzio: "The *Fumanella*, one of the olfactive creations," "Today the *Violetta di Fiume* is the most perfumed violet in the world: 'Sola mihi redolet.' "*Lauro di Laurana*, faint, fleeting, highly delicate. Laurana: an evocation of glory, for poets: reawakens the memory of two great artists."²

These are names that seem to respond to the phrase in a famous line of the *Fanciullo* in *Halcyon*, "Nature and Art are a two-headed god," a phrase that was also reflected in letters from D'Annunzio, Lord of the Vittoriale,³ to his perfume supplier, Mario Ferrari; in these letters he makes real flowers communi-

cate with the scents in small bottles, ignoring the fact they are not from Italy but mainly from France – which was always his favourite second home, before, during and after his voluntary exile in 1910-1914. Born in Modena, of aristocratic origins and a passionate botany lover, in 1921 Ferrari bought the Gardone pharmacy. It was here that he met D'Annunzio, who also arrived there in the same year after the Fiume enterprise. In addition to medicines, toiletries and food delicacies, he also supplied the demanding recluse from Cagnacco with a deluge of perfumes, as can be seen in the letters published by Elena Ledda, an impassioned, expert D'Annunzio scholar, together with Giulio Ferrari, the pharmacist's son.⁴ Below is a selection that, as a whole, outlines a perfumed itinerary.

Please deliver to M.me Angèle Lager, in my name, a phial of Doctor Landolt's Collyrium (Clor. of cocaine, adrenaline, distilled water – a well-known formula) – with dropper for ophthalmic use.

Russian Eau di Cologne (two large bottles),

Eau dentifrice Dr. Pierre (large bottle) and a box of teeth pâte.

(17 March 1923)

Another three snow-white gardenias! Thank you. Yesterday's remedies helped the person I am looking after. I kindly ask you to give me another two Riègles flacons, for everyday use.

I am returning an old recipe for gargling so you can renew it. Could you please also send me a litre of lotion to rinse irritated gums. Thank you.

Please allow me keep the little boxes with the perfumes until tomorrow because I have not yet finished choosing. Do you still have the Rosine vaporisateurs? Toute la forêt in particular. I am enclosing L. 2,000 advance payment.

I have another request for a piteous case that I will tell you about. My book will be published on the 27: a mystic date. Come and collect



Cover of the brochure *I profumi del Carnaro*, Milan, Grafiche Baroni, 1920, drawings by Adolfo De Carolis. Biblioteca del Vittoriale

a copy and you will find the Vittoriale totally reborn. The book is 672 pages long! And I began it on 21 May. What a “test run” for my brain, after years of military action and, alas, politics!

(17 July 1924)

I have received the delicacies and the two beautiful gardenias that in themselves are testimony to summer. Thank you.

If you have received any other specialities, please send them to me. Come for lunch on Saturday (12.30) and I will show you a convincing document regarding a certain reserve of yours

Please send me some lotion for the gums and two Dr. Boral nasal solutions (two flacons).

I will keep 8 boxes of soaps. I will keep the five hot water bottles.

I need another four large bottles of Colonia Erba. If you have 215 and there are small ones too, please send me two so I can try it. Do you have the mouth rinse Foletto di Ledro I use it for myself and my friends. It is excellent. I always have some. If you have any, send me some today, six or also 12. Thank you.

(4 September 1924)

I have spent days of the greatest sadness and I have lost a great friend and admirable artist: Leon Bakst. Please forgive my delay. As for Caron I created a French-style jeu de mots: the parody of Caro verbum factum est [John 1:14 “The Word became flesh”]: Caro(n) odoranem factum est. Smell became Caron!

I have also lost the new card. Truly the height of untidiness.

Odorarius magister means perfume master. And it is a legitimate title. I have also had to have the rope of the Baiadera lengthened [special fabric in the Apollino del Vittoriale room]! Let's forget stinginess.

I'm sending you 2,000 lire for two flacons; and, if you have one, put the change aside towards it. Extraordinary international experiments [the Ferrari pharmacy was called “Internazionale”]!

(30 December 1924)

If possible could you buy me three boxes of different bonbons (Cova?) and three marrons glacés (Tre Marie?), and three panettoni. I'm enclosing 500 lire. And I'm including another thousand for ten of the usual. The last shipment was perfectly on time; and don't worry. Thank you.

I would be grateful if you could get hold of some Magnesia bisurata, and if you can create a small "Mariani" cellar in the House you are going to buy. Kindest regards (For sure, the pun for Caron is highly refined and thus maybe cryptic!).

(6 January 1925)

The influenza is truly perfidious (thy name is woman, Shakespeare would say) and it has left me restless, irritable and lustless!

Your gardenias are still perfuming the Vittoriale and making it lily-white, to the great vexation of the gardener Vigilio.

Last night at dinner, in the mood for jesting, faced with the recent offer, I recalled that I had once been a modest rhymer.

as solitary and sad as tapeworms are we
in the sinuous, hidden abdomens.

Oh Master of remedies and fragrances,
console us with your gardenias.⁵

Talking about fragrances, I expect the prices of essences to rise once more: even the old ones by Lubin and Guerlain. Send me Prince Albert's cassis. It is pleasant to use. Procure a large amount. Send me some pots of Mousse de fleurs and Reine des crèmes (Lesquendieu).

(20 July 1925)

All of these "vaporisers" are more or less defective. Two I have left unopened so you can open them. In one, open, the rubber opening was ruined. Maybe a fragment has damaged the glass canal. I don't know. In any case, the "package" (that's what they're called) is not very practical. It should be vertical.

Here is the 3,100 lire for the perfumes.

I'm adding another 2,000 to complete the 10,000, in the unknown; and to have the blessing of the Council of Basilea (1431).

This evening my paintress will leave. Tomorrow my French publisher Calmann is arriving. On the 9th you can come up to the Vittoriale to restore our equilibrium with a conversation next to the oleanders.
(7 September 1925)

An ancient saying has sprung to mind, seeing that I am now almost dressed in gardenias: cum odore candor!

My gardeners and the guests in my gardens are green with envy. Nobody has ever seen a gardenia as large as the one on my table where I am starting to work again!

I am finally free of the odious remains of the obnoxious "influenza." And I thank you for having helped me recover with your medicines. In the meanwhile huge gardenias are not sufficient to still my obsession with perfumes. Send me the usual box of essences. Thank you. I am including the usual lire. Thank you. Please procure, in abundance, some Kola Astier and Hondé (not for me because according to Prof. Clerici, I have the heart of a high quota flyer: a 500 horsepower engine at least!)

(6 July 1925)

My perfume supply has finished! I will send you a list of the perfumes I prefer to avoid the clutter of those I do not like. Furthermore, I need twenty-four 15 gr. small packets of soda sulphate of soda sulphate (crystallised) and twenty-four 20 gr. ones (idem)

Do you have Agnel pâté? With this cold it is very good for my beautiful hands. Can you also send me a couple of bottles of Sloan?

(21 January 1926)

I have received Caron's gift and I would like to know how I can send him my thanks and gift of gratitude. Thank you. Send me six boxes of Rim bonbons (yellow peaches).

And can you renew the “Landolt.” Thank you. I like the Lubin Kis-met. Do you still have some? All of the perfumes went in a flash! That was quick!!

(6 May 1926).

The latest events have meant I have been unable to see you here. To-day I am thinking of throwing myself into the Lake. Life is not worth living in Eskimo land. In the meanwhile I am sending you 6000 lire. Keep all the perfumes.

(24 July 1926)

I'm already better. I am up and out of bed. Silence is all I need to get better. Silentium medicinale.

I have received the bill, and I am surprised that the exchange rate has not facilitated the perfume trade.

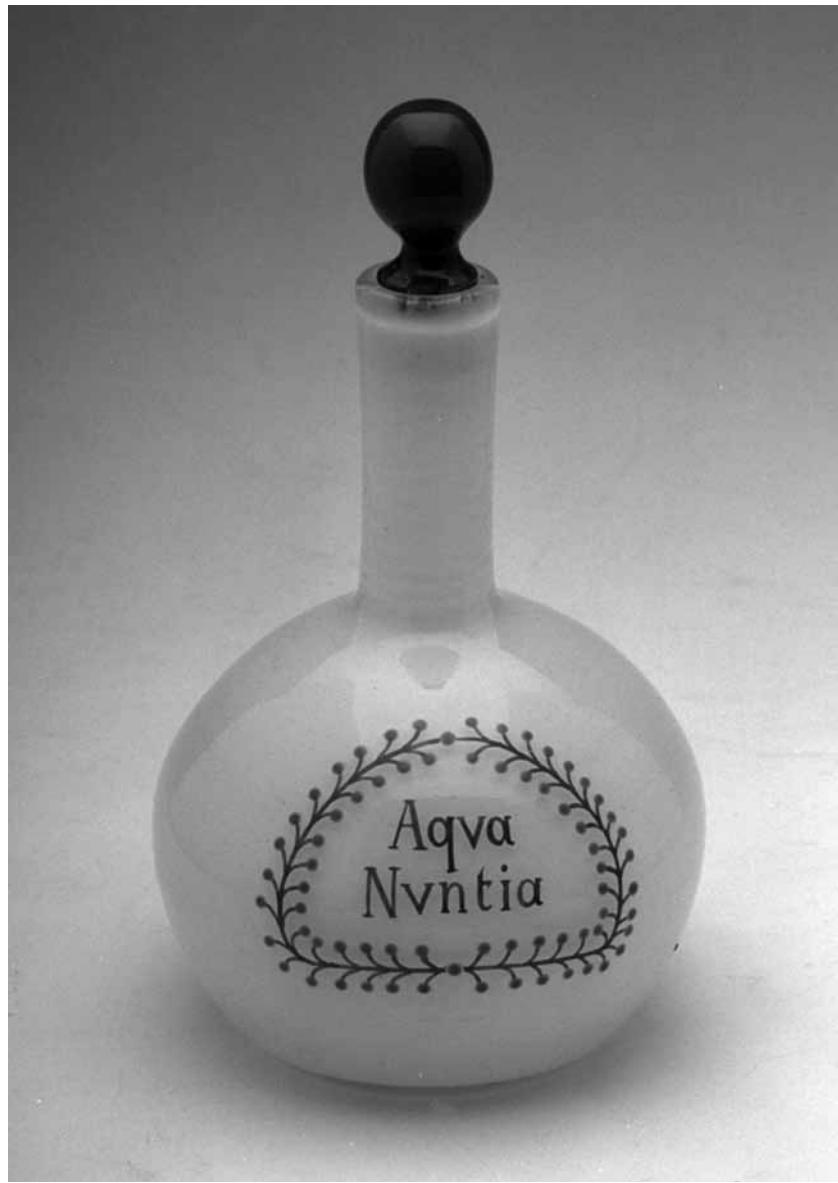
Why 325 lire (!!), for the mediocre “Nuit de noël”? And the Len-theric box 700 lire! It was only yesterday I gave it to Donna Liliana Teruzzi La Jacée (Jacea centaurea, the Pharmacopola would say) it is excellent; and I would like some more, but 200 lire for just a few drops!

Having completed the lament of my voluptuous nose, I am includ-ing 5,000 lire for these most valuable essences. Please send me all the “novelties” this evening, and add six tubes of Rinargolo and the same number of Sulphorinol. I shall also purchase the glass perfume bottles that you sent the other day. I would like another two or three round ones (I already have two): like apples or oranges in yellow and orange.

(18 October 1926)

Do you have any news of Caron. I should say, with Dante of Manerba: “Caron dimonio con occhi di bragia.” I need it for the coming 22 and 23. Thank you.

(19 February 1927)



Unknown author (probably the Martinuzzi school), small bottle of *Aqua Nuntia* perfume. Prioria del Vittoriale

The liqueur is excellent. I don't know how much energy it can add to my own energy; but I like the taste in drops and find it comforting. An ancient Italian name that was used for an "energetic" elixir – is appropriate: Lisirvite. Lisir is the archaic form of Elisir, used by the magnificent Bernardo Davanzati. One can say both Lisirvite and Elsirvite. I prefer the former. You choose.

I have received the perfumes. Send me some more (not the vaporisers). Lentheric – or Houbigant – has a perfume with a Japanese name that I can't remember [Guerlaine's Missouko, taken from a letter by Ferrari]. I like it).

(18 November 1927)

I have received the perfumes. Amongst the new ones Aimant is excellent. If you still have Jacée, send it to me and also some Nuit de Noël – by Caron.

I am including the "balance" 3,670 lire (30 to my credit). (3,700) After such a long time today I had the chance to review the "subject" of my studies for the La figura di cera [Wax Figure]; and I don't feel like waiting. Send me 25 grams if you can and even if you can't. I am enclosing 2500 lire as usual. Should you send me 5 or 10 grams, keep the change for the medicinal bill for this September.

(28 September 1928)

I will send you a cheque for 16,000 lire to settle the pharmaceutical bill for July and the dolorosa [bill] for the Perfumes. You can keep the remaining towards new bills. Please send me the bills, and indicate how much credit there is. I must confess that being a creditor is much more pleasant than being a debtor. But anything can happen.

(19 July 1929)

I have a million in American dollars deposited at the Banca Commerciale, but I cannot withdraw it until I have delivered the book I am writing: The Short Fairy Tale of my Long Life. I have been trying

to negotiate it with the expert usurers but in vain. And even Calcaterra [Giovanni, bank consultant] does not want to lend anything to a Senzaterra [Lackland; pun between Giovanni Calcaterra/John "Treadland" and John Lackland]

Today I am therefore unable to pay the, alas!, dear perfume bill. But I need only a few perfumes, in particular those of Chanel. My deposit is my guarantor. Ciao, colleague.

(3 April, 1930).

I have finished the perfume. Now I prefer those by Chanel, although they are scarce and expensive. However, I have remained true to some of the Coty essences (Chypre, Jacée, Aimant, Rose Jacqueminot: send me a couple of the latter if you have them. I am using Houbigant's "très fine" Eau de Cologne for massage. Does Coty have a "Colonia"? Do you still have the Lubin Eau de toilette? I am ruined! My bill must be exorbitant. I am sending you 10,000 lire in the meantime; and instead of sentencing me to seek amongst my papers, help me and remind me of the total sum. Please.

(6 June 1930)

I assure you that the erba del colle had nothing to do with my ailment. I went without a hat for four hours and was dressed very lightly, without ever having to blow my nose and not the slightest sign of a senile cold. (Take note for posterity) I really like the Eau de Coty (which I was not familiar with, and I know everything). I shall always use Eau de Coty; however, the big bottle is impressive, but bothersome. It slips out of your hand.

(12 June 1930)

I was very pleased with the Acque nanfe (made from orange flowers) and the small Chanel case you sent me; but how can the Giver accept it as a gift? I shall write to Sigismondo [Ruperti, itinerant salesman] almost a Malatesta.

I know from Aelis that Pia has not yet completely recovered! Here is a Torta del Paradiso healthy and perhaps even more refined than the Parrozzo from Pescara. If it were not for the Cakes, Paradise would not exist. Amen.

Asking you to recapitulate, with the last deliveries, I was hoping you could tell me the total sum necessary for the Solstice Bill.

Tonight is the shortest night. In 1918 I carried out no less than three consecutive nocturnal bombardments, in honour of the fallen Baracca. I will do it again. If you can, send me some Ypnerotoidina. The 24th is the anniversary of the successful operation.

(20-21 June 1930)

I beg you not to send the Landolt Collyrium. The adrenaline deteriorates and goes red after two or three hours. At times it is already rose-coloured when it arrives! You might remember that once – following Doctor Duse's advice – I ordered two solutions and I myself put the instantaneous collyrium together. But it bothered me. When it is really fresh, Landolt gives immediate relief to eyes that are weary from lengthy studies. But the "famous oculist" himself warned me against too frequent use. I therefore ceased. For the more pitiable cases, I will need some "Zinc-adrenalin." Thank you.

If you have Eau de Coty, send me several; I keep using it in my bath. I can't resist squandering anything new. I would also like some Eau de Lubin.

(27 June 1930)

Until now I have been "the snake charmer;" and I prepare myself to take a magic bath. But I have noticed that the Molnard Essence aromatique has finished! Are you familiar with it? A few drops suffice to make the bath "tonic" and perfume it like a spring meadow. If you don't have any, could you get me some for the future? I will take at least six phials. Here is the empty glass.

If you can, send me Chanel's Magnolia and Gardenia; or the Sycamore.

Add – Please, exceptionally – the change. I am enclosing 400 lire. What ever you are able to do. And thank you for your beautiful gardenias, which inspired in me a short droll poem. I might be able to rewrite it for the secret gardener.

(16 July 1930)

Woe is me! I am already outdated as a gentleman, and soon I'll be outdated as an unexhausted donor! For weeks and weeks, silent kindness has placed the voluptuous whiteness of the most beautiful gardenias in Lombardy on my table, which is full of thoughts and worries. I would like to present you with the page I wrote for the last small sad gardenia ... Lifeless and yellowing, it is now buried in Fioretti de' rimedi contro fortuna.⁶ You will never guess what happened! I, who am always studying, was reading to my infinite delight an extremely rare translation of Ovid, done at the beginning of the fourteenth century by a notary from my Prato: Ser Arrigo Emintendi [sic, for Simintendi]. I had got as far as the tale about King Pandion and Tereus. I was reading: "... Si volse in quello uccello che ha in capo la grande cresta: lo grande becco si vede da lungi in luogo di lunga punta" [...] is himself changed to a bird, with a feathered crest on its head. An immoderate, elongated, beak juts out, like a long spear]. At that very moment Luisa [Baccara] brought me the flower that was about to become a bird, and the bird about to become a flower. Ovid, my compatriot from Abruzzo, peered in astonishment out of a Persian vase; and went back to his Metamorphoses. Ah, it never ends.

My head is groggy because of your Panodorm. Romano misunderstood me. I said I wasn't sleeping because I no longer took Adalina; and I'm not taking it so it doesn't become a habit. I used it the last few days to get rid of the tingling in my brain: with moderation: a tablet and a half; but I observed that for the first hour after awakening, my crystalline mind was dulled. The other morning, at ten, I took one of the new tablets: I slept uninterrupted until seven in the afternoon. I woke up, had a light meal, and fell asleep again until midnight. "Accidémpoli" a

Florentine would exclaim. I wanted to try again to make sure. I took one tablet at five this morning: I slept until half past five in the afternoon. My writing is obtuse. Too much grace, Saint Marius! I shall stop taking Panodorm for the time being, as well. And all I shall ask for are perfumes, perfumes, perfumes. (I need neither reds for my lips and nipples, nor chypre powder). Please find me a rose essence (not Houbigant) and some Coty Chypre, and also Chanel's Sicomore. In addition, please order 5 Coty coffrets for me for my hands. Would you like me to cut out the advertisement and send it to you?

(12 November 1930)

The supplies I had when the two "damsels of fragrances" took their leave have finished. Can I have new perfumes today? I also need "Cologne" and English lavender (Yardley).

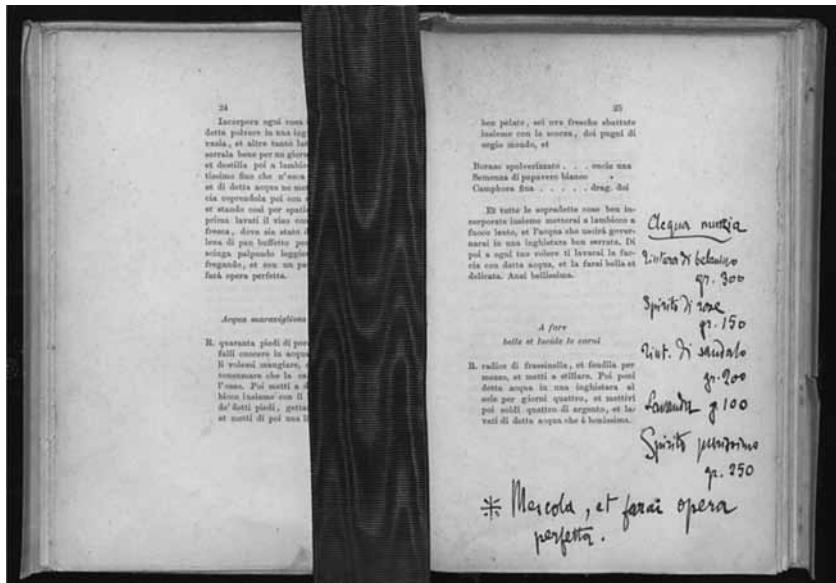
As regards my doctor Robin's Peptokola, one day the biggest of the Fools in service asked me: "Do you want colapeppe [pun on Peptokola]?" I found that an admirable verbal formulation ...

(31 August 1932)

Woe is me! At this very moment – 4.00 in the afternoon on the 16th – in the huge pile of letters I have found two you sent by hand: one dated the 7th, the other the 9th! I have been ill and sad. I think Doctor Bioglio is coming tomorrow – Gabriellino's doctor – if the blunt truth is to be said. Please tell me if the purchase you wrote to me about is still possible — after such delay. You can telephone and tell me yes or no; I'll send for it immediately. The only perfume I have left is a small bottle of Peau d'Espagne!

(16 January 1934)

After such lengthy silence, such distance, and such forgetfulness, today I have also received Easter greetings from two "ex-perfumers" Valeria and Pia [Ferrari's daughters]. Easter greetings for me, a faster amidst revelry: for me, who professes the most lucid and bitter



Gabriele d'Annunzio, annotations in *Ricettario galante del principio del secolo XVI*, edited by Olindo Guerrini, Bologna, Romagnoli, 1883. Prioria del Vittoriale

contempt for the King of the Jews, and who regards the “Resurrexi” as the most inauspicious day of mankind: or rather, of the human Livestock that has been subjugated for centuries by priestly fraud and papal trade. Oh Valeria, of no value, oh Pia without pity! As a sign of scorn, here are the Eggs of the Lamb on the Monday of the Angel, my Monday: for Signora Olga [Ferrari's wife], for the two “exes,” for the Farmacopola. Where does the Easter Egg come out? From the Lamb? Do you know this miraculous quadruped? Is the Lamb of God oviparous?

And how many other questions! Is it true that the Workshop of Fragrances is closed? Does that “ex” allude to the sad closure?

I live, no longer behind two chains but behind seven. I have adopted the stock phrases of a recent friend of mine: “I don't know. I don't remember. I don't know anything. I don't remember anything.”

*I try to smell the Rosa Jacqueminot, the Aimant, the Chypre ...
(Easter Monday, 1934)*

Here is the 12,173 lire for the Perfumes. I'm surprised I have neglected your bills since January!

I'm adding – for more felicitous moments – another 8,000 lire, making a total of 20,000.

Please send me the Basilea medicine this evening.

And please send me a selection of perfumes; all that is left are a few drops, owing to the excessive pilgrimaging of excommunicated Abbesses. Wednesday or Thursday, please come up to the Vittoriale so we can talk and come to an agreement.

(30 August 1936)

Specialists may be familiar with the Italian fragrances which the Lord of the Vittoriale of the Italians liked, which, as far as the essences in small bottles are concerned (Chanel, Coty, Caron, Eau de Lubin...) seem more like the Vittoriale of the French, or even of the English, sweetly smelling of lavender.

Being ignorant in this field I shall limit myself to the observation that Gabriele tends to associate the distilled essence with the actual flower the perfume comes from (magnolia, gardenia, sycamore, rose). At times this is exalted by the real flower, in particular gardenias, which are pleasing to the "amateur of sensations" owing to both their fragrance and whiteness, and which the thoughtful Ferrari offers him together with the fragrances enclosed in bottles. The poet pays him back with paper flowers, sending him this spirited lines, written in red ink in one letter: "As solitary and sad as tapeworms are we in the sinuous / hidden abdomens / Oh Master of remedies and fragrances / you console us with your gardenias". Is his quick-witted collocation of the wilting gardenias in small flowers that evoke the medieval treatises of *De remediis utriusque fortunae* not an implicit paper

flower? D'Annunzio is always D'Annunzio, even when he is writing about trivial things: fanatic about form, he expects the containers to be as good as the contents, and by superimposing art on nature he asks for bottles that are shaped like apples and oranges. A master of perspicacity, he jokingly rewrites the brilliant attack of the Gospel according to Saint John, replacing the Incarnate Word with the perfume of Caron, creating a verbal *divertissement* without the embarrassing irreverence with which he parades his scorn for the mystery of the Resurrection.

However, this perfumed correspondence also reveals the external vicissitudes surrounding D'Annunzio at Gardone Riviera. We can hear the rustling of women's gowns, starting with Angèle Lager – a young companion to Madame d'Espagne, a French aristocrat who was staying at the "Rimbalzello" on the lake shores; she was the lover who was renamed Jouvence, who gave the old Don Giovanni the illusion of drinking at the fountain of youth. Then there was Luisa Baccara, the lady of the Vittoriale, and "Aelis" or rather Amélie Mazoyer, the *bonne à tout faire* housekeeper whom the veteran from Fiume brought back with him from France. However, many perfumes disappear with a friend paintress, perhaps the Polish Tamara de Lempicka, with a noble woman passing through and with the countless "excommunicated abbesses" who visit the lavish and melancholic elderly and feeble libertine's *garçonne*. Yes, he was feeble and in need of collyrium for his surviving eye, rinses and toothpastes for his unhealthy mouth, adalina and costly mental aids. Friends are also outlined, for example Giancarlo Maroni, an architect and practical manager of the restoration of the Vittoriale; Doctor Antonio Duse, the faithful, discreet doctor from Salò who transmitted his passion for homing pigeons; Doctor Bioglio, who treated his son Gabriellino's depression; and Calmann-Levy, who published the French translation of his books. His conspicuous use of medicines and his close relationships with doctors are justified by the

ills of “turpe vecchiezza” (“infamous old age”), as he wrote evoking Ovid’s *Amores*, “turpe senex miles, turpe senilis amor,” in his last masterpiece, *il Libro segreto di Gabriele d’Annunzio tentato di morire [The Secret Book of Gabriele d’Annunzio who is tempted to die]*. He asked his chemist for twenty-five grams of an unnamed substance so he could face the revision of his preparatory studies of his unfinished work which included *Segreto, La figure de cire*, the female wax figure, shaped for magical-erotic games, amidst twists of aromatic incenses. It was the eccentric Corè, Marchesa Luisa Casati Stampa who introduced him to the latter.

The letters to the Chemist also include the perfume of time, one that is bitter: references to Léon Bakst’s death, the great Russian stage designer who designed *Martyre de Saint Sébastien* in Paris; other references included the solstice, a sacred moment for his profane rites, the air bombardment in honour of the fallen hero, and the publication of his first volume of *Faville del maglio*. In D’Annunzio’s letters, written during his prolific literary retreat when he sees Dante’s profile in the promontory of Manerba stretching out on the lake, he rediscovers in his soul fellow-citizen writers, including the ancient poet from Sulmona, and the medieval prosaist from Prato; shadows also appear in these letters of the works he never completed, *Favola breve di una lunga vita*, an autobiography that had been promised, for a lofty fee, to an “American publisher,” John Holroyd Reece; it was never written, however, and was replaced with *Libro segreto*, in which, freed from the “errore del tempo” [“error of time”], he outlined flashes of illumination on an interior self-portrait that was incomplete and fragmentary, and not the “stolta biografia” [“dull biography”].

The “dear friend,” thus called with a mixture of confidence and complicity, procures “specialities” that explain the exorbitant sums the incorrigible prodigy spent, being incapable of resisting squandering; he also procured valuable specialities for the former champion of heroic gestures, reduced by time to only erotic and

literary forms. The “maestro di farmachi ed aroma” [“master of medicinals and fragrances”] comes to the aid of both the mature lover in his dressing gown, and the writer “tentato di morire” [“tempted by death”], with not only pills, but also drops of perfume that can keep at bay the suspicion of *turpitude* from senile eros, and instil the inspiratory force necessary to complete his Cyclopic work. Did the legendary *astomi*, creatures without mouths, feed by inhaling smells? The ascetic from Gardone – the brave faster who does not spurn the *marrons glacés* of the Tre Marie or the *Torta del Paradiso*, the only paradise on earth – prefers other delights: “And I ask for perfumes, perfumes, perfumes.” This triple cry echoes with a need for intense delight and medicine, in the wake of that oxymoronic spiritual eroticism that was meant to inspire the trilogy he never completed, *Romanzi di carne senza carme* [“Carmina-less carnal novels”]. Who knows whether the “voluttà senza carne” [“disembodied pleasures”] which the unrivalled “amateur of sensations” mentions in his *Libro segreto* [Secret book] is a perfume his “voluptuous nose” inhaled.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise specified, quotations have been translated from the original by C. Cawthra.
- 2 Quotations are taken from a recent article by Andrea Graziani. Cf. GRAZIANI 47.
- 3 'Vittoriale' was the name D'Annunzio gave to his villa on Lake Garda.
- 4 Cf. LEDDA.
- 5 "solinghi e tristi siam come le ténie / ne' sinuosi e latebrosi addomi./ O maestro di farmachi e di aromi, / tu ci consoli con le tue gardenie."
- 6 Petrarch's *Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*.

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THE PERFUME OF VIRTUE FRAGRANCE AND MORALE IN ANCIENT CHINA

Alessandra Lavagnino

Introduction

Today it is true that in the frenetic life of the huge Chinese metropolis, one of the most common status symbols of the new generation of the wealthy is the purchase and use of expensive perfumes that are so skilfully commercialised by the important western brands. However, it is even truer that amongst the variety of fragrances that these big brands are offering on the dazzling ground floors of the big, western-style department stores that are to be found unfailingly in the mega shopping centres all over the Chinese cities, floral fragrances appear to be prevailing: non-aggressive, ‘natural’ ones for women, and fresh, simple ones for men.¹ This is still a relatively new, perhaps not yet well-established trend that favours the article and brand as an icon and a sense of having conquered western-style ‘modernity;’ however, although heavily mediated by the western-brand market nowadays, this love for perfumes and essences has once again become part of the habits and traditions that have always been a salient characteristic and ‘fragrant’ peculiarity of traditional Chinese civilisation. The wretched years of the super-revolutionary China are now fortunately a thing of the past, when even the most harmless ‘perfumed waters’ (*xiangshui*香水) were considered capitalist heresy and completely forbidden; in the desolate, bare *baihuo dalou* 白貨大樓 – the state or collective department stores – creams to protect one’s skin from the harsh winters were sold

by weight, handed out in spoonfuls only if the clients brought tiny containers from home with them. Such were the memories of those who - including the author- in those far off years, were discovering everyday surprising aspects of a harsh, daily life. As an example, incense (*xiang* 香) could not be burnt in the temples that had become rigorously off-limits for visits or any kind of worship; instead, incense was only used as a sort of mosquito repellent, or to sanitise the public toilets ...²

Today, in what is an increasingly complex Chinese reality, the meaning of the traditional custom of fragrances made of natural products has returned to the fore; these may be from flowers or aromatic plants, or valuable essences that can be burnt and diffused on occasions with a particular ritual importance, whilst others are used because of their medicinal and therapeutic qualities on the basis of what appear to be cryptic and mysterious ancient recipes and potions. Thus, perhaps without even realising, once again there is respect for a tradition that believes perfumes and fragrances bear highly symbolic messages; enclosed in the scent of the most sought after and carefully selected essences, these messages evoke a clarity that is not just that of the fragrance, but that also becomes uncontaminated purity, and not just in the material sense.

And all the direct and indirect references to the images from a refined millenary tradition are revived in all their evocative power, with the subdued, but intense intertextual maze that evokes impartial, but profound associations with stories that have been consolidated in a narrative that has never disappeared; on the contrary, it is revived and evoked immediately by the image of a perfumed flower, the scent of aromatic wood, the diffusion of that unmistakeable cloud that releases the perfume of incense.

Incense and perfume

And this is where it is appropriate our short exploration shall start. However, it should be borne in mind that the Chinese term *xiang* 香, mentioned above, means both ‘incense’ and ‘perfume/ fragrance.’

Identified as ‘radical’ (*bushou* 部首) number 186 in the great dictionary that was compiled under the Ming dynasty during the Kangxi era (1662-1722), *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典 (*Kangxi Dictionary*),³ the word indicated the prince of Oriental perfumes, including Chinese perfumes, and therefore the greatest of them all; this underlined the importance of the numerous aromatic substances that have been burnt for centuries, releasing intense clouds of valuable scents. However, it is believed that already in the oldest extant lexicographic collection, the exquisite *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 (*Explaining graphs and analysing characters*)⁴, compiled by the scholar Xu Shen 许慎 in the second century AD, the character *xiang* was present.



*Xiang*⁵

Here, the character *xiang* was illustrated in one of the evocative para-etymologies with images that Chinese scholars interpreted as a mouth that is open, and can therefore communicate, and a plant or small tree above, 穀, which produces drops of water, 水, like rain. *Xiang* would therefore represent the vital lymph that makes oral expression – communication – possible.

However, in the very same source we find that the term *xiang* is always associated with another word that we can only look at briefly here.



*Fang*⁶

The word *fang* 芳 that the aforementioned source simply describes as *xiangcao* 香草 (“aromatic grass”). Therefore, the word *xiang* not only means “incense” but also “fragrance, perfume, aroma.”

At this point we cannot help but mention the principal text, the most famous collection of high poetry that established itself over the centuries as the consecrated metaphors of a centuries-old Chinese tradition, the *Shi Jing* 诗经 (*Book of Odes*). It is the oldest extant anthology of poems and is said to have been compiled by Confucius himself.⁷

In the *Major Court Hymns* (*Daya* 大雅, *shengmin* 生民) is the following quatrain, in tetra-syllable lines:

The beans grow luxuriantly,
Luxuriantly they grow,
Their perfume begins to be released,
The Sovereign oversees in tranquillity

It is the perfume coming from a plant that is grown to feed the people that tranquillises the sovereign, hence the beginning of an as-

sociation that establishes itself between a ‘good’ aroma and its useful function for the peasant, for whom it is a source of nutrition, and for the sovereign, who may watch the orderly growth of his people without any worries. This is all associated with the word *xiang*. It is therefore the perfume of products from the ground, in particular *wu gu*, 五谷 (“five cereals”), of which the above-mentioned bean is one of the most important, that creates another interesting link that ties together the various aspects of how the forces of nature are portrayed. The five types of cereal, wheat, millet, maize, and sorghum, appear to be related to *wu xing* 五行 (“five elements”), in other words, water, fire, earth, metal, and wood, or “five phases” – as some scholars in this field have translated the term,⁸ and each of these potential elements also has a smell or flavour that is able to rule the complex rules of a correct diet.⁹ Today there are still five fundamental aromas, *wu xiang* 五香, which are skilfully mixed in Chinese cuisine: star anise, clove, Chinese cinnamon, Sichuan pepper, and fennel seed; there are also the five flavours, *wu wei* 五味, savoury, sweet, sour, bitter and spicy, which co-exist in harmony with the five colours, *wuse* 五色, and the five music notes, *wuyin* 五音... We could go on and on with this endless numerological matching, the origins of which lie in a continuous, complementary interaction between the primordial energies that exist and alternate in the above-mentioned “five phases,” creating over the centuries a continuation of references; this is a further testimony of just how closely everyday life today is tied to profound, sound cultural roots that influence even the tiniest expressions.¹⁰

Early examples

Returning to our subject, it is worth going back to the most ancient texts, which are also a great source of reference, in particular *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analecta*), which is believed to be by Confucius; in it he explicitly compares the rule of a wise prince with the scent of perfume/incense.¹¹

Another example is a famous text from the classics, *Zuo Zhuan*. “Xi gong wu nian” 《左傳・僖公五年》 左傳・僖公五年 (*Tradition of Zuo, Fifth Year of Duke Xi*) in which one can read that during sacrificial ceremonies “branches are gathered to make the incense more refined” (*Shisanjing Zhushu*, 189).

This traditional association between perfume and exemplary, noble and virtuous actions thus established itself throughout centuries and centuries in poetical texts, clearly but meekly.

This is obviously not the place for an exhaustive study of the subject and we shall limit ourselves to just a few examples that we deem significant owing to the authoritative nature of their sources and immediacy of image, with the specific objective of helping us understand this essence to the full.

A brief mention of another theme linked to fragrances will also be useful: one that is mentioned in another great anthology of ancient Chinese poetry, *Chuci* 楚辭 (*The Songs of the South*; it appears to link perfumes and essences to the construction of a special thread – of smoke – that links the shaman celebrating the rite with the mystical ecstasy that unites man with the more mysterious and magical powers of nature. We are around the fourth century BC in the cruel, rebellious reign of Chu (today's Sichuan) and these ecstatic journeys were also made possible thanks to particular substances and fragrances that favour trances and adventurous expeditions into another world full of flying dragons and imaginary creatures. “Redundant fragrances (*fang* 芳) fill the ceremony halls” it says in the first of the “Jiu ge” 九歌 (*Nine Chants*), introducing the descent of the divinity during the rite.¹²

Examples of some poetical texts: *Fu* 赋 of the spirit of the Luo River

An image that is equally intense and was soon to establish itself as a sound metaphor of fame and virtue is connected to the

landscape, to the colours and fragrances of another region, one that is just as inaccessible and severe in its natural hardships, but written several centuries later: we can read it in one of the poems by Cao Zhi 曹志, a prince and poet who lived in the third century BC: along the banks of the river Luo he met a fairy-like, divine creature of such indescribable beauty and so elusive that he would always be filled with a sense of regret and nostalgia. These are also the ‘fragrant’ tones of love and sadness found in what is believed to be a veiled declaration by the prince-poet of loyalty towards his brother emperor Cao Pi 曹丕 – who ascended the throne of the short-lived Wei 魏 dynasty with the dynastic name Wendi 文帝 – with the consolidated allegorical interpretation that was to revive the same erudite exegesis over the centuries of the oldest writings from a clearly didactic vision.¹³

The spirit after whom this renowned composition in rhythmic prose is named, *Luo shen fu* 罗神赋 (*Fu of the Spirit of the Luo River*),¹⁴ suddenly appears before the poet in the guise of a young grace “without any perfumed (*fang* 芳) make-up” (*ibid.*). “[The young girl] approaches wearing embroidered Turkish slippers suitable for long journeys, wearing gauze garments as light as mist that are impregnated with the fragrance (*fang* 芳) of orchids (*lan* 兰) the like of which have never been seen before” (*ibid.*). Here the image is imbued with particular intensity, and the fragrance is accompanied with an even more detailed stratification of meanings: this is because of the natural fragrance of the orchid, a particularly singular flower that has always been regarded as a magical plant and is of considerable symbolic value in China. In fact, ever since ancient times it has been used to perfume purificatory waters, and young girls would have precious little bags containing its dried petals tied to their belts so they would leave a trace of perfume behind them. According to Confucian tradition the orchid also became the most noble flower, as it was not only attributed with medicinal characteristics, but also embodied the

virtue and honesty of a virtuous man and scholarly tradition has handed down numerous anecdotes. For example, in the anthology of stories and parables *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語 (*Sayings from the Confucius School*) from the Han period it says that in one of his countless, unhappy wanderings, Confucius himself had come across the intense fragrance of orchids and had exclaimed: “The orchid should be the prince of everything that is perfumed. But it must be left in the company of other plants” (Tournier 257). In other words, although as outstanding as a perfumed orchid, a wise man must always remain in touch with his people. In another episode from the same source, talking about the orchid of the trees, Confucius allegedly said: “The orchid that blooms in the depths of the forest is certainly not lacking in perfume because nobody comes to smell it: thus, the superior man who practises virtue and moral does not tolerate that his purity is disturbed by difficulties (278).

If we continue with Cao Zhi’s poetry, a little later on we come across another expression that appeared here for the first time and went on to become the antonomasia for virtuous fame. “[The goddess] positions her light body in the pose of a swan that is about to spread its wings but without taking flight, continuing along the paths impregnated with the fragrance of spices, and its progress diffuses fragrance amidst the perfumed nardus” (*ibid.*). According to up-dated Chinese sources,¹⁵ the expression *liufang* 流芳 appears here for the first time and its initial meaning of “diffusing fragrance” was quickly expanded until it meant “spreading a good reputation.” Hence the idiomatic expression *liufang houshi* 流芳后世 documented as early as the sixth century AD, “diffusing fragrance for posterity,” or rather “handing down one’s fame for posterity;”¹⁶ *liufang baishi* 流芳百世 “diffusing fragrance for a hundred generations,” and likewise “handing down one’s fame for posterity” can also be found in more common contemporary lexicographic tools.

Over the centuries, new evocations were derived from ideas, doctrines and religions that, like Buddhism, were brought to China thanks to the caravan routes that crossed the heart of Asia through the passage of time; these were then added to the complex stratification of images that are articulated in continuous intertextual references, some more explicit than others, regarding a written patrimony that is continuously consulted, re-copied, and reinterpreted before being updated and transmitted once again. And it is along this dense network of routes, some more popular than others, that valuable goods such as silk and perfumed spices travelled. For example, in the Middle Ages, as Schafer reminds us in his ageless *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*: “There was little clear-cut distinction among drugs, spices, perfumes, and incenses — that is, among substances which nourish the body and those which nourish the spirit, those which attract a lover and those which attract a divinity” (155).

Not long afterwards it was none other than *shaoxiang* 烧香(burning incense/perfume) that was to become the most common act of devotion for Buddhists, in a gesture that both purified and redeemed, guaranteeing the immediate ascent of the believer’s best intentions of purification to heaven, together with the smoke. Thanks to the speculation regarding Buddhism, evocative images therefore abounded and these contributed further to what was already a profuse repertoire of perfumes and fragrances that we have only been able to describe in brief here.

“A journey to the temple of accumulated fragrances”

It would be remiss not to cite the poem in pentasyllabic lines by Wang Wei 王维(699-759), one of the most representative authors of the Tang dynasty, unequivocally regarded as the

golden age of Chinese poetry; the title is *Guo xiangji si* 过香积寺 “Journey to the Temple of Accumulated Fragrances”:

*Lost among cloudy peaks.
In ancient forest no human path,
Bell sounds deep in the mountains.
A stream scrapes over sharp rocks,
Sunlight chills green pines.
By an empty twisted pool at twilight,
Meditation purges poisonous dragons.*¹⁷

In Buddhism, one achieves a peace of mind and heart that allows one to overcome even the most serious adversities (the most inauspicious dragon), thanks to the ascent of accumulated fragrances in the temple. In this expression *xiang ji* 香积 (literally “incense + pile”), which is significantly present in the poem’s title as well, underlines the accumulation of ‘fragrances’ or rather of virtuous connotations that allow the poet to overcome any kind of unexpected difficulty. The journey to the temple of accumulated fragrances thus becomes the virtuous fulfilment of the initiatory journey of a mystical itinerary in which incense embodies the entire value linked to holiness and the conquest of Buddhist perfection. It is only through the subtle, profound language of poetry and the intensity with which it is perceived and condensed that this complex symbolic interweaving is taken to even further heights. That is why we feel that Wang Wei’s poem is the loftiest and most sublime epilogue of a mystical journey towards the perfume of perfection.

“Washed and rinsed”

We would like to conclude this brief itinerary of outstanding examples of Chinese poetry by mentioning at least one of the poems by Li Bai 李白, another great poet from the Tang dynasty

who, once again, entrusted perfume and cleansing with the subtle message of purity, which is unappreciated and concentrated, seeking crystal-clear waters far away from the confusion of the world.¹⁸

*Bathed in fragrance (fang芳), do not brush your hat
Washed in orchid (lan 兰) perfume, do not shake your coat:
“Knowing the world fears what is too pure,
The wisest man prizes and stores light!
By Bluewater an old fisherman sat:
You and I together, let us go home.¹⁹*

Notes

- 1 Today the breath-taking development of the Chinese market in the field of luxury perfumes is the object of interesting research. Cf. BURR.
- 2 For more about the countless memories regarding the difficulty of everyday life in the decade of the “Cultural Revolution” (1966-76), cf. GAO.
- 3 For the electronic format of the work, cf. KANGXI.
- 4 Unless specified, the translations are by the author.
- 5 For the Chinese text, cf. the electronic version in XU.
- 6 For the Chinese text, cf. the electronic version in Xu 1.
- 7 For more about the text’s complex and rich exegetical tradition, cf. VAN ZOEREN, KERN.
- 8 CHENG A. 254.
- 9 TOURNIER 285.
- 10 Cf. SCHIPPER.
- 11 Cf. CONFUCIUS 128.
- 12 For an incomplete but important translation of this anthology see HAWKES. For the Chinese text the quotation was taken from CHUCI.
- 13 Cf. WATSON 116.
- 14 For the Chinese text, cf. CAO.
- 15 Cf. Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs online.
- 16 Cf. IBID.
- 17 For the Chinese text, cf. WANG. For the English: http://www.mountainsongs.net/poem_.php?id=108
- 18 The composition is called *Mu yu zi*, 沐浴子 (*Washed and rinsed*); for the original Chinese text, cf. LI.
- 19 Translated by Jean E. Ward.

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PROPTER ODORES **PERFUMES IN ROMAN TIMES**

Paolo Mastandrea

In every primitive society, perfumes are part of the sacred sphere; they are symbols of an alliance contract between man and the invisible powers that are believed to be regulating Nature – in other words, the fate of every living being in the sensible world. The smell of ‘incense,’ the burnt substance that becomes *pro-fumus* and rises to the skies as a fragrant vapour, therefore represents the desire to leave the physical restraints of the body once and for all, freeing oneself of its insecurity and fragility; it represents a form of yearning for purer forms of existence in a supersensible space that is hoped will be happier as there is no pain, loss or fatigue: ethereal but stable and lasting in eternity. That is why it is the celestial gods that feed on perfumes but perfumes that guarantee immortality.

In its countless expressions – from diverse poetry genres and artful prose to captions and scientific treatment – Latin literature has reproduced both the ideological tendencies and emotive tensions of collective social groups and the psychology of single individuals. Drawing on the production of several classical authors and writers from the Late Antiquity and Christian periods, we shall look at several examples.

The Roman’s cultural approach towards perfume follows two main directions: the legalistic respect for any use that is part of ceremonies and religious rites, and the moralistic suspicion of any possible abuse in the private and individual sphere. Fundamentally, there is also a prejudiced hostility towards lifestyles that

are characterised by luxury and comfort: this explains why the subject of smells and the sensations they produce instinctively arouses references to circumstances, places and images of conventional exoticism that these literary descriptions are set in. This is also the case when they are dealt with for what could be described as ‘scientific’ purposes (that is, trying to discover the origin and explain physiological causes, and here I am thinking of Pliny the Elder in particular).

Lucretius and Catullus

Let us start with Lucretius, the visionary poet who lived during the times of Caesar and Cicero, as the title of this essay has been taken from one of his lines – more specifically, from the last section of the hexameter “[...] araque Panchaeos exhalat propter odores;” it is in the second book of *De rerum natura*, in which an enthusiastic promulgator of the Epicurean doctrine is explaining how the variety of shapes of atoms (some smooth and fluid, others pointed and penetrating) produce different and actually opposite effects on the perception of our senses:

Huc accedit uti mellis lactisque liquores
iucundo sensu linguae tractentur in ore;
at contra taetra absinthi natura ferique
centauri foedo pertorquent ora sapore
[. . .]
Omnia postremo bona sensibus et mala tactu
dissimili inter se pugnant perfecta figura;
ne tu forte putas serrae stridentis acerbum
horrorem constare elementis leuibus aequae
ac musaea mele, per chordas organici quae
mobilibus digitis expergefacta figurant;
neu simili penetrare putas primordia forma
in naris hominum, cum taetra cadauera torrent,

et cum scena croco Cilici perfusa recens est
araque Panchaeos exhalat propter odores. (2, 398-417)

*And note, besides, that liquor of honey or milk
yields in the mouth agreeable taste to tongue,
whilst nauseous wormwood, pungent centaury,
with their foul flavour set the lips awry;
thus simple 'tis to see that whatsoever
can touch the senses pleasingly are made
of smooth and rounded elements, whilst those
which seem the bitter and the sharp, are held
entwined by elements more crook'd, and so
are wont to tear their ways into our senses,
and rend our body as they enter in.
In short all good to sense, all bad to touch,
being up-built of figures so unlike,
are mutually at strife- lest thou suppose
that the shrill rasping of a squeaking saw
consists of elements as smooth as song
which, waked by nimble fingers, on the strings
the sweet musicians fashion; or suppose
that same-shaped atoms through men's nostrils pierce
when foul cadavers burn, as when the stage
is with Cilician saffron sprinkled fresh,
and the altar near exhales Panchaeon scent ...¹*

As can be seen by the final reference of this passage, the use of perfumes is associated with public events and open spaces, in the ambit of theatre or religious liturgies. A particularly private use, one that is aimed purely at the search for pleasure, is revealed in another work by a contemporary poet in which the sense of smell plays a key role; we are talking about the famous poem 13 in hendecasyllables, when Catullus is inviting one of his friends to dinner:

Cenabis bene, mi Fabulle, apud me
paucis, si tibi di fauent, diebus,
si tecum attuleris bonam atque magnam
cenam, non sine candida puella
et uino et sale et omnibus cachinnis.
Haec si, inquam, attuleris, uenuste noster,
cenabis bene; nam tui Catulli
plenus sacculus est aranearum.
Sed contra accipies meros amores
seu quid suauius elegantiusue est:
nam unguentum dabo, quod meae puellae
donarunt Veneres Cupidinesque.
Quod tu cum olfacies, deos rogabis,
totum ut te faciant, Fabulle, nasum.² (1-14)

You will feast well with me, my Fabullus, in a few days, if the gods favour you, provided you bring here with you a good and great feast, not forgetting a radiant girl and wine and wit and all kinds of laughter. Provided, I say, you bring them here, our charming friend, you will feast well: for your Catullus' purse is full with cobwebs. But in return you will receive a pure love, or what is sweeter or more elegant: for I will give you an unguent which the Venuses and Cupids gave to my girl, which, when you smell it, you will entreat the gods to make you, Fabullus, all Nose!

As Guido Paduano astutely observed, in this passage the initial list of material goods that the author does not have is opposed to his ideal values (*meros amores*, v. 9): “The word that brokers the contact between the two incomunicable planes of concrete reality and the interiority of emotions is *unguentum*; [line 12] perfume, which is perceived via the sense but is as subtle and immaterial as the air that is bearing it, is the meeting point between material and spirit, and thus is of divine origins” (47).

Catullus participates in the life without rules of the Roman

jeunesse dorée, a typical feature of social circles in which luxury is approved of without regret or obstacles other than the occasional (or chronic) lack of money in one's pockets. The association of lavish dining-tables and expensive garments, of wines and unguents³ as natural incentives to sensuality, reappears in Lucretius' fourth book, at the end of a famous page in which the 'orthodox' Epicurean condemns amorous passion – followed by excess and abandon.⁴

Horace and Ovid

One generation later, in contrast to the disquieting and slightly morbid complexity of Lucretius' psychological profile we have the calm wisdom of the 'lewd' Epicurean, for example Horace; in one of his early odes, he portrays the new, young partner Pyrrha "besprinkled with perfume" – a practitioner of love and once also the poet's companion (poem 1,5):

Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa
perfusus liquidis urget odoribus
grato, Pyrrha, sub antro?
cui flavam religas comam
simplex munditiis? (1-5)

*What slender youth, besprinkled with perfume,
courts you on roses in some grotto's shade?
Fair Pyrrha, say, for whom
your yellow hair you braid,
so trim, so simple ...*

In addition, his friend Dellius is fond of "wine and scents, and roses' bloom;" and rightly so since there is no escaping the fate of common mortals, no matter how wealthy and influential you are (poem 2,3):

Huc uina et unguenta et nimium breuis
flores amoena ferre iube rosae,
dum res et aetas et sororum
fila trium patiuntur atra. (13-6)

*Bring wine and scents, and roses' bloom,
too brief, alas! to that sweet place;
while life, and fortune, and the loom
of the Three Sisters yield you grace.*

In Horace's *Odes* (2, 3, 13; 7, 21; 3, 14, 7) similar evocations on the "carpe diem" theme appear in continuation. Following in the footsteps of Catullus and Horace, the heirs of their taste and life and writing styles, the elegiac poets of the Augustan age often link the pleasant images of erotic encounters with the smell of exotic perfumes from the Orient. Examples are Tibullus (1, 7, 49), Propertius (2, 29, 15; 3, 13, 8), and Ovid (Epist. 21, 155) with descriptions of mostly clandestine amorous encounters, or at times singing epithalamiums and official rites of legitimate weddings; furthermore, as part of the more obvious dialectics of the contrasting elements of *eros* and *thanatos*, in similar contexts there may also be moving images in which the lovers foresee obsequies, either for themselves or for other – characterised by the use of Arabian and Assyrian fragrances (Tibullus, 1, 3, 5 and 2, 2, 3).

As usual, Ovid is the most extreme and transgressive; having reached the heights of worldly and literary success, he assumes the role of tutor of amorous techniques, in the most beautiful and carefree period of life, and wanting to accompany young people of both sexes to reap the best possible fruits. At the end of the second book, *Ars amatoria*, after much exaltation of the circumstances and places where the perfumes of unguents and flowers blend, and the welcome obligations of courtship and conversation intertwine with dancing and music, it is no surprise to find a sort of seal of auto-celebration that binds the joy for the work

completed to the symbols of success and the olfactive pleasure of the tresses of the young people:

Finis adest operi: palmam date, grata iuuentus,
 sertaque odoratae myrtea ferte comae.
Quantus apud Danaos Podalirius arte medendi,
 Aeacides dextra, pectore Nestor erat,
quantus erat Calchas extis, Telamonius armis,
 Automedon curru, tantus amator ego.
Me uatem celebrate, uiri, mihi dicite laudes;
 cantetur toto nomen in orbe meum.
Arma dedi uobis; dederat Vulcanus Achilli:
 uincite muneribus, uicit ut ille, datis.
Sed, quicumque meo superarit Amazona ferro,
 inscribat spoliis NASO MAGISTER ERAT. (2, 33-40)

*The work's complete, triumphant palms prepare
With flow'ry deaths adorn my flowing hair.
As to the Greeks was Podalirius' art,
To heal with med'cines the afflicted part;
Nestor's advice, Achilles' arms in field,
Automedon for chariot-driving skill'd;
As Calchas could explain the mystic bird,
And Telemon could wield the brandish'd sword;
Such to the town my fam'd instructions prove,
So much am I renown'd for arts of love.
Me ev'ry youth shall praise, extol my name,
And o'er the globe diffuse my lasting fame.
I arms provide against the scornful fair;
Thus Vulcan arm'd Achilles for the war.
Whatever youth shall with my aid o'ercome,
And lead his Amazon in triumph home;
Let him that conquers and enjoys the dame,
In gratitude for his instructed flame,
Inscribe the spoils with my auspicious name.*

The composition of Ovid's unique treatise coincided with the end of the ancient era and the beginning of the Common Era. It was straight after this that the poet began work on his masterpiece, the fifteen books of *Metamorphoses*; amongst the countless other tales, it describes the tale of Myrrha, daughter of the King of Cyprus and so devoted to Artemis that she is willing to devote her own chastity to the goddess; this arouses Venus' jealousy, who therefore awakens in the virgin an unhealthy passion for her father, Cinyras. Having realised it is his daughter he has made pregnant, just as he is about to kill her with his sword, Myrrha is transformed into a tree, which gives birth from its slashed trunk to her beautiful, sweet-smelling son. Adonis is his name and Venus is later to become infatuated with him as well. Nobody can describe the developments of the classical myth as well as Marcel Detienne and his *Gardens of Adonis*: here it suffices to say that myrrh – as all precious perfumed unguents in general – played a key role in a completely different story in the same period: the Evangelists' gospels, which were to have a profound influence on the destiny of mankind.

Petronius

Returning to the Roman world and its elegant literary forms, the excess of luxury (that is known to verge imperviously on bad taste), is portrayed in the Neronian age by the figure of Trimalchio: the first 'great Gatsby' in Western literature, immortalised in *Satyricon* by Petronius, *arbiter elegantiae* at the Roman court. In the chapters describing the dinner, from the very first image the host is depicted as excessive and is portrayed coming out of the bath completely naked while his servants remove the perfume he has applied in great abundance; the whole scene is delightful:

1 Longum erat singula excipere. Itaque intravimus balneum, et sudore calfacti momento temporis ad frigidam eximus. 2 Iam Trimalchio unguento perfusus tergebatur, non linteis, sed palliis ex lana mollissima factis. 3 Tres interim iatraliptae in conspectu eius Falernum potabant, et cum plurimum rixantes effunderent, Trimalchio hoc suum propinasce dicebat. 4 Hinc involutus coccina gausapa lecticae impositus est praecedentibus phaleratis cursoribus quatuor et chiramaxio, in quo deliciae eius vehebantur, puer vetulus, lippus, domino Trimalchione deformior. 5 Cum ergo auferretur, ad caput eius symphoniacus cum minimis tibiis accessit et tamquam in au- rem aliquid secreto diceret, toto itinere cantavit. (28, 1-5)

I cannot linger over details. We went into the bath. We stayed till we ran with sweat, and then at once passed through into the cold water. Trimalchio was now anointed all over and rubbed down, not with towels, but with blankets of the softest wool. Three masseurs sat there drinking Falernian wine under his eyes. They quarrelled and spilt a quantity. Trimalchio said they were drinking his health. Then he was rolled up in a scarlet woollen coat and put in a litter. Four runners decked with medals went before him, and a hand-cart on which his favourite rode. This was a wrinkled blear-eyed boy uglier than his master Trimalchio. As he was being driven off, a musician with a tiny pair of pipes arrived, and played the whole way as though he were whispering secrets in his ear.

Following this lengthy *excursus* we find perfumes on nearly every page, either in their little alabaster jars, poured on the guests' heads or feet or even portrayed in images that are to decorate the tomb of their generous host; they not only offer a pleasant insight into everyday life, but are also the cultural elements underlying the entire existence of those people:

60,1 Nec diu mirari licuit tam elegantes strophas; nam re-pente lacunaria sonare coeperunt totumque triclinium intremuit. 2 Consternatus ego exsurrexi, et timui ne per tec-tum petauristarius aliquis descenderet. Nec minus reliqui convivae mirantes erexere vultus expectantes quid novi de caelo nuntiaretur. 3 Ecce autem diductis lacunaribus subito cirlcus ingens, de cupa videlicet grandi excussus, demit-titur, cuius per totum orbem coronae aureae cum alabastris unguenti pendebant.

65,7 (Habinnas) iam ebrius uxoris suae umeris imposuerat manus, oneratusque aliquot coronis et unguento per fron-tem in oculos fluente, praetorio loco se posuit, continuoque vinum et caldam poposcit.

70,8 Pudet referre quae secuntur: inaudito enim more pueri capillati attulerunt unguentum in argentea pelve pedesque recumbentium unixerunt, cum ante crura talosque corollis vinxissent. 9 Hinc ex eodem unguento in vinarium atque lucernam aliquantum est infusum.

71,5 (Trimalchio has his last will and testament read) Respiciens deinde Habinnam: “quid dicis, inquit, amice carissime? aedificas monumentum meum quemadmodum te iussi? 6 Valde te rogo, ut secundum pedes statuae meae catellam pingas et coronas et unguenta et Petraitis omnes pugnas, ut mihi contingat tuo beneficio post mortem vi-vere”.

We were not given long to admire these elegant tours de force; suddenly there came a noise from the ceiling, and the whole dining-room trembled. I rose from my place in a panic: I was afraid some acrobat would come down through the roof. All the other guests too looked up astonished, wondering what the new portent from heaven was announced. The whole ceiling parted asunder, and an enormous hoop, apparently

knocked out of a giant cask, was let down. All round it were hung golden crowns and alabaster boxes of perfumes ...

[Habinnas] was quite drunk, and had put his hands on his wife's shoulders; he had several wreaths on, and ointment was running down his forehead into his eyes. He sat down in the chief magistrate's place, and at once called for wine and hot water.

I am ashamed to tell you what followed: in defiance of all convention, some long-haired boys brought ointment in a silver basin, and anointed our feet as we lay, after winding little garlands round our feet and ankles. A quantity of the same ointment was then poured into the mixing-bowl and the lamp.

[Trimalchio, after his last will and testament had been read] looked at Habinnas and said, "Now tell me, my dear friend: you will erect a monument as I have directed? I beg you earnestly to put up round the feet of my statue my little dog, and some wreaths, and bottles of perfume, and all the fittings of Pestrates, so that your kindness may bring me a life after death ...

It is clear that for Trimalchio (and for the marble worker Habinnas and all the other freedmen), perfumes were a recognised social status symbol, a clear sign of the wealth to be left on one's funerary monument in eternal memory of oneself. However, another unforgettable character in the tale laments the venal cost of these products, the immoral preceptor Eumolpus: in the final scenes set on the ship of Lycas, he is lamenting how Encolpio and Giton have used up all his money with a common female friend. He found them together with her the night before, oozing with wine and unguents, leading him to end with the comic-epic sentence "they still stink of the shreds of my inheritance:"

105 inter cetera apud communem amicam consumpserunt pecuniam meam, a qua illos proxima nocte extraxi mero

unguentisque perfusos. Ad summam, adhuc patrimonii
mei reliquias olenit.

Furthermore, they squandered my money on a certain lady friend of ours; I pulled them away from her the night before, reeking with wine and scent. In fact, they still stink of the shreds of my inheritance.

These passages are examples of several extreme cases (not by chance satirical) of hedonistic consumption; however, although Petronius's apparent reproof is directed more at the social category of the newly rich and uneducated freedmen who are guilty of gross extravagance, than at *luxuria* or *avaritia* as 'sins' in themselves, it is clear that the author disapproves of (or is identifying and confusing) waste and intemperance, superfluity of perfumes and degradation of customs.

Pliny the Elder

At the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, after the tragic death of Nero and the bloody intermezzo of military anarchy, the Flavian period was characterised by a return to Italic simplicity, to the frugal, sober lifestyles adopted by the founder of the new dynasty – a coarse peasant-farmer and soldier from Rieti. The extensive scientific dissertation on the production, importation, diffusion and social purpose of perfumes from the Orient is indeed dedicated to Vespasian and this is also our main source of knowledge. Pliny the Elder, who was to die when the Vesuvius erupted destroying Pompeii and Ercolano in 79, wrote a truly encyclopaedic treatise on herbalism, covered in books XII to XXVII in his monumental *Naturalis historia*. I shall limit myself to just a few extracts that are illustrative of an explicit manner of narrating both history and anecdotes as if they were the implicit ethical and ideological tensions:

Haec est materia luxus e cunctis maxime supervacui. margaritae enim gemmaeque ad heredem tamen transeunt, vestes prorogant tempus: unguenta ilico exiprant ac suis moriuntur horis. summa commendatio eorum ut transeunt feminam odor invitet etiam aliud agentis. exceduntque quadringenos denarios librae: tanti emitur voluptas aliena; etenim odorem qui gerit, ipse non sentit. 21 si tamen et haec aliqua differentia signanda sunt, in M. Ciceronis monumentis invenitur unguenta gratiora quae terram quam quae crocum sapient, quando etiam corruptissimo in genere magis tamen iuvat quaedam ipsius vitii severitas. sed quosdam crassitudino maxime delectat, spissum appellantes, linique iam, non solum perfundi, gaudent. 22 aliquem e privatis audivimus iussisse spargi parietes balnearum unguento atque Gaium principem solia temperari ac, ne principale videatur hoc bonum, et postea quendam e servis Neronis. 23 vidimus etiam vestigia pedum tingui, quod monstrasse M. Othonem Neroni principi ferebant, quaeso ut qualiter sentiretur iuvaretque ab ea parte corporis? nec non maxime tamen mirum est hanc gratiam penetrasse et in castra; aquilae certe ac signa, pulverulenta illa et cuspidibus horrida, unguuntur festis diebus, utinamque dicere possemus quis primus instituisset! ita est nimirum: hac mercede corruptae orbem terrarum devicere aquilae. ista patrocinia quaerimus vitiis, ut per hoc ius sub casside unguenta sumantur. 5. 24 Quando id primum ad Romanos penetravit, non facile dixerim. certum est Antiocho rege Asiaque devictis, urbis anno DLXV, P. Licinium Crassum L. Iulium Caesarem censores edixisse ne quis venderet unguenta exotica; sic enim appellavere. 25 at Hercules iam quidam etiam in potus addunt, tantique est amaritudo ut odore prodigo fruantur ex utraque parte corporis. L. Plotium, L. Planci bis consulis censorisque fratrem, proscriptum a triumviris in Salurnitan latebra unguenta odore proditum constat, quo dedecore tota absoluta proscriptio est; quis enim non merito iudicet perisse tales? (13, 4.20-5.25)

Perfumes serve the purpose of the most superfluous of all forms of luxury; for pearls and jewels do nevertheless pass to the wearer's heir, and clothes last for some time, but unguents lose their scent at once, and die in the very hour when they are used. Their highest recommendation is that when a woman passes by her scent may attract the attention even of persons occupied in something else – and their cost is more than four hundred denarii per pound. All that money is paid for a pleasure enjoyed by somebody else, for a person carrying scent about him does not smell it himself. Still, if even these matters deserve to be graded after a fashion, we find in the works left by Marcus Cicero that unguents that have an earthy scent are more agreeable than those smelling of saffron, inasmuch as even in a class of things where corruption is most rife, nevertheless some degree of strictness in vice itself gives more enjoyment. But there are people who get most pleasure from unguent of a dense consistency, which they call thick essence, and who enjoy smearing themselves with perfume and not merely pouring it over them. We have even seen people put scent on the soles of their feet, a practice said to have been taught to the emperor Nero by Marcus Otho; pray, how could it be noticed or give any pleasure from that part of the body? Moreover, we have heard that somebody of private station gave orders for the walls of his bathroom to be sprinkled with scent, and that the Emperor Caligula had the bath-tubs scented, and so also later did one of the slaves of Nero – so that this must not be considered a privilege of prince! Yet what is most surprising is that this indulgence has found its way even into the camp: at all events the eagles and the standards, dusty as they are and bristling with sharp points, are anointed on holydays – and I only wish we were able to say who first introduce this custom. No doubt the fact is that our eagles were bribed by this reward to conquer the world. We look to their patronage forsooth to sanction our vices, so as to have this legitimation for using hair-oil under a helmet. I could not readily say when the use of unguents first made its way to Rome. It is certain that in the year of the City 565 the

censors Publius Licinius Crassus and Lucius Julius Cæsar issued a proclamation forbidding any sale of “foreign essences” – that being the regular name for them. But, good heavens! Nowadays some people actually put scent in their drinks, and it is worth the bitter flavour for their body to enjoy the lavish scent both inside and outside. It is a well-known fact that Lucius Plotius, the brother of Lucius Plancus who was twice consul and censor, when proscribed by the Triumvirs was given away in his hiding-place at Salerno by the scent of the unguent he had been using – a disgrace that acquitted the entire proscription of guilt, for who would not consider that people of that sort deserved to die?

Here the nationalist Pliny seems to be paying the greatest attention to where exactly the individual substances originated – worried and almost anguished by the extent of the expenditure required to import the products from the remotest regions: Arabia, India and China. The real loss this caused the state coffers led to regret that although the territories of the Roman Empire were so huge, they were as good as incapable of making any appropriate contribution.

As these fragrant unguents were used for multiple purposes – sacrifices in temples, medical reasons, aesthetic cosmetics and emollient treatments for athletes' and gymnasts' skin – it was inevitable that perfumes would be linked with pleasure, arousal and sexual activity. However, over the centuries, driven by oriental spiritual conceptions that tended towards sex-phobic, with the spread of lifestyles embracing chastity and repressing instincts, men and women's cultural relationship with their own bodies also changed.

The Christian age

From around the middle of the second century, the Christian movement and the organisation of the Churches played a sig-

nificant role in this field. Around 190 the great theologian Clement of Alexandria devoted an entire chapter of his *Paedagogus* to the question “Whether unguents and wreaths should be used” (2,8), limiting his stricture to certain male excesses that bordered on effeminacy. His contemporary, the Carthaginian polemicist Tertullian, on the other hand, was much more intolerant (for example in *De cultu feminarum*). As part of a more generalised expansion of misogynistic attitudes, the greatest ecclesiastic thinkers and writers penned repeated condemnation of the use of perfumes, thus continuing the authoritarian and acrimonious moralism of the Roman tradition instead of the charitable, compassionate and indulgent magnanimity of Clement’s precepts.

Of the countless examples of such attitudes, I have chosen a few lines by a contemporary poet to Saint Augustine, Bishop Paulinus of Nola. A member of the learned and wealthy senatorian Gallic-Roman nobility, he and his wife Terasia withdrew to a religious life, choosing the Campanian town as his seat. It was here that he also wrote an epithalamium for the wedding of Iulianus and Titia that differs considerably from the old ‘pagan’ canons despite the continuity of the literary genre: the bride is the daughter of Aemilius, Bishop of Benevento, while the groom is a young *clericus lector*, son of Memorius, Bishop of Capua. In the elegant circles of an aristocracy that is both worldly and ecclesiastic, it is common practice to renounce any object or ornament of luxury, including the use of perfumes:

Nulla peregrinis fragret nidoribus aura,
cuncta pudicitiae munditias oleant.
Vnguentum sanctis unum est, quod nomine Christi
diffusum casto spirat odore deum. (25, 35-8)

*That the air is not be impregnated with any foreign odour
but should thus emanate the perfume of purity and modesty.
There is but one perfume that is worthy of the saints, the one*

*that, spread by the name of Christ
emanates the chaste fragrance of God.*

The wife of the future bishop of Aeclanum – and later a follower of Pelagius, an antagonist who equalled Augustine himself in dramatic theological disputes – should therefore pay heed to avoiding luxury waste when looking after herself, and in particular she should refrain from any excess in the use of perfumes and the dimensions of her hairstyle:

Talibus ornari fuge dotibus, o noua sancti
nupta uiri; uacuis sensibus ista placent.
Tu neque odoratis uaga uestibus atque capillis
naribus agnoscி, qua gradiare, uelis,
aut implexarum strue tormentoque comarum
turritum sedeas aedificata caput. (81-6)

*Oh young bride newly-wed to a consecrated man,
spurn any adornments that are more suited to the frivolity of
the senses,
you shall not enjoy walking around and being recognised on
the street
by the fragrance of your garments and hair,
neither shall you sit
with a tower made of curly tresses on your head.*

One can say that the ancient world ends around here: at that time the day-to-day lamentation about matrons' luxury and waste was common place while the borders of the Empire were ceding slightly everywhere, and Italy was subject to incursions and looting by Alaric I and Radagaisus; from the very moment that military disasters and economic decline were to take the quality of life in the Western Roman Empire back several centuries to prehistoric levels, everything gradually lost meaning.

Notes

- 1 Ancient Cilicia corresponds to the South-East area of Asian Turkey, while Panchaea was an island off the Arabian peninsula in the Indian Ocean, perhaps today's Socotra or Failaka. Unless otherwise specified, all English translations are taken from the following website: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>
- 2 Cf. ADAMS 35, in particular owing to the similarities be-
- 3 tween the nose and penis (or also clitoris).
- The word *unguentum*, used in Latin to indicate perfume, reminds us that in the ancient world oil was used as the basis for preparing the product and not alcohol, as has been the case since the late Middle Ages.
- 4 Cf. LUCRETIUS 2, 1123-36.

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THE PERFUME OF THE WILDERNESS

Irene Nasi

In an article that appeared on 14 August 1870 in the *New York Times*, a fashion journalist wrote: “French perfumes have long occupied the first position in Europe, and are much sought after in this country; [...] our country might soon rise to eminence in this regard, for we have here as good a material from which to manufacture as can be found anywhere.”¹

It was with this declaration of independence that in the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States began to gradually distance itself from Europe. As far as perfume is concerned, that is. However, the fulfilment of true cultural independence, and of an American identity that defined the newly-born nation in completely innovative terms² proved to be a much longer and more insidious battle than the one for political independence in 1776.

Whilst scrutinising two of the most renowned newspapers of that time (the aforementioned *New York Times* and *Harper's Bazaar*), numerous articles about the diffusion of the use of perfume in American society came to light; these revealed to what degree cultural emancipation in the United States had also been achieved thanks to the delicate notes of ambergris or bergamot. There is no doubt that the first obstacle that the art of perfumery had to overcome was its puritan legacy and the consequent rejection of anything associated with vanity and personal glamorisation. An article published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1899 stated:

“The too free use of perfume about the person has been avoided for many years and held inadmissible in good society, the

merest hint of a faint odor being all that was possibly allowed.” The very fact that the first perfumes to be used in the most fashionable cities, such as New York or Boston, were light lavender or rosemary water, shows just how cautious American society was in its initial approach to the world of fragrance.

It was in the first decade of the twentieth century that perfume was introduced into intellectual American gatherings as a form of art to all intents and purposes. According to an article in the *New York Times* published on 14 September 1902, it became a means to enrich the cultural scene in large cities with new influences that were frequently of an exotic nature: “Announcement of a ‘perfume concert’ to be given in New York early in October, at Carnegie Lyceum. For this olfactory concert, entitled ‘A Trip to Japan in Sixteen Minutes,’ prof. Sadakichi Hartmann has devised a special machine capable of spreading odours.”

With the arrival of the roaring twenties and the birth of a new image of a more independent and unconventional woman (the flapper), perfume not only became an essential female toiletry, but also an opening on to the Parisian Belle Époque described by Fitzgerald in *Tender is the Night*, or by Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*. Highly fashionable in that period, violet and sandalwood essence had the power to evoke the luxury of high society who spent their nights dancing, holding goblets of champagne and wearing diamonds.

Owing to the Great Depression in the thirties and the consequent difficulty in importing raw materials from the most important centres of the art of perfume in Europe (Grasse and Messina in particular), the American industry that specialised in this sector was forced to start a series of experiments at home regarding the cultivation of plants that could be used as the basis for the creation of new essences. While on the one hand the commerce of perfumes suffered a serious setback, on the other it marked the beginning of research into more inherently ‘American’ fragrances

that could not only satisfy market demand, but could also reach the peaks of the European art of perfumery.

It was at the end of the Second World War that New York established itself as the undisputed leader of perfume, on a par with Paris and Venice. After the victory that saw the United States rise to the peaks of international chess, the New World had an increasing cultural influence on Europe, which had suffered greatly during the war. Thanks to the creation of brands such as Estée Lauder, Helena Rubinstein, Revlon and Elizabeth Arden over the following twenty years the American art of perfumery was able to develop its own, clearly defined identity: evocative of a simpler life style than the European one, certainly less refined but with a strong character.

In 1952 the perfume producer Josephine Catapano created Youth Dew for Estée Lauder, which has always been regarded as the first real American perfume. The floral notes of jasmine and lily of the valley embodied the image of the new American woman: independent and a sportswear lover. In 1979 Estée Lauder introduced *White Linen*, a fresh fragrance suitable for women who loved the outdoor life, while Revlon focussed on the new career woman with *Charlie* (1973). These iconic fragrances met the American taste perfectly, so much so that French perfume sales dropped significantly, as we can read in an article that was published on 5 August 1979 in the *New York Times*: “Revlon’s *Charlie* and Estée Lauder’s *Youth Dew*, examples of perfumes meant to appeal to the so-called liberated woman, edged out traditional top-selling perfumes such as *Chanel No. 5* and Nina Ricci’s *L’Air du Temps*: both sold about \$30 million in annual American sales. The French share in the US market dropped from 20 to 10 percent.”

The main characteristic that sets American perfumes apart, today, as in the past, is their freshness, the search for a naturalness that blends with the smell of the person wearing it. Owing to the

highly middle-class structure of American society, this comes as no surprise. Studies by Munier, Classen, Howes and Synnott³ on the socio-cultural aspects of perfume have shown how a rise to power of the middleclass, both in Europe and the United States, coincided with abandoning what was a typical excess in perfumes by aristocracy, and the ensuing preference for “simple fragrances, highly appreciated for the smoothness of their harmony” (Munier).⁴ Furthermore, there is a strong link between the absence of smell and power: “in contemporary urban life, the strong man is neither the sweaty labourer nor the perfumed aristocrat, but the inodore, clean-cut businessman” (Classen, Howes, Synnott 185).

It was therefore an “olfactory revolution” (*ibid.* 6) that took place in the nineteenth century. Far away from the miasma of the lower classes and suffocating fragrances of aristocracy, the new middle class became the spokesman for an odourless modernity or, as Marcello Aspria said, for an “olfactive silence” (6) that could make room for the pure, incorruptible voice of the soul. The same tendency can also be seen in twentieth-century Western culture, with its portrayal of an ideal society as “deodorized”⁵ (Classen, Howes, Synnott 175). However, one should not neglect the strong individualism of the middle class, in particular if the object of such reflections is American society.

The figure of the self-made man, the characteristics of whom are already to be found in Benjamin Franklin’s *The Autobiography*,⁶ is the symbol of a social structure that is essentially based on the concepts of individualism, self-confidence and, to a certain extent, narcissism. This leaning towards ‘personalisation’ led to a further change in the taste of American society as regards perfume, which can also be seen in more recent advertising campaigns.⁷ The slogans from the nineteen fifties that portrayed female perfume as a means of seduction were replaced in the eighties and nineties by images in which perfume becomes a means of



The gorgeous, sexy-young fragrance. By Revlon

Concentrated Cologne, Perfume, Perfumed Dusting Powder and Body Silk.

Advertisement for *Charlie*, Revlon, end of the seventies

self-satisfaction and personal fulfilment; these two concepts were in line with a post-sixty-eight feminist society and the yuppie culture. One of the more recent tendencies is even to commission exclusive perfumes, which can become an expression of a person's unique nature.

A multiple award-winner from New York City,⁸ the perfumer Christopher Brosius was one of the first to offer his clients this possibility. Summarised in the “CB Manifesto” (2013), his artistic inspiration comes mainly from the relationship with American nature. The *wilderness* is the prime note in Brosius’s creations and, together with a strong individualistic charge, makes this artist the perfect example of the direction contemporary American perfumery is taking: one that leads to the identifying premises of the country itself.

It has been scientifically proven⁹ that the sense of smell evokes memories emotionally to a greater extent than the other senses: with more intensity than an image, the olfactory sensation is transmitted directly to the amygdala and to the hippocampus, the two parts of the limbic system devoted to the memory of emotions. Furthermore, Alan Hirsch’s article “Nostalgia, the Odors of Childhood and Society,” states that the memories of olfactory sensations during childhood are the most vivid and persistent, as they are associated with a person’s first individual experience of the world. Brosius’ childhood, which he spent in a rural village in Pennsylvania, was characterised by the constant contact with the nature around him. “Dirt & dandelions, vegetable gardens, walks in the fall woods, snow, wet rocks from the river” (Brosius) are the main olfactory sensations that the perfumer wanted to reproduce in his creations. He therefore went from the smells of the wilderness, to their synthesis in perfumes evoking its spirit whilst respecting its freshness by not using alcohol.

Brosius’ “CB Manifesto” is an artistic declaration that draws liberally on Whitman’s poem “Song of Myself,” published in its

final version in 1892 in the famous *Leaves of Grass*. The countless similarities reveal not only Brosius' passion for literature (many of his perfumes are either inspired by literary works or simply reveal his passion for books),¹⁰ but also an artistic objective he has in common with Whitman: that of establishing an American identity, one that is based on the exaltation of the self and on the research of the self in relationship with nature.

The manifesto describes perfume as a means of expressing oneself, as one's own "personal landscape" (*ibid.*) in the sense of an interior world. Perfume is an "invisible portrait of who we are" (*ibid.*). But what kind of perfume? Obviously one that respects the originality of the person using it, without masking it. The same difference between synthetic and natural perfumes is expressed in the second stanza of "Song of Myself," which is probably the most well-known example¹¹ of something extremely rare in American literature: the description of an artificial perfume:

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are
crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not
let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the
distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised
and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-tread,
crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart,
the passing of blood and air through my lungs,

The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and
dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn...
(8-35)

The perfumes that intoxicate the poet are the refined (but artificial) ones from old Europe, as opposed to the natural smells of foliage, the ocean, hay drying after being reaped. Similarly, Brosius' manifesto contrasts perfume understood as an "ethereal corset trapping everyone in the same unnatural shape" (Brosius), taking up the same idea of individual suffocation and homogenisation with the one that lays a person's soul bare. Very close to Whitman's heart, the concept of nudity reappears in the perfumer's manifesto: Perfume is discovered fully only by our lovers when we are together – naked" (*ibid.*). For Brosius, perfume is a means for the self to express itself to the full: "I encourage you to be yourself, expand yourself and please yourself / allow yourself the luxury of your own vision" (*ibid.*).

In Whitman the perfume of nature is in tune with the poetic self that recognises it as part of itself and that therefore leads to a thorough awareness of one's own identity. More than any other poem, "Song of Myself" shows just how fundamental and feverish Whitman's search was for terms that could define being American. Indeed, despite the initial self-reference (the first line is a pithy "I celebrate myself," v. 1), the poet sees himself as a man amidst a multitude of men, who all share the same land and the same history: "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (*ibid.*). What emerges from both Whitman's poem and Brosius' manifesto is essentially a symbiotic relationship between what is natural and what is good.

In "The Sociology of Odors," Largey and Watson showed how a person's smell is associated with a precise moral value within a social context. As a consequence, such an attribution is often linked to racial or class prejudice. Hence, if smelling nice corre-

sponds to being a good person, one should reflect on why Brosius created fragrances that were inspired by natural smells, including some that were not particularly pleasant (Brosius' first perfume was *Dirt*, and it was incredibly successful), such as wet soil, trodden fig leaves, the musky smell of hunting in the forest.

For Brosius every element of the wilderness became an excuse to create not only a perfume but a complete, inherently American and almost iconic experience.¹² His descriptions of the fragrances are turned into short sketches of crystalised moments of life that become eternal and shareable through perfume: “*At the Beach 1966* – the prime note in this scent is Coppertone 1967 blended with a new accord I created especially for this perfume – *North Atlantic* – [...] The effect when you wear *At the Beach 1966* is as if you’ve been swimming all day in the ocean” (Brosius). Each perfume tells its own story, from *Gathering Apples* (an experience that is also evoked in Robert Frost’s famous poem “After Apple Picking,”) to *November*, a fragrance that evokes memories of family lunches celebrating Thanksgiving.

It was the role of the wilderness in American culture that Roderick Nash analysed in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. With its etymology as the starting point, Nash describes its development and transformation throughout history, underlining (already in the introduction) the difficulty of defining the excessively random and fleeting nature of the concept. With its meaning of personal, uncontrollable volition, the root of the word *will* seems to indicate the stimulus of individuality in it,¹³ as well as the fact that it is more a mental state than a spatial concept. From the writings of seventeenth century pioneers, one can infer that Puritans saw this wild nature as a place with neither God nor law, and thus a place to be purified and conquered.

This vision changed radically as a result of the influence of European romanticism and the birth of transcendentalism and the wilderness became an actual foundation of the American identity.

According to Nash, it became a “cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem” (67). Furthermore, seen as an expression of everything that is instinctive and intact, the positive character of this wild nature was contrasted with European ruins, a symbol of a nature that had been modified and corrupted, light years away from the original innocence of the New World.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the creation of large urban centres and the progressive distancing of inhabitants from the wilderness made the latter into a cult. The idea of the systematic conservation of the wildest natural areas in the United States can already be found in Thoreau’s writings, one of the most authoritative voices of Transcendentalism. In this regard, the essay “Walking” (1862) is relevant; the author writes: “in Wilderness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. [...] From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind” (37). Frederick Jackson Turner, author of *The Frontier in American History* (1893) also says that if it had not had wild territories to conquer (both physically and mentally), the American identity would have lost its foundation. The preservation of these areas thus became a moral imperative: defending the wilderness meant defending America.

On 3 September 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, thanks to which the protection of specific natural areas became law. An initial attempt to define the wilderness was so that such areas could be identified: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrampled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (121). Significant here is the fact that, despite the assertion that these areas are totally independent from the modifying action of man, he is still present as a visitor. This is only one of the many contradictions in the Wilderness Act, the very presence of which is intrinsic to the inspiration of

the act itself: can one really speak of wilderness if it is confined within federal limits?

Once again, what was preserved was the evocative power of this concept rather than its physical reality. There is no doubt that the wilderness is a distinctive, unique trait of America, the ideal she turns to every time she is seeking her own identity.

At a moment of great social and cultural change, in a completely innovative fashion, with his creations Christopher Brosius wanted to revive the foundation of being American. Embracing in a perfume the vastness of the ocean, the scent of a sequoia forest or the silence of the Alaskan snow is an act of affirmation, a return to the origins, to the image that, despite its darker sides and the numerous testimonies of its fallibility, continues to cherish that dream: that of a pioneer with the immense horizon open before him.

Notes

- 1 All the articles presented here, published in numbers of the *New York Times* and *Harper's Bazaar*, and are taken from the *press archive* section on the internet website www.scented-pages.com
- 2 Transcendentalism was undoubtedly the philosophical-literary movement underlying the affirmation of artistic and cultural independence.
- 3 The analysis of perfume as a social and cultural phenomenon is relatively recent. Despite the publication in 1977 of the article "The Sociology of Odors," by Gale Largey and Rod Watson, it was not until the nineties that this new area of academic interest was taken seriously and anthropological and sociological studies were carried out by Constance Clasen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott.
- 4 Translated by C. Cawthra.
- 5 Of interest here is the article by Vendela Vida "America's Deodorized Fiction. Has American Fiction Been Deodorized?" which appeared in *Slate* in 2013; in it the author describes the general lack of olfactory sensations in American literature, sensations that can, however, be found in some contemporary novels connected to 11th September. *The Autobiography* by Benjamin Franklin (published posthumously in 1791) laid the basis for what was to become an American icon par excellence: the self-made man. Nevertheless, the expression comes from a famous speech made in 1859 by Frederick Douglass, called "Self-Made Men," and published in 1895. Despite the differences, both essays describe the social ascent of persons from a more humble background, establishing themselves to the full socially, through hard work and moral integrity.
- Cf. CLASSEN, HOWES, SYNNOTT 189-90.

- 8 In 2000 Brosius won two awards from the Fragrance Foundation, and in 2003 no less than seventy of his creations were included in the triennial exhibition of the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum. For the very first time in history, an art museum recognised perfume as a design object.
- 9 In this regard of interest is the report on the scientific experiment carried out at Brown University in 2003 and coordinated by Rachel S. Herz: "Neuroimaging evidence for the emotional potency of odor-evoked memory".
- 10 Some fragrances that illustrate this tendency are *In the Library, A Room With A View*, or the more cryptic *Soaked Earth*, named after a novel by Stella Gibbons. One of the new perfumes in production will be inspired by *Genji monogatari*, the great Japanese literary classic.
- 11 Together with the description of the ambergris of the sperm whales in chapter XCII in *Moby Dick*.
- 12 Exemplary here are the fragrances *Under the Arbor*, *Wild Hunt/Forest*, *In the Summer Kitchen* and *Winter 1972*.
- 13 Nash gives a detailed etymological explanation of the word, the root of which *will* is derived from the Teutonic and Norse languages. The adjective *wild* is derived from *willed*, with the meaning of immoderate, confused, untidy. One of the first examples of the word *wildeor* (*deor* is derived from Old English and means animal) is in the epic poem Beowulf, where the word is used in reference to wild, imaginary animals. *Wildeor* was then contracted to *wilder* followed later by *wildern* and finally *wilderness*. Etymologically, the word means *Wild-dēor-ness* a place of wild animals (cf. NASH 1-2).

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SHAKESPEARE'S PERFUMES

Sergio Perosa

Plots and characters in Shakespeare's tragedies, histories and 'problem plays' are so violent and gory, that no amount of perfume can sweeten them: its expected effects do not actually work. I will start with some of these negative cases, to clear the way.

In *Macbeth*, in the famous sleep-walking scene, Lady Macbeth's agonised cry:

Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia
will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh! (V, 1, 448-50)

A linguistic warning. If relevant examples are not to be missed, one must bear in mind, also for what follows, that in Shakespeare's language *sweet* (both noun and adjective) had often the express meaning of perfume/perfumed, and *to sweeten* equalled 'to perfume'. What other meaning could a pair of "sweet gloves" have in *The Winter's Tale* (IV, 4, 243) or the gloves that are "as sweet as damask roses" in *Titus Andronicus* (II, 4, 6)? The same can be said of the "sweet musk roses" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (II, 1, 252), of "Sweets to the sweet: farewell!" spoken by the Queen while she scatters flowers on Ophelia's tomb in *Hamlet* (V, I, 237), and of "With fairest flowers ... I'll sweeten the sad grave" in *Cymbeline* (IV, 2, 220). In *Titus Andronicus* (II, 4, 6) "sweet water" is clearly perfumed water, and so is the "sweet water" that Paris vows to sprinkle on Juliet's sepulchre (*Romeo and Juliet*, V, 3, 12-14). This obvious meaning is recorded in all good dictionaries. In the *Shorter Oxford*

English Dictionary we find, and with quotations from Shakespeare: “Sweet. Sb. . . . 5. Sweetness of smell, fragrance; *pl.*, sweet odours, scents or perfumes: *poet.* 1594; *a.* and *adv.* 2. Pleasing to the sense of smell; having a pleasant odour; fragrant . . . *b. spec.* scented.” One is therefore surprised by fanciful translations that render it in a variety of ways, and compromise our right comprehension of Shakespeare.

Let us go back to Lady Macbeth’s distraught utterance: despite the fact that “perfumes of Arabia” – by ‘Arabia’ meaning the entire Near East – were already legendary in the Middle Ages and the name itself evoked sweet sensations, they are totally insufficient to the admittedly desperate aim to *sweeten* any trace of her crime, above all to herself. One should also bear in mind that during the Elizabethan age, owing to the terrible living and hygienic conditions, unpleasant smells abounded: hence other examples of a stench that is impervious to any “sweetening” with perfumes. In the startling Sonnet 130 (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” a line followed by a whole barrage of disparaging descriptions of her charms), Shakespeare lets himself go:

And in some perfumes there’s more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. (ll. 7-8)

So much for his lover’s breath. Not to mention the breath of the common people, foul-smelling by definition: the plebs in Julius Caesar emanate “a deal of stinking breath that it had almost choked Caesar” (I, 2, 240-44) – who does indeed soon faint and fall to the ground. It was an age in which perfumes were a necessary antidote to bad smells that saturated the air, rather than a touch of grace and attractiveness. There were *perfumers* whose task was to ‘sweeten’ the rooms (*Much Ado About Nothing*, I, 3, 60; in contemporary Venice there were, for the same purpose, ‘*essenzieri*’); lavender was used as a “strewing herb,” scattered on the ground or on boards to keep them

clean and perfumed, and in his essay “On Gardens” Francis Bacon reminds us that thyme was used to perfume the air.

In contrast, Prince Hamlet has a sweet, perfumed breath, as Ofelia observes in the cruel scene of their confrontation: he not only presented her with gifts (which he denies having given her), but

With them words of so sweet breath compos'd
As made the things more rich; their perfume lost,
Take them again. (III, 1, 98-100)

In *Cymbeline* we are told of Imogen “Tis her breathing that / Perfumes the chamber thus” (II, 2, 17-18).

In the ‘brothel scene’, Desdemona appears to Othello like a black weed, beautiful to look at and so perfumed it hurts one’s senses: “O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair? / Thou smell’st so sweet, that the sense aches at thee” (IV, 2, 68-69). Nevertheless, when he is about to suffocate her, reflecting on the inevitable consequences of the murder he is committing, he thinks of a rose being picked, that nothing can bring back to life – so that it has to be smelled on the branch:

when I have pluck’d the rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again,
It must needs wither: I’ll smell it on the tree. *Kisses her*

There is no way back. Yet with the last kiss Othello enjoys a moment of balsamic breath, of heavenly fragrance, that almost results in his alleged ‘justice’ to break her sword:

A balmy breath that doth almost persuade
Justice herself to break her sword. (V, 2, 13-17)

Desdemona’s, Imogen’s and Hamlet’s breath itself is like a perfume coming from nature, gardening or the like.

Turning from human to natural perfumes, in the *Sonnets* beauty is as ephemeral as a flower; summer smells of honey – but will it survive the rapid passage of time? “O, how shall summer’s honey breath hold out” (N. 65, l. 9). The early, ‘forward’ violet is a delightful thief who has stolen the perfumed breath of the poet’s beloved:

The forward violet thus did I chide:
 Sweet thief, where didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,
 If not from my love’s breath? (N. 99, ll. 1-3)

In *Hamlet*, Laertes finds instead that as a source of perfume, pleasure, or gratification, the violet is short-lived and transitory, “The pleasure and suppliance of a minute; / No more” (I, 3, 7). This is a motif that is often associated with flowers and their perfume. But it is precisely to a violet that Henry V refers when the night before the battle he muses that first and foremost he is a man, not a king – to simple men it smells the same as it does to him: “I think the king is but a man, as I am; The violet smells to him as it doth to me” (IV, 1, 107).

Roses, on the other hand, offer a kaleidoscope of perfumes: the allusion to synaesthesia is deliberate and repeated. There is the *musk rose* (probably the *Rosa arvensis*) and the pink-coloured *damask rose*. It is significant that in Shakespeare’s and his contemporaries’ works the *sweet rose* is often contrasted with the *canker* or *canker-bloom* because of its sweet, ‘cultivated’ perfume compared to the supposedly odourless wild flower. According to a centuries-long tradition, *canker* is the repugnant caterpillar or worm that eats up the rose and lurks in its buds, and as such it is often mentioned in his plays and sonnets. A perfect example is in No. 35: “And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud,” (l. 3) or No. 5: “like a canker in the fragrant rose” (l. 4); but also in *The Two*

Gentlemen of Verona, “in the sweetest bud / The eating canker dwells” (I, 1, 43); in *Romeo and Juliet*, “soon the canker death eats up that plant” (II, 3, 30), and in *Hamlet*, “The canker galls the infants of the spring / Too oft before their buttons be disclos’d” (I, 3, 39-40).

On the other hand, *canker-bloom* – also known simply as *canker* – referred to the *rosa canina*, the dog rose, which is wild, grows in briars and was considered odourless (“I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace,” says Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*. I, 3, 22), in deliberate contrast with the perfumed rose. In the first part of *Henry IV*:

To put down Richard, that sweet lovely rose,
And plant this thorn, this canker, Bolingbroke? (I, 3, 176-77)

With an analogous meaning and contrast, the *canker-blooms* appear in Sonnet 54:

The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
For that sweet odour which doth in it live.
The canker-blooms have full as deep a dye
As the perfumed tincture of the rose. (ll. 2-6)

However, the *canker-bloom* buds are neither admired nor courted, they wilt and die alone: “They lived unwoo’d, and unsuspected fade; / Die to themselves,” while “Sweet roses do not so; / Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odours made” (ll. 9- 12).

The first image of this conclusion reappears in Sonnet 94 – about the corruption of the mighty who avail themselves of accomplices and hatchet men to carry out their evil deeds: “The summer’s flower is to the summer sweet, / Though to itself it only live and die.” In this sonnet, however, the metaphor being developed is that of an infected flower that proves to be worse than a weed, and even smellier:

But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity;

...

Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. (ll. 9-14)

As if to underline its importance, this last line appears also in *Edward III*, a play reputedly written, at least partially, by Shakespeare, from which it might have been taken (II, 1, 451).

The other idea expressed at the end of Sonnet 54, that particularly fragrant perfumes can be extracted from roses (“Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odours made”), leads to a second aspect that deserves particular attention here: artificial, “distilled” perfumes.

They are mentioned in *Cymbeline*, when the Queen declares that Doctor Cornelius has instructed her in the art of perfume distillation, “Hast thou not learn’d me how / To make perfumes? distill? preserve? Yea so” (I, 6, 12-16), so that the king himself is charmed by her. However, Shakespeare also uses it as a particular metaphor – that becomes one of his countless distinctive traits – in the so-called marriage sonnets (No. 1-17), in which he urges his beloved friend, the *fair youth*, to marry.

In these sonnets, perfumes, being distilled essences, become the figure of the friend who should – and is invited to – ‘distil’ his own essence, i.e. his semen, to procreate his offspring. There are various allusions to the artificial creation of perfumes, but I shall concentrate on Shakespeare’s more pregnant poetical parallels: the *fair youth* is called upon to ‘distil’ himself for procreation, in the same way as perfumes do.

John Donne’s eighth elegy, too, we recall, begins with a reference to this distillation process: “As the sweet sweat of roses in a still.” But the discharge of semen that is being asked of Shakespeare’s friend to guarantee his lineage in the marriage sonnets is identified with the distillation process of perfumes in a precise, insistent, and totalising way. In Sonnet 104 the passing of the seasons is compared to his beloved’s life, with an explicit reference to perfumes:

Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burn'd,
Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green. (ll. 7-8),

and his beauty will fade as it does for them.

The example in Sonnet 5 is of even greater pregnancy and significance:

Then, were not summer's distillation left
A liquid prisoner pent in walls of grass,
Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,

...

But flowers distill'd, though they with winter meet,
Leese but their show: their substance still lies sweet. (ll. 9-14)

Flowers transmute and perpetuate themselves as perfumes;
so will this fair youth do in his offspring.

A section of the book *Delights for Ladies, to Adorne their Persons, Tables, Closets, and Distillatories; with Beauties, Banquets, Perfumes, and Waters*, published in 1628, is devoted to the “Secrets of Distillation.” The author, Sir Hugh Plat (1552-1611?), was Shakespeare’s contemporary; the text was probably available in manuscript, but regrettably there is no way to establish whether the playwright was familiar with it. A comparison would allow for further elucidation of this peculiarly Shakespearean aspect or ‘conceit.’ (The first of these manuals had been printed in Venice in 1555 as *I Notandissimi Secreti de l'Arte Profumatoria*.)

Everything we have said so far confirms both the meaning of *sweet* as ‘perfumed,’ and that Shakespeare used it in this specific sense. There is also a reference to “rose water:” “Let one attend him with a silver basin / Full of rose-water and bestrew'd of flowers,” in the *Induction* to *The Taming of the Shrew* (I, 1, 55). In

Romeo and Juliet, on the apothecary's shelves, among other "beggarly" items "thinly scattered," are also mentioned "old cakes of roses" (V, 1, 47) – a preparation of rose-petals in the form of cakes used as perfume, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In another famous quotation, the *sweet rose* exists in its own essence – in every sense of the word –, regardless of its name. Ah, were you not Romeo!, Juliet sighs, leading to another famous utterance that became proverbial:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By another name would smell as sweet. (II, 2, 243-44)

Today this is an obvious, generally acknowledged truth, a truism for linguistics and general knowledge: qualities are not linked to nouns and words, language terms are arbitrary and cannot be 'perfumed' or otherwise, depending on the thing they express. Here Shakespeare was probably ahead of his times – as usual. Nevertheless, he became really interested and believed in perfumes. If there is another line of contrast in the sonnets between the *fair youth* and the *dark lady* who tempts him away from the poet, it is between the sweet perfume emanating from the former, and the heavy, coarse, sexual scent from the latter.

In clear reference to Shakespeare, Gertrude Stein – a blunt American whose writings could be described as totally arbitrary from a linguistic point of view, but who was also bound to concrete words and things – in another well-known assertion countered (or confirmed?) "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." Sure enough: with or without Juliet's reflections about their name, Shakespeare's sweet roses by definition emanate perfume, just like the breath of good and loving people (though his lovers weren't exactly honest: neither Hamlet nor the fair youth of the sonnets are so).

Elsewhere, this value and significance of perfume finds its

negative counterpart in the affectation of dandies and coquettish ladies, cheap and ‘paid’ women, male and female courtiers, both high and low. For dramatic purposes, Shakespeare frequently fluctuates between one idea, concept, affirmation, or world vision, and their opposite. Thus, in the same fashion as he repeatedly expresses prejudice against and almost disgust for feminine sexuality, he is equally repulsed by prettifications, stigmatising the excessive use of cosmetics in his days, which he called ‘paintings,’ and their unchecked diffusion. In diverse sonnets and plays his repulsion for cosmetic applications that disguise life and mystify reality is extreme; he sees them as an artificial making-up or counterfeit that creates a false appearance, hiding and disguising vice, defects, the inner emptiness of both men and women. Perfumes are of course only an appendix or a secondary aspect of all this vituperation and negativity, but they do feature dramatically in the picture – which brings us back to where we started.

Hamlet is one of the many who shows disgust for those who use cosmetics and perfumes excessively or inappropriately, such as affected courtiers. At the end of his play one of these, Osric, brings him King Claudius’s treacherous challenge and Hamlet taunts and makes endless fun of him – a ‘water-fly,’ whose excessive fawning, recherché language, and bonnet-waving seem to herald a trail of odorous perfume (Hamlet is so incensed, that with a double comparative he asks “Why do we wrap the gentleman [Laertes] in our more rawer breath?”, V, 2, 119-120). There are repugnant, loathsome references to the ravages of cosmetics in two other chilling passages of the play: in the scene with Ofelia, “I have heard of your paintings, too, well enough; God has given you one face, and you make yourself another” (III, 1, 143), Hamlet blasts against her; and dreadfully in the scene when he muses upon Yorick’s skull: “Now get you to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come” (V, 1, 187-89).

In the first part of *Henry IV*, the fiery Hotspur, who has just returned injured, exhausted and covered in mud from the battle, justifies his outburst of anger caused by the ‘popinjay,’ the coquettish fop and affected dandy who came to demand that he hand over the prisoners:

He was perfumed like a milliner.
And 'twixt his finger and his thumb he held
A pouncet-box, which ever and anon,
He gave his nose and took't away again;
 . . .
I then, all smarting with my wounds being cold
To be so pest'red with a popinjay
 . . .
[...] he made me mad
To see him shine so brisk, and smell so sweet,
And talk so like a waiting-gentlewoman. (I, 3, 36-51)

(Similarly, in his fourth elegy, *The Perfume*, John Donne defines “the greatest stain to man’s estate, to be called effeminate,” ll. 61-62). Finally, the “perfumed dandies” in Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, smell “like Bucklesbury in simple-time” (II, 2, 249): like the apothecaries’ street, whose obnoxious concoctions of herbs and spices can be smelt miles away. And in a passage – conclusive for our purposes – in *Timon of Athens*, “dis-eased perfumes” are mentioned, as if they were a synonym for perfumed courtiers or lovers (IV, 3, 60). Cosmetics and thus also perfumes appear to emphasise, as mentioned before, the ‘false seeming’ that challenges, disguises and betrays life; far from helping to hide eyesores and ugliness, as one would hope, they rather highlight them.

A full-fledged, unhindered exaltation of perfumes shines at the beginning of *Twelfth Night*:

If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it.

...
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes on a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour. (I, 1, 1-7)

Music is equated to perfumed exhalations from flowers: another beautiful example of synaesthesia. Similarly, in the sonnets, perfumes wafted around like a memory of the beloved fair youth.

A final, superb evocation of the soothing and exhilarating effect of perfume – one can almost smell it whilst reading – is in Ahenobarbus' enchanted description of Cleopatra, which culminates in the distracting effect of its diffusion. On the river Cydnus,

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne
Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them;
[...] From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
Her people out upon her; and Antony,
Entron'd i'th'market place, did sit alone
Whistling to the air. (II, 2, 215-221)

Can one imagine invisible perfume having a greater power – the power to impregnate the sails, the air itself, enveloping and pervading everything, becoming one with the barge, making the winds amorous and reaching out to the wharfs? (Significantly this famous passage will be taken up, modified and ‘reversed’ in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* for section II, “A Game of Chess,” to

emphasise by contrast contemporary artificiality, dissipation, and loss of meaning).

Those gathered so far are just a few reflections, as ephemeral as the perfume of violets. And this brings us to another literary/cultural warning: the strongest, enduring, unalterable perfume, is the one that transpires from Shakespeare's own verses, even the cruellest ones, in a synaesthesia that equals and indeed surpasses the ones he evoked. His verses – whether 'sweet' or coarse – smell good.

So much so that with an infinity of quotations, whether explicit, hidden, 'covert' or allusive, nowadays both he and his works are evoked in the names of an endless number of brands for perfumes, essences, fragrances. Shakespeare, his plays and his characters have become an advertising icon of perfumery. On the Internet one can find the following: Black Phoenix Alchemy Lab has a Shakespeare Collection that has named its essences after his characters – *Antony*, *Caliban*, *The Apothecary*, *Cordelia*, *Juliet*, *Helen*, and even *Iago*, *Lear*, *Lady Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Tamora* and *Yorick* (with pertinent quotations). Body Time has launched the "Shakespeare In the Park – New Essences," using the corresponding names of his plays: in this case the lucky ones are *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. There was a "Shakespeare Perfume Event" to create perfumes that were inspired by the former plays. There is also a "'Shakespeare in Love' red rose composition," another perfume with the menacing name *Beware the Ides of March* and another called *Fair Verona*, in honour of Juliet. The recent Mavive line also includes *The Merchant of Venice*. These are just a few; the list could go on. There is an academy of Shakespearian perfumes in India, in Italy and, I expect, elsewhere.

I hardly believe that Shakespeare would have taken offence; on the contrary, he might have smiled, knowingly and pleased.

IVAN BUNIN. THE SCENT OF APPLES AND MEMORY

Donatella Possamai

You try to make him [Bunin] reminisце, describe. With him the two are synonymous; his art is extremely close to that of the painter, at times disconcertingly so. He perceives and records the finest details of color and line, taxing both your vision and memory, forgetting that literary composition differs from one on canvas, which permits your eyes to rove up and down, back and forth, simultaneously observing both the details and the ensemble. If possible, Bunin is even more sensitive to odors. In his verse and in his prose he uses odor to evoke a multiple variety of sensations. (Kaun 134)

Ivan Alekseevič Bunin was the first Russian writer – and moreover in exile – to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1933. The official motivation was as follows: “for the strict artistry with which he has carried on the classical Russian traditions in prose writing.”¹ Together with that of Maksim Gor’kij, his name had been put forward for over ten years by Romain Rolland, who had been awarded the Nobel in 1915.²

Born in 1870 in Voronež,³ in South-West European Russia, to an old landed gentry family in decline, Bunin would often be remembered as the spokesman for a world that was destined to disappear shortly afterwards, swept away by the turmoil of the revolution. In his brief discourse before the acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize at the Grand Hôtel banquet in Stockholm on

10 December 1933, Wilhelm Nordenson, professor at the Karolinska Institutet succinctly and masterfully described the writer's artistic traits as follows:

Not only the efforts to explore the subtleties of atoms and chromosomes have been rewarded today; also brilliant efforts to describe the subtleties of the human soul have been crowned with the golden laurel of the Nobel Prize. You have, Mr. Bunin, thoroughly explored the soul of vanished Russia, and in doing so, you have most meritoriously continued the glorious traditions of the great Russian literature. You have given us the most valuable picture of Russian society as it once was, and well do we understand the feelings with which you must have seen the destruction of the society with which you were so intimately connected. May our feelings of sympathy be of some comfort to you in the melancholy of exile. (*The Nobel Prize in Literature 1933.*
Ivan Bunin. Banquet Speech)

There is no doubt that the sense of melancholic nostalgia for a Russia that no longer exists is one of the key stylistic features in Bunin's works, since he continued to choose his homeland as the setting for his works, and to connect them closely to his birthplace even after he had moved to France for once and for all in 1919, where he died in Paris in 1953. Rather than a direct result of his expatriation and status as an exile, unlike other writers who emigrated, in Bunin's work this sense of sadness caused by memory seems to be more an ontological question that is intrinsically linked to his human essence. As a matter of fact, his earliest short stories have often been compared to those by a very close friend of his, Čechov, as they lack any real plot, and it is in these short stories that a sort of constant, subtle but never sorrowful regret for the things of the past transpires; it is a regret that summarises human inability to stop things in the

hic et nunc, that is, a regret for the relentless passing of time, for being a prisoner of the flow of *chronos*.

It was at the turn of the century – at the crossroads of the great nineteenth-century tradition of Russian realism and the birth of modernism – that in the tenth number of the journal *Žizn'*, in October 1900,⁴ Bunin published the short story “Antonovskie jabloki” (“Antonov Apples”⁵); this was twenty years before he emigrated. Bunin was to become a great master of short stories, and as Gleb Struve pointed out as early as 1933, one year before he received the Nobel Prize:

Numerically speaking, short stories represent Bunin's most important contribution to literature. Of these there are six volumes dating from the pre-revolutionary period, and four published since the Revolution outside Russia. It is also, perhaps, in the domain of the short story that lie Bunin's greatest and most perfect achievements... (424)

In the version published in *Žizn'* the short story is given the significant subtitle “Kartiny iz knigi ‘Épitafi’” (Pictures from the Book *Epitaph*⁶). As Jurij Mal'cev (1994, 84) observes, the caption to the allusive “epitaph” even further highlights the barely thirty-year-old Bunin's penchant for the theme of the past that was to play a key role in all his works. “Antonov Apples” marks a turning point in the author's writing as it is here, for the first time, that the plot is not so much based on the chronological succession of events but on the free association of images, in a manner that was more intrinsic to poetry, of which Bunin was also a fervid reader. The short story is therefore difficult to summarise, as it has no *fabula*, no plot in the classical sense of the word; the narrator is anonymous and unidentifiable, the background is the village Vy-selki and its surrounding countryside, and all we are told is that “Old men and women lived long lives there – the first true sign that a village is well off...”⁷. We could say that the main frame-

work of the short story lies in the development of the memory in a succession of simultaneous scenes, marked by the narrator's voice: "I remember ...", "I recall ...". It should be pointed out that in the context of Bunin's artistic method, as can already be seen in this short story, it is the actual process of remembering and not the result that is important in the creative process; as Anna Lušenkova so wisely points out when talking about Bunin and Vladimir Nabokov:

For both Bunin and Nabokov literary creation is therefore closely tied to an intense process of the memory. Furthermore, both of them believe there is a fundamental difference between memory in the sense of process (память) and memory in the sense of result, associated with memories (воспоминания). Extraneous to their artistic methods, the latter is nothing other than an inert picture of the past. For them memory is important as a process: active during the creative procedure, this kind of memory is closely linked to awareness of the self. (127)

The narrator in "Antonov Apples" therefore remembers the youthful sensations aroused in him by the past atmosphere of living in the countryside of landed gentry and peasants rather than actual events (which are, as said earlier, as good as absent). It is these sensations in the narrative framework of the short story, that skilfully induce in the reader a sense of melancholy for the disappearance of the "Home of the Gentry" that he portrays. If we were to apply in retrospective the conceptual categorisation outlined by Svetlana Boym, which foresees two kinds of nostalgia – "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia" (41) – Bunin's story is certainly pervaded with the latter; this is due to the sentiment of the loss of one's native places and the impossibility to turn back time, a nostalgia in which the *ἄλγος* cannot and does not want to implicate the *νόστος*, other than in fantasy. However, the author is driven by his imagination to explore the lands

that are still alive in the past because “The innate imagination in nostalgia is related to the original *humus* and with the wish for transcendency, going beyond the self: in both time and space. The wish of going beyond the limit, knowing it exists” (Mirabelli 3). In this case this displacement is not so much the fruit of a physical movement but of a temporal one; the mental chronotope can only be reconstructed in its entirety by crossing the barriers of time. At that time Bunin can certainly not have known that his own existence was to be transformed into a real exile, with the complete, final loss of a space that was so intimately linked to his identity.

In “Antonov Apples,” the tools for this melancholic recollection are represented by the smells, first and foremost the fragrance of the apples, and it is this that invigorates and gives rhythm to the narration as they appear throughout the tale:

Помню раннее, свежее, тихое утро... Помню большой, весь золотой, подсохший и поредевший сад, помню кленовые аллеи, тонкий аромат опавшей листвы и — запах антоновских яблок, запах меда и осенней свежести. (BUNIN 1984, 19)

I remember a fresh and quiet morning ... The big garden, its dry and thinned-out leaves turning golden in the early light. I remember the avenue of maples, the delicate smell of the fallen leaves, and the scent of autumn apples – antonovkas, that mix of honey and fall freshness ... (3)⁸

And again: “The scent of apples hangs everywhere...” (4) (“Всюду сильно пахнет яблоками...”, *ibid.*)

It is as if each new image of the countryside, which is freely associated with the preceding scenes, is awakened by the memory of the perception of this smell:

Войдешь в дом и прежде всего услышишь запах яблок, а потом уже другие: старой мебели красного дерева, сущеного липового цвета, который с июня лежит на окнах... (24)

You notice first the scent of apples as you go into the house, and then the other smells: old furniture made of mahogany, dried-out linden flowers that were scattered on the windowsills in June ... (9)

It is through the persistence of the memory that time expands and it is the fragrances and perfumes, with procedures and associations that border on synesthesia that stimulate the memory and allow a visual, almost tactile reconstruction of that memory, annulling any temporal barriers. As Renato Poggiali keenly observed:

Thus in Antonov Apples (Antonovskie jabloki, 1900) he had used, at least ten years earlier, the Proustian device of the “interrémence du cœur” by causing the peculiar scent of a particular kind of apple to recall in the mind of the protagonist all the forgotten memories of the past life of his family and of himself. (277)

The ability of olfactory perceptions to take root in the memory and arouse and re-arouse vivid ‘autobiographical’ memories – the so-called “Proustian phenomenon,” as Simon Chu and John Downes called it in their important study on the subject⁹ – has now almost certainly been confirmed scientifically. Smells are able to “activate the episodic memory: that is, that form of long-term memory that contains all the autobiographical memories comprising our identity” (Cavalieri 1). In Proustian terms, in “Antonov Apples” what we see is an alternation of *mémoire volontaire*, in the sense of a logical, conscious procedure, and *mémoire involontaire*.

ntaire, the spontaneous memory that is aroused by the senses and emotively labelled; it is the latter that makes it possible to cover time without any limits, without having to go in a specific direction, hence the ability of human beings to project themselves in the infinite. Pertinent for us here is how the smell of apples not only stimulates the memory process (just like the famous Proustian *madeleine*), throughout the entire tale, breaking down the structure, but also how, as a motive of memory, it becomes the instrument of an artistic victory over time, a means of reconstruction and rejoining with a fragment of past experience that will never return. With “Antonov Apples,” the author retrieves a part of himself that is chronologically distant but not irretrievably lost since it can be revived in an artistic creation; the sense of tenuous melancholy that permeates the story is probably to be attributed to the subtle, unconscious joy of this small triumph. This aesthetic method of the memory’s retrieving and interiorising heralds the unique characteristics of Bunin’s later works and it is shown to the full in *Žizn’ Arsen’eva* (*The Life of Arseniev*), his greatest novel, written at the end of the twenties. It is no coincidence that many critics compared it to Proust’s *Recherche*, this owing also to something Bunin himself said when he wrote to Petr Bicilli in 1936: “When something is fashionable, I ‘deliberately’ keep my distance. That’s what I did with Proust. It was only recently that I read him and it even frightened me: in fact, in *Žizn’ Arsen’eva* [...] there are many completely Proustian points!”¹⁰

As Hans Rindisbacher points out: “With the richness of his olfactory vocabulary and its application in a text of remembered, impressionistic images and events, the Bunin of ‘apple scent’ stands on the threshold to the modernist, more aggressive use of olfaction in narrative prose...” (140). We might therefore have already gone beyond the ‘threshold’ the critic mentions, and not only because, as said earlier, the fragrance of apples is both an evocative and structural element of a reality that is more psycho-

logical than it is real, but also because of the other characteristics of this text that break with, as is typical of modernist tradition, traditional genres, fragmenting the idea of time and causing the plot to collapse.

Bunin was perfectly aware of the importance of smells and perfumes as a tool to stimulate artistic creation; a great perfectionist and a lover of dry, verbal craftsmanship, he wrote and rewrote his works more than once. This was also the case with "Antonov Apples," and on the first page of an earlier version we find this passage, which was cut later:

Антоновские яблоки... Где-то я читал, что Шиллер любил, чтобы в его комнате лежали яблоки: улежавшись, они своим запахом возбуждали в нем творческие настроения... Не знаю, насколько справедлив этот рассказ, но вполне понимаю его: известно, как сильно действуют на нас запахи... Есть вещи, которые прекрасны сами по себе, но больше всего потому, что они заставляют нас сильнее чувствовать жизнь. Красота природы, песня, музыка, колокола в солнечное утро, запахи... Запахи особенно сильно действуют на нас, и между ними есть особенно здоровые и яркие: запах моря, запах леса, чернозема весною, прелой осенней листвы, улежавшихся яблок... чудный запах крепких антоновских яблок, сочных и всегда холодных, пахнущих слегка медом, а больше всего осенней свежестью! (BUNIN 1987, 488-9)

Antonov apples... I read somewhere that Schiller loved apples in a room: once they had ripened their fragrance would awaken his creative humour... How much truth there is in this tale I do not know, but I understand him perfectly: it is a known fact how the strength of smells affects us... There are things that are beautiful in themselves, but in particular because they force us to experience life even more. The beauty of nature,

a song, music, bells ringing on a sunny morning, fragrances ... Fragrances effect us with a particular strength and some of them are particularly strong and vivid: the smell of the sea, the fragrance of the woods, fertile earth in spring, autumn leaves decomposing, ripe apples ... the marvellous fragrance of crispy Antonov apples, juicy and always cold, that smell a bit of honey but of autumn freshness in particular.

Bunin was therefore perfectly aware of the “powerful link with the emotive memory” and of the “extraordinary evocative strength and strong affective importance of smells” (Cavalieri 2) and he used them deliberately in the structure of his tale.

And it is the fragrance of apples that will mark the end of the tale, thus sealing the disappearance of a world, but only from the kingdom of the visible, and not from the superior dominion of artistic creation.

In fact, the last short chapter begins as follows:

Запах антоновских яблок исчезает из помещичьих усадеб. Эти дни были так недавно, а меж тем мне кажется, что с тех пор прошло чуть не целое столетие. (BUNIN 1984, 29)

The aroma of antonovkas is disappearing from estates and country houses. We lived those days not long ago, and yet it seems a hundred years have passed since then. (4)

Notes

- 1 Cf. *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1933. Ivan Bunin*.
- 2 For more about the historical reconstruction of the events connected to the award of the Nobel Prize for literature to Bunin cf. STRÖMBERG.
- 3 There are countless monographs with extensive sections dedicated to the writer's biography and memories. Cf. the books by, BABOREKO, MAL'CEV, Roščin, SMIRNOVA, the three volumes by GAITON MARULLO, the two by GRIN, two in the series "Literaturnoe Nasledstvo", and one from the series *Pro et Contra*, to name but a few.
- 4 Žizn' (*Life*) was very well-known at that time; it was published in Russia from 1897 to 1901, the year in which the publication was suspended and the editors arrested for allegedly sympathising with the Social Democrats. It was published for a while abroad afterwards. Žizn' published
- 5 short stories by Anton Čechov, Leonid Andreev and Maksim Gor'kij.
- 6 We opted for this translation because although we agree with Fasmer's interpretation of "antonovskie" as an adjective for a place name (80), it is difficult to establish the name of the original place (which could be Antonovo, Antonova, Antonovskaja etc., cf. ČERNYCH 46); as Antonov apple is also a noun for a fruit (known in other countries with the name Possarts Nalivia) we therefore adopted the latter in its plural declination.
- 7 The volume was never completed, but Bunin used "Epitaph" as the title for both a tale and a poem.
- 8 "Старики и старухи жили в Выселках очень подолгу, — первый признак богатой деревни..." (BUNIN 1984, 21). Unless otherwise specified, the translations are by C. Cawthra. Unless otherwise specified,

- the translations from the story are by G. Hettlinger.
- 9 “Proust’s experiences formed the basis of what has become known as the Proust phenomenon, the ability of odours spontaneously to cue autobiographical memories which are highly vivid, affectively toned and very old.” (CHU, DOWNES 111).
- 10 Когда на что-нибудь мода, я “назло” отвертываюсь от модного. Так было и с Прустом. Только недавно прочел его — и даже испугало: да ведь в “Жизни Арсеньева” [...] немало мест совсем прустовских (MEŠCERSKIJ 154).

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THE ESSENCE OF HISPANIC-AMERICAN LITERATURE SHROUDED IN PERFUMES OF LOVE AND SMELLS OF DEATH

Silvana Serafin

Of the five senses that condition human action, olfaction is surely the one that also makes it possible to ‘smell’ emotions and activate memories at any distance, whether they are related to nature, the city, home, family, food, sex, or the sea-saw of life and death. This is a dichotomy that marks the relentless passing of time and one that has been immortalised in literature; its symbolic value goes far beyond individual existence, imprinting universal nature on the melting pot of sensations that are also caused by smells.

Nature: fragrances of legends and whiffs of tragedies

Over the centuries there has been a painstaking search for aromas, essences, and delightful fragrances from natural resources to cure illnesses, relieve pain and create perfumes; they have not only been used to counter a lack of personal and collective hygiene but also to seduce the object of one’s desire, to create fatal concoctions to eliminate sovereigns, leaders, ‘cumbersome’ and irritating husbands/wives, or to reduce the smell of putrid surroundings, mouldy homes, rank cities and their unbreathable air.

Thus, after they had come ashore in the Indies, starting with their discoverer Christopher Columbus the Spanish conquerors were completely overwhelmed by their attraction for American nature: in addition to being majestic and extremely green, it also comprised an infinite richness and variety of plants that could

be used as a source of unguents and essential oils. Such materials were indispensable for the preparation of banquets and festive or funerary ceremonies, or for experiments with new medicines to cure diseases or for the preparation of deadly poisons.

A perfect example is the Balsam of Peru, extracted from a large tree that belongs to the Leguminosae family (Papilionaceae) that, contrary to what its name might lead one to expect, grows mainly in Central America and Mexico.¹ This misunderstanding is due to the fact that once it had been collected, the product was transported to the port of Callao in Peru where, from 1524 on, it was shipped to Europe.²

This honey-coloured spirit was produced by boiling pieces of the tree bark; the first official chronicler of the Indies, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557), wrote that it was oily and could heal wounds from “a knife or spear, or any other kind of recent wound, because it staunches the blood immediately” (“cuchillada o lanzadas, o cualquier otra herida reciente, porque inmediate restaña la sangre” 62).³

A generous nature that not only contained “the smell of the yeast, the hot vapours of the shadows, the torpor of death, the chaos of procreation” (“hálito del fermento, los vapores calientes de la penumbra, el sopor de la muerte, el marasmo de la procreación” Rivera 155), it also offered endless opportunities, whetting voracious appetites, with a pregnant smell of death, oppression and exploitation, fuelled by fantastic stories of mountains of silver and gold, and extraordinary treasures that could overcome any kind of difficulty even if lives were sacrificed.

Hence the legend of the Guatavita *cacique*: in a sacred ritual, once the body had been smeared with aromatic essences and covered with gold dust, he would immerse himself once a year in the lagoon while the priests were offering their gods golden idols and handfuls of emeralds; he continued to penetrate the most impenetrable areas of the Amazon and Orinoco Rivers, sacrificing the

lives of both the Spanish soldiers and natives they came across on their relentless journey.⁴ With their emphasis on perfume in an arcane world, the origins of which go back to ancient times, these are all legends that provided fertile ground for the continuous creation of an infinity of other imaginary stories that are closely related in their intertwining, and all of which are characterised by the odour of profit.

Times changed and the cycle of events led to political independence and the birth of new nations; but the lure of ‘gold,’ of the famous metal or any other source of wealth was hard to resist. It comes as no surprise if a handful of *caudillos* reduced to slavery anyone who braved the heart of the forest to extract natural rubber, regardless if white or *indios*. The result is a chain of criminality, brutality and injustice, exacerbated by a land without law or order, as the Venezuelan writer Rómulo Gallegos in *Canaima* (1934) shows so clearly.

Tragedy loomed large over the entire indigenous population who had been exploited to the utmost and had even been deprived of the right to live, annihilated by drugs and labour. In the ritual propitiatory dance of the Tarangué there is therefore neither joy nor cheerfulness, mere infinite sadness that increases the un-coordinated gestures of the bodies that are moving convulsively in the full moon like “disgusting beasts that would gasp and twist under the dehumanizing effect of the *yopo*” (“asquerosas bestias que jadeaban y se retorcían bajo la acción deshumanizante del yopo” Gallegos 120). Ghosts in an imaginary world, who have plunged down into the abyss of the *conquistador*’s culture, their only hope is redemption from above, from the magic world of beliefs and superstition.

This sense of inertia was also highlighted in the ‘indigenous’ literature that appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century with *Raza de bronze* (1919), by the Bolivian writer Alcides Arguedas (1878-1946); it then developed throughout the entire An-

dean area where a high percentage of the indigenous population was unjustly subjugated, although they still managed to maintain their own dignity. Following in the master's footsteps, it is no surprise that the Peruvian Ciro Alegría (1909-1967) was to go on to create in *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* (1941) the unforgettable figure of Rosendo Maqui, the mayor of the indigenous community in Maqui, impoverished of their lands by an 'untouchable' exploiter who bribed the people who were meant to guarantee justice. Impassive to the gendarmes' blows so that reprisals were not carried out against his people, the elderly *indio*'s death in prison became a symbol of the grandeur of his race.

The life of white workers in the forest was just as tragic. Cruelty and greed and the intense smell of *purguo* saturate the atmosphere of the camp and the different outposts set up in the woods, in close contact with the trees from which rubber was extracted. Every day, come rain or shine, they risked death by climbing up the huge trees to extract the precious rubber or by inhaling the toxic vapours⁵ to increase their master's profits. However, this gruelling work was based on the *avance* chain, the advance money that had to be repaid with exorbitant interest rates, determined by the entrepreneur on erroneous forecasts of the amount of rubber to be extracted; this meant that there would therefore be no end since the debt would be handed down from father to son.⁶ The same mechanism would later be adopted for many emigrant workers who 'invaded' Argentina, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Completely different emotions are aroused by the lyrical invocation of nature: extolling the perfume of the woods, sixteen-year old Neruda who moved to Santiago to attend the Pedagogical Institute, remembers the joyful period of his childhood in Temuco. Similarly, the fragrance of lilac reminds him of "the light sunsets of my childhood / that flowed like a stream of calm water" ("Claros aterdeceres de mi infancia / que fluyó como el

cauce de unas aguas tranquilas,” from “Sensación de olor” 34). The perfume of roses and lilies, together with birds singing, have the power to alleviate the sadness of the unhappy *Blanca Olmedo* (1908), a novel by the first real writer from the Honduras, Lucila Gamero de Medina (1873-1964): “These perfumes and these songs – observes the protagonist – gave my body renewed life and made my heart beat a new life” (“estos perfumes y estos cantos – constata la protagonista – daban a mi cuerpo nueva vida y hacían que mi corazón latiera de nueva vida” 89).

Inhaling from the flower “the aromatised perfume” (“el embalsamado aroma,” “A Mercedes Manig” 137), yearning for his beloved, Rubén Darío grieves over her. The object of desire changes but the poet’s feelings continue to be inspired by nature. Most revealing are the lines: “Of the silent surroundings I would give you / the perfumed, mysterious kiss” (“Yo te daría del callado ambiente / el beso perfumado y misterioso,” from “A Filis” 138).

While imagining a tiger thirsty for blood, wandering through the forest and smelling “in the intricate labyrinth/ of smells the smell of dawn / And the pleasant smell of deer” (“en el trenzado laberinto / De los olores el olor del alba / Y el olor deleitable del venado” from “El oro de los tigres” 556), Borges realises that it is completely different to the symbolic tiger created in fiction. Hence the search for a third tiger that, nevertheless, the poet writes, once again will be “a form / Of my dream, a system of words / Human and not the vertebrate tiger / that walks the earth / way beyond mythologies” (“una forma / De mi sueño, un sistema de palabra / Humanas y no el tigre vertebrado / Que más allá de las mitologías / Pisa la tierra” from “El oro de los tigres” 1206).

In an attempt to seek comfort to alleviate his intense pain, in exile in a bitterly cold New York, José María Heredia resorts to melancholy to recapture the sweetest fragrance of orange and mango” (“naranjo y del mango soavísimo el aroma” 216) and with it the perfume of his beloved Cuba, urging the North wind

to carry his tears to his homeland. Only the “gentle Melancholy, / will be a sweet balsam” (“gentil Melancolía, / será bálsamo dulce” 208), a “balsam of peace and consolation” (“bálsamo de paz y de consuelo” 217), capable of warming the poet’s arid heart, and thus also in a broader sense that of any suffering human being.

Aroma envelops the whole of Latin America, where the “the fragrance of valerian and the fragrance of rose” (“olor a nardos y olor a rosa”) are a characteristic of the Dominican Republic according to Rubén Darío (1053), while the Chilean factories present the homeland with the treasure of their fumes “since below the blue, endless sky / [they] offer you, as a splendid treasure / the factories of their incense” (“puesto que bajo el cielo azul, inmenso / te brindan, como espléndido tesoro / la fábricas su incense” 485).

These are the perfumes that make it possible to penetrate the essence of being, just like the ones experimented by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1904-1982) on his journey back in space and time, until he reached the fourth day of creation, very close to the beginning of the “terrible solitude of the Creator, the sideral sadness of the periods without incense and exaltation, when the earth was chaotic and empty, the darkness lay on the surface of the abyss” (“[...] terribile soledad del Creador, la tristezza sideral de los tiempos sin incenso y sin alabanzas, cuando la tierra era desordenada y vacía, las tinieblas estaban sobre la haz del abismo” 189). Thanks to the initial chaos that contemplates possible regeneration, the self experiences the internal/external dissociation, thought/reality, returning to find its way in the world.

Cities: pervasive smells of civilisation, isolation and abuse of power

From the smells of nature to those of cities: this highlights the constant contrast of the civilisation/barbarism theme, which the Argentine writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888) began so

polemically with *Facundo o civilización y barbarie* (1845), comparing the city to the pampas. From his own perspective, in *Martín Fierro* (Part I: “La ida” 1872; Part II: “La vuelta de Martín Fierro” 1878) José Hernández (1834-1886) also proposes this contrast, creating the ultimate gaucho poem. Here the eulogy of the vast expanses gives the pampas a mythical value, even if the protagonist feels the need for a socio-cultural order that can only be found in the city.⁷

The function of the city in the construction of the concept of civilisation therefore plays a key role since it is the privileged seat of institutions and predominant political ambitions; but it is also the heart that generates doubts, curiosity, ideas, vital impulses that result in action, and progress with scientific and technological developments. It is in the city that one learns to respect the laws and principles of civilised existence, which are indispensable elements if a nation is to be reshaped and guide lines established for the new society.

Nevertheless, the power of the ‘elected’ class, made up of aristocrats, ancient landowners, wealthy bankers, merchants and professionals, highlights a supremacy that is directed more towards satisfying one’s own pragmatic and immediate conditions. Fervently supported by most naturalist writers,⁸ divided between political and literary activities, the bourgeois ideal that is open to cosmopolitanism is in clear contrast to the prevailing provincial and rural forms. They try to condemn the vices of the new urban society, which has been devoured by the temptation of easy profit-making, where the smell of money alternates with that of failure and bankruptcy, prostitution and exploitation. It is no coincidence that in his novel *Santa* (1903), the Mexican Federico Gamboa (1864-1939) describes the Mexican capital as a “big whore,” suffocated by the dense air of immorality. The abundance of brothels – one completely different from the other, but all sharing the same smell of bestial lust, lechery and corrupt lewdness – makes it a place of damnation, and a dangerous, irresistible enchantress.

This was a city that grew unnaturally owing to the inexorable flow of immigrants who foster the development of marginalisation pockets. These are working-class areas full of huts and barracks where delinquency and crime develop and the poor lose the last remains of their dignity, or sense of obligation as imposed by the bourgeois society. Their coarseness is displayed through the “acrid smells” (“acres olores” Gamboa 93) of the multitude, the “foul-smelling heat of the crowded multitude” (“calor oliente de multitud apiñada” 241). In fact, smells play an important part in the characterisation of a place and in the description of characters that respond to an elementary psychologism; they often appear improbable, clumsy, sketchy. On the other hand, the superficiality of this social analysis is due to a particular bourgeois design: it is not a good idea to awaken the consciousness of the lower classes if one wants to preserve hegemony and power. Any elements that might disturb the social equilibrium should be stemmed so that the city remains the privileged environment of the ‘bourgeois’ culture.

The atmosphere is one of violence, fuelled by the excessive power of dictators who in a city disoriented by the anarchy caused by the wars for independence, assume the role of ‘legitimate’ representatives of the new society. Here the urban masses begin to gain importance, skilfully manoeuvred by the politicians, the real basis of power, a direct enactment of the middle class. One individual without scruples is followed by another, becoming an obsession with the collective consciousness of the subjugated people, as in the case of Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1814-1840) in Paraguay and Juan Manuel de Rosas (1832-1851) in Argentina. Their ‘undertakings’ have been immortalised on the brutal, bitter pages of countless works,⁹ making them synonymous with the most feared dictatorship.

It is mainly in the twentieth century that the theme acquires particular dramatic intensity as a result of the ferocious dictators who, from Venezuela to Guatemala, from Salvador to Nicaragua,

and from the Dominican Republic to Argentina, are imposing oppressive systems that have no comparison elsewhere. Power, a synonym for corruption, misgovernment, and amorality is expressed to the full in the figure of the dictator, which became emblematic in Miguel Ángel Asturias' *El señor presidente* (1946): through the materialisation of the subconscious energies of society, power creates the archetype of the Latin American dictator.

And that is not all; in addition to offering a functional model that establishes coherence for a series of tests, creating a homogeneous *corpus* of narrations, the novel features thematic clusters, isotopes that also appear in later novels: the universality of the figure of the dictator, the omnipotence of his powers, the presence of a handsome, malignant favourite, the introduction of a mythical element owing to the lack of facts about the president's life and actions. These are the elements that give him a mysterious aura, fuelled by the attribution of exceptional, often magical characteristics; unfailingly dressed in black, from head to foot including his tie, and the inevitable hat.

The smell of violence and death spreads to every corner in the city, starting with the doors of the presidential palace where beggars seek refuge at night, huddled over their 'riches': scraps of meat and bits of candle, a handful of boiled rice in an old newspaper, excessively ripe oranges. While on the outskirts there is an abundance of mud hovels "with a smell of stubble" ("con olor de rastrojo"), wooden huts "smelling of *ladino*" ("con olor de *ladino*"), and barracks with squalid entrances, "stinking of stable" ("hediendo a caballeriza" 29), inns that smell of straw: the intense, unpleasant smell of misery, overwhelmed by terror makes itself felt everywhere.

The same smell comes from the beggars, tortured in prison until they confess to whatever the president wants, or from the sweat-drenched shirt of the poor secretary who, after rushing to dry the ink off the file the president has signed, is punished with

two hundred blows with a stick that will prove fatal, for having knocked over the inkstand. It is the same sense of terror that overcomes Cara de Ángel, the favourite who has fallen into disgrace and is locked up in an underground prison cell where the greasy broth with tiny pieces of fatty meat and bits of omelette smells the same as the bucket for excrements. The only perfumes come from the memory of the white rose, outside the dining room window where he would eat with his mother, and from the thought of his wife: physically worn out, his memories of young Camila are like “inhaling the perfume of a flower and listening to a poem” (“se aspira una flor o se oye un poema” 283)

Hidden in the shadows, the dictator strikes terror and fear of death, but as Bellini says, “in the light of day, he can only generate a sense of nausea” (46). This is why he is presented while he is vomiting on his favourite and, more significantly, on the state shield on the bottom of a basin that he has been given.

The smell of sex

Hispanic-American literature is also, or above all, full of sighs and passions since, to use the words of the Italo-Argentinian writer Syria Poletti, “[Love] is the essence of life and of what is far beyond life. It is the mystery thrashing inside us: it is with love that tenderness, heroism, religion, coexistence and civilisation are born. Its ideal and concrete form is the couple” (“[El amor] es la esencia de la vida y del más allá de la vida. Es el misterio que late en nosotros: con él nacen la ternura, el heroísmo, la religión, la convivencia, la civilización. Su forma ideal y concreta es la pareja” Fornaciari 150). Thus, the search for a companion by a one-winged angel in *Amor de alas* (1981), is a hymn to love’s power that is able to calm the anxiety of men and women who are tormented by existential problems, meeting the other ‘self’ and find renewed unity thanks to love. Doriel and Sigma’s final flight,

united as one towards the light of God is a message of hope aimed at all those who are born different and who, after becoming conscious of themselves, find in love the happiness and freedom of the spirit.

However, there is another side to love: one that is fuelled by sex, by the smells that the human body produces to stimulate sexual arousal. This is why (in their historical evolution) mankind has tried to find aphrodisiac essences, to create filters of love and perfumes with pheromones, the true cause of attraction between the sexes. Unconsciously, Camila, the young protagonist in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*), knows that without smelling what you are kissing the kiss tastes of nothing so that “her salty, dark yellow skin, like the sand and pine-cones and quinces, taught her to kiss with her nostrils open, anxious and gasping” (“su carne salobre y trigüeña como la arena y las piñuelas y los membrillos, la enseñaron a besar con las ventanas de la nariz abierta, ansiosas, anhelantes,” García Márquez 81).

For the young José Arcadio (29), on the other hand, while sitting in the barn it is the smell of smoke that comes from the armpits of his cheerful housemaid that is to exert an irresistible sexual attraction for a long time. A smell that is so difficult to miss that it acts as a guide in an unknown room where he finds the woman and gives release to his passion “in a bottomless darkness in which his arms were useless, where it no longer smelled of woman but of ammonia” (“en una oscuridad insonidable en la que le sobraban los brazos, donde ya no olía más a mujer, sino a amoniaco” 30).

The smell of armpits is also a source of attraction for the protagonist of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Traversuras de una niña mala*. Of great eloquence is the following description of the different smells emanating from the various parts of a girl’s body: “Everything about her gave off a delicate fragrance, which intensified in the tepid nest of her shaven armpits, behind her ears, and in her small, damp sex” (“Toda ella despedía una fragancia delicada.

Que se acentuaba en el nido tibio de sus axilas depilada, detrás de sus orejas y en su sexo pequeño y húmedo” 66).

Smells that sometimes arouse insane passions, such as Pradelio Ranquileo’s, the protagonist in *De amor y sombra*, towards his little sister who has made him lose his head and strength, because “when he smelled the smoke of her hair and the lye soap of her clothes and the sweat of her neck, and felt the weight of her body on his” (“ese olor a humo de su pelo y de lejía de su ropa, del sudor de su cuello, del peso de su cuerpo encima del suyo” Allende 182). At other times, the smell is repulsive, for example the one produced by sixty men sweating and panting in the arms of García Márquez’s adolescent mulattress. The air becomes unbreathable and as thick as mud when she is forced to prostitute herself to buy her grandmother’s house that she had burnt down owing to carelessness.

These examples are all by male writers, but that does not mean that female writers did not write about sex. Above all, starting in the 1930s female writing deals with body language by speaking in metaphors about the models imposed on women by the official culture. Here amorous passion is the starting point for social change, creating equality for man and woman within the couple’s relationship.

Love that is expressed in the concrete nature of its smells, as a positive force that can also fulfil and satisfy a woman to the full counters educational principles that usually restrict female attitudes: religion and family and marriage, love and eroticism, a young body and old age. This denial thus becomes an important selection tool because it is precisely by refusing a reality that it achieves the very opposite.

Conclusion

By manipulating images and ideas – more specifically smells – literature reveals social realities and occurrences that often go

unnoticed. Crossing the internal border of a culture, it absolves the arduous and complex task of defining human beings within their surroundings: this encourages the birth of a collective consciousness and their own, well-defined identity. With words, writers record the contrasting geography of their continents, opposing the violence of political power and describing a society that is basically supported by the stimuli of love and death. These are strong emotions that are closely related to their physical surroundings, thus contradicting what Bachtin claims in his famous essay on the forms of time and chronotope: the character of the place therefore ‘enters’ the event as a constitutive part and ‘not’ simply as an abstract extension.

This is why a literary journey through smells must inevitably start with the physical world of nature before continuing in the city: in addition to establishing precise ties between literature and history, it becomes a true need if we understand writing as knowledge, the transformation of culture into richness and awareness. The result of the permanent tension between the past and future, between the time of memory and the time of hope leads to the perception of life as a whole, with its perfumes of love and smells of death, as well as the split, or rather transcending Hegel’s ‘Prose of the World,’¹⁰ identified with a purely social mechanism.

Notes

- 1 Cf. *Enciclopedia italiana* 995.
- 2 *Ibid.* 996.
- 3 For a broader overview of the first chroniclers of the Indies, Mexico and Central America, cf. SERAFIN, 1983.
Unless otherwise specified, quotations have been translated by C. Cawthra with the assistance of M. Cannavacciuolo from the original texts, the pages of which are indicated in brackets. The original Spanish editions are to be found in the bibliography.
- 4 However, the much sought after destination was never found and today people are still looking with the same zest for the kingdom of the Seven Cities of Gold, the Amazons, the Giants, the enchanted lake of Parima and the golden palace of the cacique Manoa.
- 5 Cf. GALLEGOS 122.
- 6 Cf. *ibid.* 104.
- 7 Eustasio Rivera deals with this subject, with the dialectics between city and forest, enter-

ing the forest, the strength of which mainly comes from the metaphorical and imaginative nature of a real epic poem, cf. SERAFIN 2006.

8 Amongst the writers who were inspired by the model of Victorian England and the Second French Empire are the Mexican Federico Gamboa (1864-1939), the Venezuelan José Rafael Pocaterra (1889-1955), the Peruvian Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera (1847-1909) and the Argentinian Julián Martel (pseudonym of José María Miró, 1867-1893). For example the novels: *El matadero* (1838) by Esteban Echevarría, *Amalia* (1851-1855) by José Mármol, *Facundo* (1855) by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed fundamental works of Mexican literature: *Los de abajo* (1916) by Mariano Azuela, *El águila y la serpiente* (1928) and *La sombra del cau-*

dillo (1929) by Martín Luis Guzmán. Other works include *Canal Zone* (1935) by the Ecuadorian Demetrio Aguilera Malta, *Los perros hambrientos* (1939) by the Peruvian Ciro Alegría, *El forastero* (1942) by the Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos, *El secuestro del general* (1973) by Demetrio Aguilera Malta, *Conversación en la Catedral* (1970) and *La Fiesta del Chivo* (2000) by Mario Vargas Llosa, *El recurso del método* (1974) by Alejo Carpentier, *Yo, el supremo* (1974) by Augusto Roa Bastos, *El otoño del patriarca* (1975) by Gabriel

García Márquez. The list could continue with female writers. For example: *La loca 101* (1973) and *Cuando digo Magdalena* (1992) by Alicia Steimberg (Buenos Aires, 1933), *Vaca sagrada* by Diamela Eltit (Santiago del Cile, 1949), *Pasos bajo el agua* (1987), by Alicia Kozamesh (Rosario, 1953), *No puedes ahogar el fuego: Mujeres de América Latina que escriben en exilio* (1998) by Alicia Partnoy, *Simetrías* (2007) by Luisa Valenzuela (Buenos Aires, 1938).

10

Cf. HEGEL.

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PERFUMES AND SENSUALITY IN WILLIAM FAULKNER

Giorgia Tommasi

Faulkner's works are animated by perfumes that enrich the mythical portrait of the South of the United States. Very often they are perfumes with very close ties to the land, the natural perfumes of plants and flowers that are an inseparable part of the setting of his tales: the sweet scent of the wistaria that climbs up the walls of the houses in the South, or the delicate fragrance of the honeysuckle that grows as wild bushes in the Mississippi countryside. However, these fragrances are not always completely pleasant. In fact, they stand on the border between perfume and smell, full of a sensual ambiguity affecting one's memory through olfaction, and which the author uses to express his own ambivalence towards the places where he was born.

In 1958, when asked by a student at Virginia University why there were always references to perfumes and smells in some of his novels, sixty-year old William Faulkner replied as follows: "[...] maybe smell is one of my sharper senses, maybe it's sharper than sight. [...] That to me is – is as noticeable as the ear which hears the turns of speech, which could be simply because that's a sharper sense with me than maybe sight or hearing" (Blotner, Gwynn 253). Faulkner's reply is both allusive and evocative, leaving the interlocutor (and the reader) baffled. His words reawaken an interest in a sense that does not always receive the same amount of attention as the images evoked in a literary work.

Indeed, references to the senses do abound in Faulkner's works, and they are often used to portray or look more closely at

the protagonists' sensibility, in particular the males. As we shall see, it is often the novels' male protagonists who notice olfactive nuances about the female characters who are full of great sensuality (and sexuality).

Faulkner's work is always associated with perfumes, smells and femininity, as can be seen from the billboards for the films based on his novels, such as *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958) or *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), the film adaptation of his novel *Sanctuary* (1931), in which all the protagonists are portrayed as provocative women. Further examples include the covers of the 1950s Signet editions of *The Wild Palms* (1939), *Sanctuary* and *Knight's Gambit* (1949), which portray scantily dressed women in what are decidedly seductive poses for those years.

The sensorial world in Faulkner's novels and tales is therefore not composed by images, but also by intense perfumes and smells that belong to the various characters in their own particular way, penetrating the perception of each of them, and taking on a particular meaning. We could almost say that they represent a sort of map that helps us get to know the figures living in Faulkner's decadent universe. They are the recurrent perfumes of local imagination: the wistaria and honeysuckle plants mentioned earlier, sweetish and almost nauseous, the fragrances of the trees and leaves which appear indefinite and light but equally bitter because of the memories they evoke of a family and social past that has been lost for ever. The smells of nature and the landscape thus become an essential part in the description of the mythical universe represented by the legendary Yoknapatawpha County, the 'land divided.'¹ This is the imaginary place that recreates the town of Oxford and Lafayette County in the state of Mississippi, representing the provincial culture in which the author grew up after having moved from nearby New Albany with his family when he was still a child.

The fragrances of the plants, trees and flowers, but also the

smells of the animals, human skin and body impregnate the pages describing the drama of families who are trying to come to terms with the profound changes that the South is going through after the Civil War.

There are references to perfumes for all the male protagonists in the Compson family in *The Sound and Fury*,² Faulkner's most famous novel. They are fundamental for Benjy, the brother who is only able to communicate through incomprehensible words and bellowing; for the other brother Quentin, they are full of symbolism, an almost unbearable reminder of the sensuality and sexuality of his sister, Caddy; revealingly, they are almost totally missing in the section devoted to Jason, the more practical, hard and introverted brother.

Among the first natural elements to appear insistently in the novel are the cedars, the very same trees that line the avenue leading to Rowan Oak,³ Oxford, where the writer lived his entire life.⁴ It is their perfume that makes these trees fundamental because Benjy associates their smell with his sister Caddy – the expression “Caddy smelled like trees” (1994, 5) is repeated more than once. Although the fragrance of the leaves and trees – we are led to believe they are probably the cedar trees that are mentioned frequently in the novel – is never described by Benjy, the insistence with which this fragrance is evoked is a link between the natural world and the family’s past, when Caddy represented a reassuring maternal figure for her brother whilst also having a strong erotic charge.

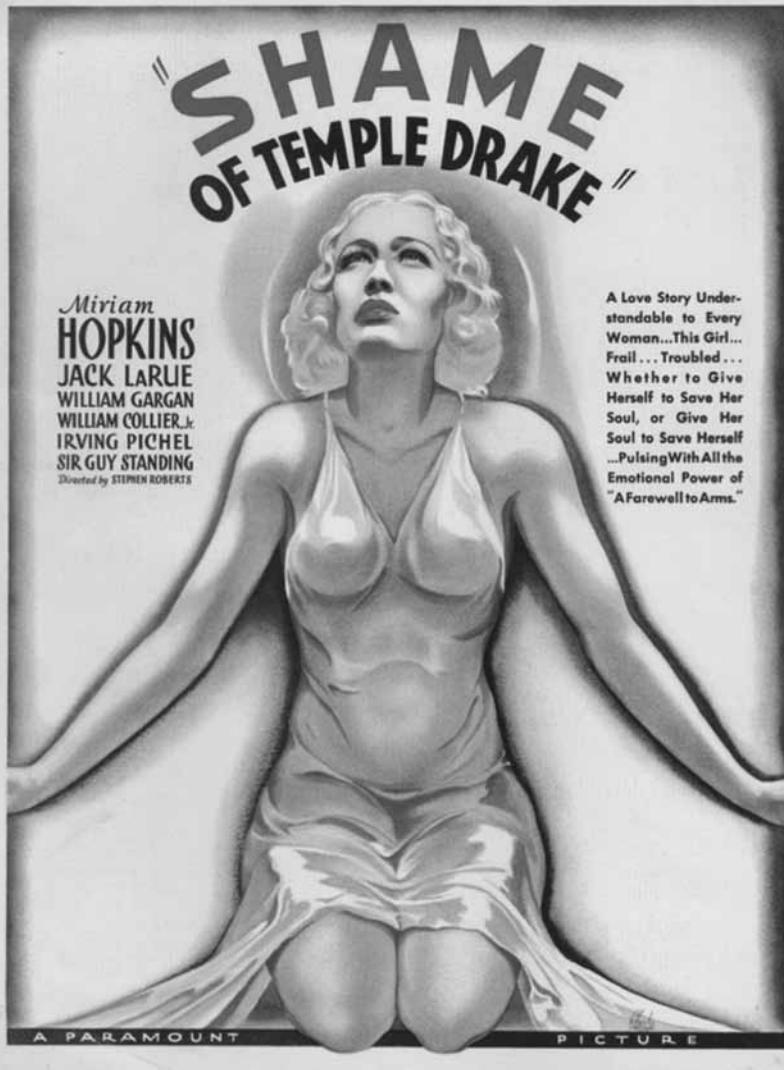
These perfumes highlight Benjy’s extreme sensitivity and become an expression for the past events and affective ties (which are almost unhealthy) with his sister. It is no coincidence that when Caddy is wearing a new perfume, her brother cries in desperation because he is unable to recognise her natural smell:

“Why, Benjy. What is it” she said. “You mustn’t cry. Caddy’s not going away. See here.” she said. She took up the bottle

"SHAME OF TEMPLE DRAKE"

Miriam
HOPKINS
JACK LARUE
WILLIAM GARGAN
WILLIAM COLLIER, JR.
IRVING PICHÉL
SIR GUY STANDING
Directed by STEPHEN ROBERTS

A Love Story Under-
standable to Every
Woman...This Girl...
Frail...Troubled...
Whether to Give
Herself to Save Her
Soul, or Give Her
Soul to Save Herself
...Pulsing With All the
Emotional Power of
"A Farewell to Arms."



Advertising poster for the film *The Story of Temple Drake*, directed by Stephen Roberts and distributed by Paramount Pictures, 1933. University of Mississippi

and took the stopper out and held it to my nose. “Sweet. Smell. Good.”

I went away and I didn’t hush, and she held the bottle in her hand, looking at me.

“Oh.” she said. She put the bottle down and came and put her arms around me. “So that was it. And you were trying to tell Caddy and you couldn’t tell her. You wanted to, but you couldn’t, could you. Of course Caddy wont. Of course Caddy wont. Just wait till I dress.”

[...]

Caddy held my hand out and Dilsey took the bottle.

“Well I’ll declare.” Dilsey said. “If my baby aint give Dilsey a bottle of perfume. Just look here, Roskus.”

Caddy smelled like trees. “We dont like perfume ourselves.”

Caddy said

She smelled like trees. (1994, 27)

Benjy calms down when his sister returns to her usual fragrance of trees, which he finds reassuring and familiar. At other moments this fragrance reminds Benjy of the intimacy of the moments he spent with Caddy before falling asleep: we thus see how the perfume of the lush vegetation of the area lies somewhere between innocence and sensuality, and how Benjy’s frequent references to it turn it into an obsessive presence.

Quentin, on the other hand, describes the perfume Caddy is wearing as a “vivid dead smell” (1994, 112), a bothersome smell that invades the surrounding nature, dominating the fragrances of the cedars and revealing a sort of disquieting link between sex and death: the perfume becomes the symbol of the sister’s sexual maturity and the loss of her innocence – of her ‘death’ as a little girl. Nevertheless, the natural fragrances are not unequivocally innocent but they too are charged with ambiguity. This can be seen in the repeated associations that Quentin makes between Caddy and the honeysuckle, a characteristic evergreen growing in the

South of the United States, and characterised by its white, cloying flowers. For him honeysuckle is indissolubly associated with the rain, a natural element that amplifies and diffuses the perfume of the flowers, in the novel:

Honeysuckle was the saddest odor of all, I think. I remember lots of them. Wistaria was one. On the rainy days when Mother wasn't feeling quite bad enough to stay away from the windows we used to play under it. [...]

When it bloomed in the spring and it rained the smell was everywhere you didn't notice it so much at other times but when it rained the smell began to come into the house at twilight either it would rain more at twilight or there was something in the light itself but it always smelled strongest then until I would lie in bed thinking when will it stop when will it stop. (1994, 107).

However, the synaesthesia with which Quentin describes it (“the saddest odor:” for him it is an odour, not a perfume), shows how he finds the tormenting fragrance of honeysuckle oppressing and invasive: it pursues him, it stops him from breathing and sleeping, it keeps conjuring up the obsessive image of Caddy's femininity and the woods where her amorous encounters took place and which he finds so unacceptable.

Another perfume with an intense, honeyed aroma is the wistaria, which reminds Quentin of his childhood and the time he spent playing with his siblings in the rain. The character of Quentin Compson, who also appears in another of Faulkner's novels, *Absalom, Absalom!*,⁵ refers repeatedly to this plant's small purplish-coloured flowers: the first time when he is still in the house where he was born in Jefferson, and then when he is studying at Harvard in chilly Cambridge in Massachusetts. Quentin associates his memories of the wistaria's sweet perfume with the penetrating smell of his father's cigar, inextricably linked to the

southern summers. While the flower is characterised by a strong perfume that invades the space of the sunset and that offers a complete definition of time for Quentin – “It was a summer of wistaria” (1990, 25) at the beginning of the second chapter – the smell of Mr. Compson’s cigar represents the past of his family. When he receives a letter in Cambridge from his father, it once again reminds Quentin of the smell of that cigar, together with the sweetness of the wistaria in bloom. Obviously the cigar can also be seen as a sign of the father’s masculine virility, the head of the family, a characteristic that is lacking in the excessively sensitive Quentin. It is precisely through the clear sensorial encounter of these two fragrances that this contrast is highlighted: the male smell of the cigar, and the bewitching perfume of the wistaria.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier with the honeysuckle, the same sense of ambiguity also surrounds the wistaria. In the opening of *Absalom, Absalom!* the perfume from this climber when it is in bloom is used as an element of disturbance that is deliberately associated with sensuality. The fragrance of the flower is both sweet and nauseous. For Quentin wistaria is “sweet and over-sweet” (1990, 9), and the association is still linked to a femininity that has been neither understood nor accepted. For him the perfume of the wistaria evokes the image of a coffin, mixed with the smell of an old female body, thus sealing the relationship between sexuality, female sensuality and death, one that Faulkner has already underlined in other works. The more unpleasant smells that appear in the author’s descriptions are frequently linked to a femininity that has faded, perhaps reflecting the historical decline of his homeland.

The image of the coffin that Quentin refers to in *Absalom, Absalom!* also brings to mind the novel *As I Lay Dying*,⁶ where one of the symbols Faulkner uses to represent the decadence of a family is none other than the smell coming from the coffin with the body of the deceased mother. Although no explicit reference

is made to the repulsive smell coming from the coffin, the reader can imagine its significance. The only character who mentions it is the young son Vardaman who, in a scene of heart-wrenching sadness, tries initially to deny the fact that his mother's corpse is emanating a bad smell – “My mother does not smell like that” (1985, 132) he says –, but then gives in in the face of such inevitable reality. In an attempt to process the tragic loss, he asks his sister for confirmation and comfort, admitting that: “I can smell her,’ I say. ‘Can you smell her, too?’” (145). But she tells him to be quiet, ignoring the poignancy.

Another figure who is characterised by an almost total absence of olfactory references is Jason, one of the Compson siblings in *The Sound and Fury*. Nevertheless, whilst in *As I Lay Dying* there is deliberately no mention of the smell coming from the mother's body to avoid dealing with the unravelling of the family, in his 1929 masterpieces this absence emphasises Jason's insensitivity in particular. He expresses himself aggressively and authoritatively and in his sarcastic, bitter comments there is no room for any comments that might reveal a hint of affection. Unlike his siblings, this is why he never mentions the fragrance of what is surrounding him. It is interesting to observe how the only smell that affects him is the bitter one of petrol, which gives him a headache, a purely ‘physical’ effect without any of the affective or intimate meanings that smells and perfumes evoke in his siblings. Jason’s horizon is purely utilitarian and there is no room for emotional evocations or absorbing sensorial references.

The association between sensorial element and past is also found in the connection that Faulkner establishes between smells and the physical decline in a broader sense. One such example is in the aforementioned novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, when Quentin arrives at the threshold of the Sutpen's Hundred mansion, and cannot help but notice the building's state of decay, a symbol of the decline of the South. Quentin's olfactory sensation is full

of meanings and, in this sense, what he recognises is an abstract “smell of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it was built were flesh” (1990, 301). For him, the old mansion has the same smell as a decaying human body. More in general it symbolizes that class of plantation owners who, having made their fortune exploiting the work of enslaved African-Americans, at the end of the Civil War have to deal with material and political ‘reconstruction.’ In addition, they have to come to terms with a new ideological perspective: the old values linked to honour and the ‘peculiar institution’ have been abandoned, and anyone who cannot let go of the past is forced to unprofitability and sterility. Examples of this include the Compson siblings, or the body of Miss Rosa Coldfield who is in eternal mourning and smells of fusty, resentful virginity.

Bodily stench as a symbol of the social and historical degeneration of the South is a theme that appears even more clearly in the short story “A Rose for Emily,”⁷ where it is associated with decadent sensuality. Once again we have the smell of a corpse, that of Homer Barron, the *yankee* that Miss Emily dated for a short time and whom she herself killed, perhaps as punishment for having refused to marry her. Pervading Emily’s home and afflicting all the surrounding places, the repugnant smell of Homer’s body is chosen to symbolise an entire generation’s attachment to the past. Furthermore, the association that the use of the sensorial element creates between sexuality and death – note how Emily spends the whole time with Homer’s corpse in her bedroom – is the same that Faulkner uses in *The Sound and the Fury* (the “vivid dead smell” that Quentin associates with the sister he loves), although with dire consequences.

Regarding Emily as the heroine of a tragedy, as Cleanth Brooks suggests,⁸ one is struck by the olfactory contrast evoked by the story’s title. The delicate perfume of the rose clashes with the smells that are associated with the protagonist in the tale. The

author seems to want to pay homage to Miss Emily by giving her a rose, almost as if wanting to remove her from the life of misery and abandonment depicted in the story. Impregnated with femininity, the perfume of this flower is also present in *The Sound and the Fury* where Quentin and Benjy associate it with sadness and the distance that Caddy's wedding means for them. In addition, the rose evokes an image of the sister as a passionate woman, in contrast to the white dress and idea of purity it is meant to give her. One should perhaps remember that in the seminal scene in Faulkner's masterpiece Caddy is depicted as a little girl with dirty white underpants because she climbed a fragrant cedar tree so she could peer inside the room where her deceased grandmother was lying – a scene that symbolises her loss of innocence.

These are just some of the many examples that are to be found in Faulkner's literary universe. It is one in which the use of aromas and fragrances is on the one hand, part of the characters' sensitivity, of how they interpret a personal, family and historical past, and their ties with their homeland. On the other hand, it symbolises the relationships among the characters – above all the often impotent, embarrassed gaze men have regarding the sensuality of women.⁹

Paying close attention to the references to the olfactory sphere in Faulkner's writing yields an unusual interpretation of his works, which always portray the profound relationships between the land in the South and the female universe, between the natural world and sensuality.

Notes

- 1 The natives of Chickasaw called the river that flows in the southern part of Lafayette county Yoknapatawpha. It is said to mean "divided land". Cf. DOYLE 23- 4.
- 2 *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is Faulkner's fourth novel. It tells the story of the Compsons, an aristocratic family in the South that has now lost its fortune. The story pivots around Caddy, the sister who becomes pregnant and has to get married, and how her three brothers react. The first three parts are respectively narrated from the point of view of Benjy, the 'idiot' brother, Quentin who commits suicide when he is a student at Harvard, and Jason, head of the family after his father's death.
- 3 Rowan Oak was the name Faulkner chose when he renamed the property, calling it after a tree that according to a Celtic legend symbolizes good luck. Cf. WILLIAMSON 228.
- 4 Faulkner purchased the house in 1930; today it is property of the University of Mississippi. Although he never graduated, Faulkner attended this university from 1919 to 1920, following a special programme for war veterans, which he actually was not. Cf. MINTER 35-9 and PORTER 6-7.
- 5 *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) is Faulkner's ninth novel. Quentin Compson is telling his roommate at Harvard the story about Thomas Sutpen; he in turn, has heard the tale from Rosa Coldfield. Highly experimental, the narration intersects with the tales of Quentin's father and Quentin's grandfathers' narrations. Originally from Virginia, Sutpen moved to Mississippi where he created the vast Sutpen's Hundred Plantation and married Rosa's sister, Ellen; she then gave birth to two children who were destined to a terrible fate when the son Sutpen had had

- from a previous marriage remerged from the past.
- 6 *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Faulkner's sixth novel, is about the Bundrens, a stricken family in the South. After the death of the mother, Addie, the husband Anse sets out on a journey with his five children to take his wife's coffin from the fictitious Yoknapatawpha County to Jefferson, where Addie said she wanted to be buried. The family is tested by the heart-breaking journey that makes old rancour and unresolved problems reappear.
- 7 "A Rose for Emily" (1930) is one of Faulkner's most famous stories. It is about Miss Emily, who represents the old aristocratic class of the South. Dominated by a father-master, who thinks no suitor is good enough for his daughter, the pretentious, proud Miss Emily never gets married and instead ends up living at home with the corpse of her lover Homer Barron.
- 8 Cf. BROOKS 161.
- 9 There are other female figures in Faulkner's works who are characterised by perfumes; for example the fragrance of verbena is associated with the sensual Drusilla (cf. FAULKNER 1990, 463), or the delicate perfume of the jasmine is associated with Miss Jenny, both of whom are described in *The Unvanquished* (from 1938). Numerous other olfactive references are to be found in *Light in August* from 1932, where young Joe Christmas refers to the sensual but nauseating "pinkwomansmelling" (1985, 487), or the wild "tiger-reek" (2006, 711) – that Horace Benbow associates with Belle, the *femme fatale* in *Flags in the Dust*, the first draft of which goes back to 1927; however, the original manuscript was not actually printed until 1973. The chapter "An Odor of Verbena" at the end of *The Unvanquished*, is a unique example of the sensorial references to be found in Faulkner's works. Here, the author decides to give verbena an exclusively symbolic olfactive value, as Robert Witt writes in "On Faulkner and Verbena", since verbena is actually an odourless plant. Cf. WITT.

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**MYSTICS OF THE SENSE OF SMELL (MYSTIKA ČICHU)
A MULTI-SENSORIAL BOOK BY JOSEF VÁCHAL**

Massimo Tria

Ecology and printing

Josef Váchal (1884-1969) is an exceptional figure in the Czech cultural world. Perhaps he is not so exceptional as to be described as unique, isolated typologically or completely inexplicable; however, in line with his restless, contentious spirit it is his originality that makes him stand out in the broader context of the early twentieth century. In the relatively calm literary waters of the Czech Republic after the First World War, in most cases a figure like his was outside the box. For example, together with other independent protagonists and *maudits* of that culture, he repeatedly forced Czech critics to ask themselves how important expressionist literature was in Prague and its surroundings, as it had been neglected and underestimated for so long.¹ A master engraver, a painter,² a collector of bloody stories³ and initiated in magical rites, Váchal is not very well known abroad and deserves more recognition as an author of the grotesque and the mysterious, as can be seen so clearly in the ‘small’ book (but only regarding its dimensions), which is the object of this essay: *Mystics of the Sense of Smell* (*Mystika Čichu*, 1920). In it he summarises his visionary universe of imaginary creatures and natural phenomena through smells, perfumes and the corresponding synaesthetic sensations. It ranges from the stench of the slaughterhouse to the smell of insects, flowering plants, natural resins and chemical compounds, with the relative multi-coloured portrayals between the Baroque and the Decadent Movement, Henri Rousseau’s *na-*

jf-like approach and Edvard Munch's and William Blake's Gothic taste for the macabre.

In actual fact, this is not even the master engraver Váchal's most original or bizarre book if one considers that his literary and figurative poetics deliberately - even parodistically, - revives certain Baroque⁴ and spiritualistic genres, at times extreme and bizarre, that are no longer fashionable in the twentieth century: curiosity calendars, pseudo-encyclopaedic texts, esoteric compendiums and satanic evocations are just some of the more representative genres of his great variety as an author. It is as if he has overturned certain religious presumptions of Czech and Central-European baroque literature, whilst preserving their rhetoric and stylistic features: lists, hyperboles, an alternation of styles and tones, a love for embellishment and pathos, a taste for the atrocious, and a keen sense of contact with extra-terrestrial powers. However, his aim is not to stop god-fearing Christians from reading books that have been placed on the Index by the various Jesuits and censors of the time, but rather to create new texts of this kind. This overturning of moralist and confessional Baroque therefore also results in his interest in some of its representatives, whether counter-reformists, heretics, faithful papal executors or disobedient thinkers; he is thus inspired by figures such as the "last bishop" of the Union of the Brethren, Jan Amos Komensky⁵ and by the Jesuit Matěj Antonín Koniáš, the man who represented censorship in person in the Czech culture and, according to popular feeling, the enemy of a more independent national culture; Váchal skilfully illustrated some of the latter's sermonising songs.⁶ Once again there is a desire for excess, the search for extreme expression, the complacency of an infernal threat that inspires his illustrations, which have all the characteristics of a graphic novel, a child's drawing and last but not least, of a pathological illustration as if the watercolours have been done in an altered psychic state.

Váchal always transmits his love and attention for the book

as an object that is to be read, touched, and smelled; for him it is the result of a process involving a variety of artistic series and multiple talents; very often it is portrayed as a magical text, a means of mediation with other worlds. For this author, one who was often curbed by destiny or personal choices that limited him to restricted circuits for bibliophiles or ludicrous self-produced runs, a book does not only contain words; a page is not a transient surface upon which concepts may be aligned; it is a canvas, a mental projection, a provocative weapon, an extroversion of intimate fears, a photography of a dream or of a vision. This attention towards the book-object (at times a book-casket, or book of dreams) is obviously derived from his original profession: bookbinder. And 'printing worker' and text composer remained part of him for ever, even when he decided to devote himself to literary and figurative art, combining the technical and creative aspects as succinctly and syncretistically as possible. And the contents? The themes? His inspirations? These came from the encounters that shaped Váchal's life: when he was just a small child, his father introduced him to occult readings and meetings, whilst the artistic circles that were inspired by the so-called 'new spirituality' and anarchistic politics turned him into a synthesis of opposites, ready to swing from the most extreme Christian humbleness to the most brazen spirit of heretical derision. As is the case with other figures that are difficult to understand in the early decades of the twentieth century, he was characterised by a love of opposites, a tendency towards an exacerbated expression that was full of himself, a tortuous anarchic and parodic spirit, as well as dissatisfaction with traditional forms of values. From this perspective, his expressive extremes make him similar to Jakub Deml,⁷ with whom he had a turbulent relationship as both friend and collaborator,⁸ during one of the rare phases when he embraced Catholicism. We could compare him to Jaroslav Hašek,⁹ another equally inscrutable representative of a mixture of black

humour, sneering, and social criticism disguised as humour that was a reverse shot of the most bourgeois and pacifying aspects of Masaryk's First Republic.¹⁰ He also had certain traits in common with another philosopher of the absurd, that '*Übermensch*' in Czechoslovakia, Ladislav Klíma, who with his *The Sorrows of Prince Sternenhoch* offered a turnabout on Nietzsche's philosophy and the will of power; they both share a love of grisly images and descriptions of abject, inhumane situations.

Others¹¹ have referred to his *Secession* spirit, meaning the Habsburg-Berlin variation of Modernism in painting at the turn of the nineteenth century (Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka), with its *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which the ideal vanishing point and innovative use of the materials was one of its characteristic means of expression. This might be true as Váchal was familiar with the impulses of art at the end of the century, both academic and non,¹² and from the eighteen nineties onwards, Czech culture began to draw inspiration from these artistic movements. His mixture of different genres and arts, the invention of new technical procedures, and the high craftsmanship he devoted himself to would also place him in such creative circles. But Váchal belongs to an atmosphere rather than a specific school, one in which the artists know that an age has come to an end and without any concrete hopes that new certainties are on the horizon. We could also say he is a link between Symbolism and Surrealism, but one who remained imprisoned in the transition between the two centuries and two eras, unable to find an existential and artistic equilibrium. And perhaps we should thank this interior imbalance, this psychic disequilibrium for the eccentricity and originality of his abnormal, confused texts that sway between black magic and prayer, with apotropaic formulae, grotesque laughter, witch-like dialogues with chthonic entities and humble conversations with angelic spirits.

However, let us return to our book, *Mystics of the Sense of*

Smell. The word “mystic” and all its declinations are used neither by chance nor as a metaphor: in it Váchal summarises a philosophy of the sense of smell, a true alternative value system that is built on the fundamental distinction between natural and artificial smells. Only those that are created spontaneously by nature (regardless of whether they smell nice or not, or if they are of any practical use) are good. Anything that is evoked, mixed in a laboratory or made by man is, without mincing words, ‘diabolical.’ Using a “third sense,” Váchal weaves a web of alchemical, magical, and oneiric elements that are based on the anti-modern contrast between nature and culture: “With culture the human being violates the harmonious spheres of smell to his own detriment and to the harm of the third sense. Science kills life and, in a thousand ways, by taking apart and then putting back together again the dead parts, is artificially creating demon representatives of smell” (85).¹³

The *incipit* itself already suggests respectful adoration of what is described as the most noble of the human senses, bearer and mediator of superior and purer worlds: “With a heart beat we reawaken you, oh third sense, dazzled by the splendid solar monstrance and the organ¹⁴ of the elements, inhaling the smoke of INCENSE. You reveal unto us miraculous Worlds and help us understand the Mystery of the Heavens” (11). The wording itself reveals a clear religious parallel, as if it were a mass of the senses being celebrated in honour of the sense of smell, which is superior to the excessively physical ones (such as sight) and to those that are excessively subjugated to the subconscious (here Váchal is referring to hearing).

As regards the sacredness and superiority of the sense of smell over all the other senses, it is therefore no coincidence that the short book is dedicated to a dog, described by Váchal in the inscription as “my great teacher, born in the body of a dog, Master of the Sense of Smell, my friend Voríšek.”¹⁵ The result is a

JOSEFA VÁCHALA



PASEKA

Josef Váchal, *Mystics of the Sense of Smell*, 1920, the cover of the 2008 edition

curious animalist *côté* ahead of its times, combined with caustic social criticism against the artificiality of corrupt human beings: animals are almost upheld as vestal figures in this olfactive rite since “they know no lies” (12) and their nostrils have not been ruined by culture. Ecology and animalism therefore merge in an eccentric but what is, in its own way, a coherent accusation against the corruption of the original sensorial power that can only be reconciled through a ritual, a self-sacrifice by initiates, a “grace of perfumes,” if our obnubilated senses are to recover their total, regenerative relationship with the forces of nature.

A beatnik ahead of his times

What is the book like? Tiny (9 x 10 cm) with around two hundred pages including an alphabetical list of the perfumes, odours and concepts mentioned in the text. The first one hundred and twenty-five are devoted to the mystic-style and multi-coloured text in which the author presents his philosophy of the third sense: the typeface is often coloured, underlined or highlighted in various colours, and some of the initials are embellished like mediaeval illumination texts. There are eleven lines on every page in Gothic typeface; the latter was to dominate in printing for years in Czech territories as well, and it was not until the nineteenth century that it was replaced with modern script. The orthography is also deliberately anti-modern: See the frequent use of the double ‘s’ instead of the Czech grapheme ‘š’ or the alternation of ‘w’ and ‘v’ for the fricative labiodental sound.¹⁶ However, this part of the text, which is already reduced, is often embellished with engravings (water-coloured personally by the author in the dozen copies he himself published) and they take up either part of a sheet if not the whole. The exclusively figurative part of the book begins on page 127, with “plates” depicting a ragbag of exhalations, aromatic nuances, and natural wafts that are usu-

ally (but not always) accompanied by a specific illustration by the author. From page 187 to 206 the free “Allegories of the sense of smell” prevail; these are untitled symbolic portrayals with which Váchal could give vent to his highly imaginative interior associative world. This is then followed by the concluding list (from page 207 to the end).

Let us now analyse the essential characteristics of the text: this brief philosophical treatise on the sense of smell can be divided into two subsections. In the first Váchal lists the salvific powers of the sense of smell and classifies the various categories of perfume (up to page 84); in the second he criticises human beings for having destroyed this harmony by creating artificial smells, forcing him to recapture precisely this perfect balance through a mystical retrieval of the original integrity.

While animals are connected naturally to the higher spheres and “astral body” thanks to their more developed sense of smell, humans have to seek the entrance through a “third door, which leads to interior depth” (19); this olfactory pilgrimage is no easy feat since excess can lead the uninitiated to madness, “burning too much incense over the flame” (21). Incense is regarded as the highest perfume, associated with the first person of the Holy Trinity, while styrax and benzoin are related to the Son and the Holy Spirit in a sort of triad of “celestial perfumes.” However, anyone seeking observance of traditional dogmas in Váchal’s interior cosmos would be making a mistake. In this paean to perfumes he mixes Christian inspirations with the religion of nature, and common beliefs with mythological cues: hence a series of perfumes linked to the planets (25-26) and, above all, with a description of the seven genies who control and regulate the perfume kingdom, who appear to have been snatched from one of Rudolph’s¹⁷ alchemical allegories or from a witch-like mediaeval list. The genies are “elevated beings that release powerful emanations and that also project themselves onto our planet” (31). The seven superior

essences Váchal lists, including their powers and magical attributes, are sulphur, Peru balsam, black tar, rose, garlic, bergamot and camphor; the author-evoker synaesthetically finds a colour for each, and associates them all with characteristics and spiritual brotherhood.

With what is an almost obsessive taxonomical mania, Váchal goes on to list four fundamental typologies according to which the world of smells should be classified, taking us to the magical classification of curative herbs, medical potions and supernatural entities. “Salamander,” “gnomes,” “sylphs” and “ondines”¹⁸ give their own characteristics to the perfumes beneath them, thus making them subject to the humoral theory of human temperament, and dividing them into fiery, quick-tempered, melancholic and phlegmatic. However, it is in the animal and natural kingdom that the author-draughtsman seems to be most at home, at least he seems to tend towards those horizons like a port of interior pacification: “With the perfumes from the plant world the elements show their joy at a nature that eternally renews itself. And our souls delight with them at the banquets of perfumed greetings to the Sense of Smell” (68). Each animal is subject to one of the four fundamental types: gnomes or sylphs can be their specific ‘protectors’, and in virtue of the smells it emanates, Váchal explains hate or hostility in the representatives of the terrestrial fauna.¹⁹ Lastly, Váchal relates animal smells to floral exhalations with strange combinations although it is difficult to understand whether he has produced them from a witch’s herbal or smelt them with his own delicate nostrils: [...] for example, the decoction of uva-ursi grape leaves (*folium Uvae ursi*) smells of cat urine” (73). Some of his ‘recipes’ include the right dosage, bringing to mind the alcoholic bombs of a Venedikt Erofeev,²⁰ almost as if he wanted to dull his senses and reach superior mental planes but with smells and odorous combinations and not with alcohol (not only with alcohol). And the fact that such narcotic odours played a role in his life is

revealed in the following words: “Indian tamarisk and cannabis surpass the intoxicating effect of our Poppy with mysterious aromas, melilotus officinalis, when burnt, induces one to dream with its sweetness” (76). One never quite knows whether Váchal is a do-it-yourself pharmacist trying to discover alternative corporal and psychic cures, an exalted priest in the kingdom of the Sacred Sense of Smell, or a beatnik ahead of his times who loses his bearings in a world of smoky visions.

The nose leads us to paradise

As said earlier, all this harmony, this concordance between aromas, these equilibrated spheres of vapours dominated by spirits and genies are disturbed by human intervention, which introduces a diabolical discordance with its creation of unnatural essences distilled in laboratories. By going as far as to cite the Fathers of the Church (Albertus Magnus, Saint Augustine, Saint Bonaventura), Váchal creates a direct parallel between unpleasant and artificial smells evoked by man’s hands and hell, a place of decaying bodies and the disgusting stench of corpses: “Man’s work is such, worthy of condemnation, only He created STENCH!” (87-8). The contrast between perfumes and stench, between natural odours and human creations could not be clearer. Once again, although he is deliberately isolated from society and ‘primitive’ in his own way, the author’s naturalist and anti-industrial spirit surprises us: according to his vision the effects on man and on nature are particularly harmful when the natural element is mixed with the artificial so that it clashes, “for example, in factories, in chemical plants” (98). However, in addition to his social criticism, there is no lack of lyrical openings and poetical exaltation even where we expect it least. For example: “Worthy of note is the Perfume of the skin of workers who work for a long time in gunpowder or explosives factories: it is

surprisingly similar to the perfume of orange trees; the sweat of workers in match factories smells of apricots” (99).

Why is the superiority of this sense underlined here? One possible explanation is to be found in Váchal’s memoires²¹ where, almost like a young Proust,²² he remembers how his earliest childhood sensations were linked to olfactive impressions, owing to the pungent but sweet odour of the pipe his grandfather would give him to play with, or with the mysterious blend of iodoform and gunpowder that dominated in the home of the military physician Vilém Tonner,²³ where he spent some of his childhood. There was also a garden opposite that house, where young Josef was able to get to know a large variety of fragrances from flowers and fruits and which he remembers as a “true corner of paradise.”²⁴

In conclusion, it must be pointed out how this multi-faceted, fascinating author could also be included in the convenient category of *poètes maudits* but only on the condition that one does not forget that he also belongs to the descent of mystifiers, inventors of themselves; however, this is a category that one never knows how far is to be taken seriously or whether it should be interpreted according to the principles of a sarcastic (and painful) auto-stylisation. Various sources confirm that there is no doubt that his animalist and ecological views were sincere; the same can be said of the fact that his syncretic interest in spirituality led him to carry out experiments with sensations and parallel worlds, in a mixture of confessionalism and exotericism. We should also bear in mind that he not only adored the nature of the Bohemian forest,²⁵ but also the harsh landscapes of the Julian Alps where he had to fight during the First World War, an experience that left him bereft of trust in human beings who were able to create mortal gases and poisons instead of using their own spiritual skills and sharing a fragrant peaceful life. We can therefore understand his esoteric vagrancy in the imaginary or real rivers of an uncontaminated Nature, that can be smelled, dreamt of and revived.

since (and we think this is the book's motto) "the MYSTIC, who understands the Divine gift of the third SENSE, adheres to the purest ideas about Perfume" (94). In the final pages, this priest of the Sacred Sense of Smell can only appeal to the "followers" of his Mystics so that they return to their animal state; in other words, to the "perfection of the senses of our inferior brothers" (124) because life of Humanity today, which has distanced itself from nature, is exiled from the Paradise of the perfect senses, a PARADISE that we are allowed to conquer once again by refusing all the perversions of culture" (125).

Notes

- 1 For a seminal study on the subject, cf. CHALUPECKÝ.
- 2 One of his most famous works is the frescoes of the “Portman house” (also called Portmoneum) in the beautiful city of Litomyšl.
- 3 Cf. VÁCHAL 1924.
- 4 One writer who sees this relationship with Baroque *sui generis* is PUTNA who speaks explicitly of a “sense for the black, satanic side of Baroque” (714). Unless otherwise specified, quotations have been translated by C. Cawthra from the original text, the pages of which are indicated in brackets. The original Czech edition is to be found in the bibliography.
- 5 A great religious and cultural figure in Czech history who was forced into exile by the Counter-Reformation (Cf. KOMÉNSKÝ). VÁCHAL 1932 offers a parodic version of Komensky’s didactic methods and ‘pansophical treatises.’
- 6 Cf. VÁCHAL 2008b, reprint of volumes that were originally published by the artist in 1919.
- 7 Cf. WEINER and DEML.
- 8 He illustrated volumes for Deml, including the highly imaginative, pre-Surrealist poem in prose of *Hrad smrti* (1912).
- 9 The anarchist and almost Dadaist figure in *The Good Soldier Švejk*. For more about how he broke with traditional literary canons and bourgeois conformism cf. HAŠEK .
- 10 A reference to the Czech Republic from 1918 to 1938, with the president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. It was a twenty-year period in which Váchal’s homeland was an important workshop of artistic pluralism and parliamentary democracy before the Nazi invasion.
- 11 Cf. HŮLEK 307-8, postface in the reprint of his famous *Krvavý román* (VÁCHAL 1924) and his return to the publish-

- ing field after the fall of the Communist regime.
- 12 One of his relatives was one of the most important Czech painters, Mikoláš Aleš, and he studied frequently albeit irregularly with artistic authorities of that period.
- 13 Hereafter, we are citing the beautiful reprint VÁCHAL 2008a.
- 14 The musical instrument.
- 15 A typical name for a dog in Czech.
- 16 In modern Czech these graphic characteristics were abandoned at various moments during the nineteenth century, but several more conservative traits remained for some time, for example in popular prints. In any case, the alternation of these graphic characteristics seems to be more in line with the author's personal aesthetic taste than with regular orthographic system.
- 17 We are thinking of the Habsburg Emperor Rudolf II, who moved the capital to Prague, making it a centre of alchemical studies and the heart of magical traditions.
- 18 Váčhal's sources are not always clear, but here his reference was probably the Paracelsus of *Liber de nymphis, sylphis,*
- 19 *pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus.*
“The unfriendliness of a dog, cat and mouse increases with the intensity of the smell they give off” (79).
Cf. *Mosca-Petuški*.
- 20 VÁCHAL 1995. Another autobiographical text is VÁCHAL 1929, in which he describes his experience as a soldier in World War I, expressing passion also for the animals and nature, which was harsh but amazing, in Italy and Carniola.
- 21 On page 113 Váčhal explicitly links perfumes to memories and experiences but, in perfect harmony with the spirit of the book he expands this mnemonic horizon to include earlier lives, not just childhood.
- 22 In Písek, southern Bohemia. This was where Váčhal's paternal grandparents spent the last years of their lives, looking after young Josef.
- 23 These references to Váčhal's memories come from the outstanding postface in the reprint of the work that we analysed here (OLIČ).
- 24 Cf. his monumental VÁCHAL 1931, a collection of engravings and texts dedicated to his beloved Šumava (that is, the Bohemian Forest).

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THE PERFUMES OF ALBANIA. EVANESCENT TRAILS SUSPENDED BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Giuseppina Turano

Introduction

Devoted to the expression of perfume in Albanian literature, this brief essay is the result of the detailed research of mentions and references to essences in the pages of the vast literary production of this country in a period that goes from the early twentieth century to the end of the century. The works in question are the result of a selection that was of necessity arbitrary, to exemplify the most influential literary genres in this time span.

First of all a premise is necessary: while Albanian literature witnessed the blooming of historical realism, of political poetry, and mordant satire at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the second half it was dominated profoundly by official politics and the so-called “socialist realism” that drove it towards the subject of the historical splendour of the Albanian people struggling with the revolution.

The fall of the regime in the nineties marked a brusque turning point. Once the party’s absolute control had disappeared, the theoretical and literary limits imposed by socialist realism then followed; paths other than the official ones were experimented; what had been forbidden was revived; the country was abandoned. Against a backdrop of such dramatic and radical change, very few writers dedicated their works of prose or poetry to perfume, smells or essences. However, the literature in question is full of pleasant surprises.

A country at the crossroads between East and West, Albania

lies in a fragile border area between the Roman and Byzantine dominions. It is embraced by the Greek and Latin world, and the Slav and Islamic world. Nowhere else does one come across so many cultures, languages and social forms in such a limited area. Here the European West meets the Asian East. The Christian religion (Catholic and Orthodox) lives side by side with the Muslim religion (Sunnite and *bektashi*).¹ These people's past, including the most recent, has always been stormy, at the crossroads of history and even today it is not only still wrapped in mystery, but is also as alien to Western imagination as ever.

The perfumes of this land are also testimony to this cultural interweaving: thus, the smells of the *byrek* and *raki* that evoke the East blend with the elegant perfumes of the West.

The story of this fusion process between the Western culture, visible in the Latin nature of churches and bell towers, and Eastern culture, expressed by its mosques, minarets and *bektashi* monasteries, takes us to the fall of Scutari when it was attacked by Mehmed the Conqueror's rebels in 1479; the lands of the Albanian Principality then became part of the Ottoman Empire and was known as *Arnawutluq*. However, this defeat had its precedents: in 1417 Mehmed the Conqueror took the cities of Valona and Berat, whilst Ioannina and Arta capitulated to Sultan Murad II in 1430 and 1499 respectively. The resistance of the Albanian princes and the great soldier Giorgio Castriota (called Skanderbeg) had no hope when faced with the power of the greatest army of the time.

The conquest of the Albanian principalities marked the beginning of Ottoman rule that was to last until 1912 when Albania proclaimed its independence, the last Balkan state to do so. Under the control of one of the most powerful empires in the world, every institution was subjected to profound change (all state, economic, military, religious and scholastic structures), which also had a strong influence on its culture.

The problem of cultural orientation, the sense of belong-

ing to one tradition or the other (European or Asian), was to emerge in nearly every literary work in all periods, either with undisguised or tacit evocations. Both worlds belong to a single consciousness whilst both are also present in it. And both of them can reveal hidden aspects under a shade of perfume.

The fascination of refined perfumes

Fatos Kongoli (Elbasan 1944) takes us to the West with a novel written in 2009 called *Bolero në vilën e pleqve* (*Bolero in the Old Town*). Here it is the Lancôme perfume, a symbol of luxury *par excellence*, that accompanies the tale of the strange events that upset the everyday life of a nurse called Parashqevi, who is struggling to look after two bizarre old people. It is the end of the nineties. Parashqevi is a daughter of her times; she lived her youth under the dictatorship that isolated the people from the rest of Europe and the world, excluding them from wellbeing and progress, and denying them any form of modernity. The Lancôme perfume evokes a new, distant dimension. It is the fascination of the Western world, one that is so near yet so far. It is the symbol of the luxury the regime is fighting against so scrupulously and brutally, a regime whose economy is based on principles of such austerity that people are starving.

Conscious of the evocation of this sensual, seductive perfume, Parashqevi describes it in all its nuances. First of all, its aroma, filling the room:

Unë nuk e dija ç'lloj parfumi ishte, nuk merrja vesh, por atë aromë s'mund të mos e njihja. E kisha ndeshur në paradhomën e studios së doktorit. [...] Njihja vetëm aromën, pagabueshmërisht, një aromë e mrekullueshme. (84-5)

I didn't know which perfume it was, I'm not an expert, but there was no way I didn't know that smell. I had already smelt

it in the doctor's waiting room. [...] I only recognised the fragrance but there was no doubt it was a miraculous perfume.²

Then her gaze moves to the small bottle containing the precious essence:

[...] shisha e parfumit. Ishte e bukur: një piramidë me kokë të prerë, kthyer së prapthi, me një pompë të vogël në ngjyrë të zezë. (86)

[...] the little bottle of perfume. It was pretty: a pyramid without a peak, upside down, with a small black pump.

Followed by the fragrance and form, with a mention also of its colour:

Kuptohej, po ta shtypje pompën, ajo do të nxirrte në formë sprucoje parfumin, një lëng në ngjyrën e mjaltit. [...] Lexova fjalën “Tresor”, shkruar mbi qelq me shkronja dore të zeza. Poshtë saj fjalën “Lancome” dhe, më poshtë, “Paris.” (86)

It was obvious that if you squeezed the pump, the perfume, a honey-coloured liquid would be released, a sort of spray. [...] The word “Trésor” was written by hand in black on the glass. Beneath it was the word “Lancôme” and a bit further down, “Paris.”

A solitary, touchy woman who spends her life in the sleepy, twilight drabness of Tirana, Parashqevi is the painful portrait of a period and nation enclosed in itself. When faced for just one moment with the elusive reality of Paris in the form of the Lancôme perfume, the protagonist begins day-dreaming about this different world, fantasising about everything it evokes.

With a tale written in 2002 called “Arkitekti Perandorak” (“The Imperial Architect”), Vath Koreshi (Luzhnjë 1936 – Rome

2006), on the other hand, takes us to the East. From the very title we understand that this is about a completely different dimension. Although a descendent of an old Albanian family, the protagonist lives in Istanbul, the capital of the Empire where the highest-ranking administration officials would be sent. The setting here is typically oriental, in both its colours and pace. Even the perfume filling the apartment of the architect's wife is oriental; she is the daughter of another high-ranking official of the Sublime Porte:

Nga jalldazi, ku qenë ndezur të gjithë fenerët në odat e së shoqes, i erdhi era nazike e parfumeve të saj. Dalloj mes tyre Unapan-sigotin, të cilin ia kish sjellë një mikesha e vet nga Samarkanda. Ishte parfumi më i shtrnjtë, atë e përdorte një herë e një kohë gruaja e Timurit. Unapan-sigoti hapej nëpër ajrin e mbrëmjejes si një vështrim i mekur sysh prapa bilurëve me porcelan të kaltër. Kundërmimi i tij vinte si një drudhëz ere, si një aromë delikate kërrmezësh në kopshtet e Abi Birunit. (235-6)

He could smell the delicate fragrance of her perfumes coming from his wife's apartments, where all the lights were on. He could make out Unapansigot, which a friend of hers had brought her from Samarkand. It was the most expensive perfume, which Tamerlano's wife had used in the past. Unapan-sigot would waft in the evening air like a glassy look behind the panes in light porcelain. The smell was like a breath of wind, a delicate fragrance of gladioli in Ali Birun's gardens.

With *Unapansigot*, a refined, expensive perfume (an equivalent of *Trésor*), we are taken to the heart of central Asia, to the distant district of the ancient Samarcanda, a city on the Silk Road. Perfumes float in the air, coming from a lavish apartment with the smell of spices and oriental costumes, decorated with gardens and fountains, sofas, silks and velvets.

Familiar microcosms in the same land but looking in opposite directions: the first to the West, the second to the East.

Perfume and identity

We remain in the East in Vath Koreshi's story "Arkitekti Perandorak." The protagonist is remembering an evening many years before and the meeting with his beloved. A dim memory in an atmosphere that is suspended and timeless but that smells of jasmine, a plant that originally came from India:

Iu kujtua vetëtimthi diçka që i kishte ndodhur shumë vjet më parë dhe u tkurr. [...] Atëhere ishte një dhëndër i ri dhe rendte të vente te nusja; mbante mend se kishte qenë një mbrëmje e mbushur si me erë jasemini. (241)

He suddenly remembered something that had happened to him years ago and he frowned. [...] It had been when he was young and had a girlfriend, and he was going to visit her; he remembered it was an evening impregnated with the perfume of jasmine.

We also smell jasmine in the collection *Haxhiu i Frakullës* (*Haxhi Frakulla*), written by Vath Koreshi in 1980. Once again we go back to the past, but this time two centuries earlier, to the period when the country was under the Ottoman Empire although the setting is entirely Albanian. We are in the Central-South of Albania, in the city of Berat. A beautiful Meremxhenë arrives, the daughter of a wealthy Turkish traveller called Serdar Ali Hani, friend of the Sultan. The young poet Haxhi falls hopelessly in love with Meremxhenë and her sweet perfume of jasmine:

Ishte te shatërvanet e pashait, në një natë me hënë, me një vajzë që i kundërmonte shtati era jasemin. (28)

He was near the fountains of the Sultan; it was a moonlit night and he was with a girl whose body smelt of jasmine.

With the prose of Ernest Koliqi (Scutari 1903 – Rome 1975), once again we are within geo-cultural Albanian borders. Against a background of what are essentially traditional themes – combined marriages, loves that come up against opposition, defending one's honour and seeking vengeance – Koliqi describes the Scutari bourgeoisie with all its traditions and tensions between the new and the old, tradition and progress. Nostalgic for that middle class world in which he grew up and never managed to completely shake off, in the short story “*Àndërr e një mbasditje vere*” (“A Summer Afternoon’s Dream”), in his first collection *Hija e maleve* (*In the Shadows of the Mountains*, 1929), the author manages to exalt his homeland through the figure and perfume of the rose:

A i shef këto drandofille të kuqe? Merru erë mirë. Gjyshi i em i ka mbjellë, unë i kam shartue. Langjet e tokës shqiptare i ushqejnë. Voksina e prandverës sonë i shpërthen. Era e tyne ndihet në këtë shtëpi tash njëqind vjet. Kurrë era e luleve të hueja s'mundet me të kënaqë sa kjo erë. (100)

Can you see these red roses? Smell their perfume. My grandfather planted them, I grafted them. They are nourished by the juices of the Albanian earth. The heat of our spring makes them bloom. We have smelt their perfume in this house for a hundred years at least. The perfume of foreign flowers will never be a match for this perfume.

Also in the collection *Hija e maleve*, the protagonist of the tale “*Nusia e Mrekullueshme*” (“The Magical Bride”) smells of rose. In the mountains where this tale is set, lives a unique creature, a marvellous fairy that falls in love with a young mountain

dweller; she offers him her love in exchange for his silence but when he breaks his promise by confessing to his mother, the fairy abandons him, leaving him mute. After her departure, he is unable to speak. His life will never be the same again, changed by the adventure that the mountain fairy involved him in, with its ill-fated ending.

U bâ mesnata. Oda, me tê papritme, u mbush me dritë arit e me erë drandofillesh. Nusja e mrekullueshme, me bukurinë hyjnore që gojë nieri s'mundet me e rrëfye, hyni pa çelë derë. (12)

Midnight struck. All of a sudden the room was filled with a golden light and the perfume of roses. The splendid bride, who was of such divine beauty that no human voice could ever describe her, walked in without opening the door.

This element of fantasy appears unexpectedly in an everyday context. Koliqi has revived the ancient legend of the fairies that lived in the high mountains of Albania. It is a step into the reality of the pagan world; an evocation of the past and the reassuring static nature of Albanian traditions.

On the other hand, the figure of the shaman outlined by Anilda Ibrahim (Valona, 1972) in her first novel *Rosso come una sposa* (2008), written directly in Italian, is surrounded by the seductive fragrances of herbs and spices:

Infine lo sciamano, esausto e affranto, sedeva sul *qilim*. Nell'aria ancora l'odore di quelle erbe bruciate, un odore buono che sapeva di luoghi lontani, che nessuno aveva il privilegio di aggiungere tranne lo sciamano (154).

Finally, exhausted and broken-hearted, the shaman sat on the qilim. One could still smell burnt herbs in the air, a nice smell

that evoked far off places, which only the shaman had the privilege of visiting.

Incense and aromatic resins are part of the healer's rite and the state of trance that takes him on his super-terrestrial journey into the Other World, through a dreamlike dimension that allows things otherwise impossible to happen. Meanwhile the reader is transported to far away places in the lands of the East, where shamanism is common.

With his novella *Vjeshta e Xheladin Beut* (*Geladyn Bey's Autumn*),³ Mitrush Kuteli (Pogradec 1907 – Tirana 1967) also takes us to the East, to Turkey. Both the name and title are Turkish: Geladin Bey is the youngest son of an ancient family belonging to the feudal class created by the Ottoman government; he is the son of former soldiers of the Sultan and as such has acquaintances in higher circles. But the man is corrupt, without either ethics or morals. He embodies the worst vices of a human being. Greedy for land and food, the latter is consumed in accordance with oriental traditions:

Geladyn Bey sat down next to the *sofra*, the small table with the drinks, and removed his fez. He began filling himself with food [...] and finished with a *sheqerpare*, a tasty dessert made of butter and flour, soaked in dense syrup and sprinkled with cinnamon, juniper, and cloves. (47)

Cinnamon, juniper and cloves, rare spices from the East that reached the West following the caravan routes.

With his novel *Dështaku* (*The Failure*), the writer Dritëro Agolli (Menkulkas, district of Devoll, 1931) then takes us to a completely Albanian world that is constructed on the idea of socialism and the creation of the new. Written between 1981 and 1985, the novel is set in a village in the district of Devoll, afflicted by downpours and overflowing rivers that thwart the inhabit-

ants' efforts to exploit one of the countless agricultural cooperatives wanted by the regime, to guarantee the central government enough milk and grain. However, in the spring the landscape is transformed when the air and fragrances coming from the cultivated fields help raise the villagers' spirits:

Vinte erë gjelbërim gruri, një erë e mirë që, kur e mbushje krahërorin, të dukej sikur mendimet të bëheshin më të qartë. (150)

One could smell greenish wheat, a lovely smell that would lighten your soul as it filled your lungs.

The fragrances that evoke memories are of bread and meat, snapshots of everyday life describing people, feelings and situations, such as those evoked by the young protagonist in the novel *Kronikë në gur* (1971) by the writer Ismail Kadare (Argirocastro 1936). Below are two excerpts from the English translation (*Chronicle in Stone*, 1991):

Margarita's thick hair was spread across my neck and her hair, her whole body, had a subtle fragrance I had never noticed on Mamma, Grandma or any of my aunts. Nor was it like any of the other smells I liked best, including the aroma of my favourite dishes. (55)

Grandma always smelled like fresh bread, and whenever I got hungry, I always thought of her. (70)

Jasmine, rose, aromatic herbs and oriental spices evaporate from the pages of works about Albania, a borderland where the East and West meet continuously.

Fragrance and memory

In other novels fragrances appear overpoweringly, rousing memories and evoking nostalgia. They are like fragments of something that has been lost or found once again, leading back to lost roots and the fragrances of an abandoned homeland. This is the case with the most recent authors. With her short novel written in Italian, *La mano che non mordi* (2007), Ornella Vorpsi (Tirana 1968) who has been living in Paris for years now, takes us on a ‘journey back’ to the Balkans. A pleasant experience that cancels the distance with one’s homeland but reawakens painful memories:

Io a Sarajevo non ci voglio più stare. [...] non posso più stare qui. Mi fa male, non dormo. L’odore dei peperoni fritti. La feta, le olive... (65)

L’odore dei Balcani risveglia il passato che fa male. Di nostalgia, d’amore, di rancore, di desolazione, d’impotenza, di lontananza, di vicinanza. (43)

I no longer want to stay in Sarajevo. [...] I can’t stay here. It is bad for me, I can’t sleep. The smell of fried peppers. Feta cheese and olives ...

The smell of the Balkans reawakens a past that hurts. One of nostalgia, love, rancour, desolation, impotence, distance and closeness.

Remembering the past, evoked by familiar smells, causes pain, the torment of being uprooted from one’s own world and origins. This is how a young Albanian woman, who has decided to live in the West, leaving her roots behind, described this sense of alienation.

In Sarajevo the sense of longing for her homeland gives no quarter:

L'orologio avanza e noi non troviamo la strada, continuiamo a essere persi a Sarajevo. [...] Non posso essere d'aiuto ad Aleksandar per trovare la casa del mio amico ammalato, qui tutto è straniero, solo gli odori e le visioni sono di casa mia. Mi stupisce persino che parlino un'altra lingua. (44)

The minutes are ticking by and we can't find the street, we're still lost in Sarajevo. [...] I am unable to help Aleksandar find the house of my sick friend, everything seems alien here; I can only see and smell my home. I'm even amazed they speak another language.

Sarajevo is like Tirana: they share the same tired atmosphere and the same smells. One of them is *byrek*, a thin puffed pastry filled with spinach or meat. It is one of the traditional dishes in Turkish cuisine, and now common in the Balkans, too:

L'odore del *byrek* inonda la strada. (43)

The smell of byrek floods the street.

One can remember one's homeland through the fragrances of the Balkans, through the ties that bind the European West and the Asian East. In dusty Sarajevo, a decadent theatre of confused contemporaneity, these two worlds overlap with their fragrances: fashionable perfumes blend and mix in the people living there, with ancient, traditional smells such as the one of local grappa, *raki*:

A volte, il loro odore di sudore e di grappa è foderato (nei più giovani) da profumi all'ultimo grido: Calvin Klein o Armani.

Il profumo e i vestiti fatti in Italia o in Francia li trasportano in Europa. (16)

At times, their smell of sweat and grappa is tinged (in the younger generation) with the latest perfumes: Calvin Klein or Armani.

They have transported the perfume and clothes that were made in Italy or France to Europe.

In the West, in Milan (where the writer lived for a short time), we have the smell of other perfumes and essences:

È mattina, Milano sa di brioche fresche e caffelatte. I signori milanesi sono ben pettinati, i corpi si nascondono sotto le giacche eleganti, i visi sono abbronzati, l'acqua di colonia si mescola alla mattina, le signore sono già snelle e bionde. (62)

It is morning, Milan smells of fresh croissants and coffee. The Milanese gentlemen are all perfectly coiffured, they bodies are hidden beneath elegant jackets, with sun-tanned faces, cologne water blends with the morning, the ladies are slim and blond.

The East can also be found in Paris in the fragrance of *salep*, a powder made from the tuberous roots of orchids that is used to make a Turkish drink and which the writer comes across by chance in a small shop in the city:

Un giorno, girando per i negoziotti di rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis, dove tra polacchi, ebrei, turchi e indiani cerco nell'aria l'odore dell'Albania, mi sono imbattuta nel salep, di cui avevo scordato l'esistenza. Con nostalgia e tenerezza mi sono ricordata che l'infusione di questa polvere aveva un delizioso profumo, degno delle *Mille e una notte*. (23)

One day, when I was visiting the little shops in Rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis, where the Poles, Jews, Turks and Indians seek the

smell of Albania, I came across salep, the very existence of which I had completely forgotten. With a sense of nostalgia and tenderness I remembered that the infusion of this powder was exquisite, worthy of being in A Thousand and one Nights.

Salep awakens memories that have never faded: the memory of one's homeland, the incurable nostalgia and awareness of loss.

While in Vorpsi's works perfume has the evocative power to reawaken the past, in Anilda Ibrahim's the smell of the places where she lived can get in the way of one's personal life. This is the case with Afrodita, one of the numerous protagonists in *Rosso come una sposa*: not wanting to remain trapped in the tiny village where she was born, stuck in the mountains in the South of Albania, and constantly impregnated by the unmistakeable smell of fields, she decides to move to the modern, frenetic capital:

D'un tratto si era scordata della sua infanzia nei campi di granoturco e delle capre che ogni sera doveva mungere con le sorelle. Si era levata di dosso quell'odore per sempre, come si era levata di dosso il suo aspetto da contadina. (57)

All of a sudden she had forgotten her childhood in wheat fields and the goats she had to milk with her sisters. She had put that smell behind her once and for all, just as she had her peasant-like appearance.

Catapulted from country life to a large city, she will pay an extremely high price: the inability to find her balance. She will experience merciless contrasts between the ancient culture of the family around her and their little world, and the solitude in a city. Two opposing cultures that, when they clash, result in extraneousness and alienation, with the dramatic consequence that the protagonist will not feel at home in either one or the other.

Isolated writings, different styles, forms and contents. Nev-

ertheless, twentieth-century Albanian literature all has one thing in common: fragrances and essences have both a symbolic and evocative value. The unique interweaving of the East and West, which comprises the very essence of the Albanian identity, can also be summarised by the ephemeral trace of a perfume.

Notes

- 1 The *bektashi* belong to an Islamic pantheist order that was established in the thirteenth century in the area bordering on Anatolia. *Bektashism* was brought to Albania in the fifteenth century by the janissaries of the Ottoman army. However, it became more widespread in the period of Ali Pasha of Tepelena (at the beginning of the nineteenth century). The *bektashi* recognise God in the relationship of

man with nature; they preach tolerance of any religion that is not Islamic, and differ from the traditional janissarislamic religion as regards the ban on alcohol, women having to wear a veil, and turning towards the Mecca during prayer.

- 2 With the exception of *Chronicle in Stone*, all quotations are translated by C. Cawthra.
- 3 Originally in the collection *Tregime të moçme shqiptare*, 1965.

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“A scent, my music”

Two poems by Meena Alexander

Attar

Soon after we met you set a tiny bottle in my palm.
It had blue whorls and a gold stopper,

Glass blown in the furnaces of Hyderabad.
Open it you whispered,

They call it Attar of the First Rains on Dry Earth:
Pick a piece of wool cotton and pour a drop on it,

Then set it in the broken window frame:
Remember this is the odor of earth and air

This perfume summons souls.

Half Rhyme of Scent

There'll come a time when I forget your name
Wild syllables that make the jasmine bloom

Gnarl of perfume in the tree that grows
Beside the mountain of the ancestors

Mango tree, jacaranda tree, frangipani tree,
The tree with many parrots perched in it;

I'll forget the mirror where I glimpsed your face
And mine cupped together, stout waves of scent

That swept us close in a house of salt,
There'll come a day when I forget your lips,

Hot fragrance wiped with a handkerchief.

What can I say? The idea of perfume touched something mysterious in me and here are two poems.

These few words, which express perfectly the interest aroused by a title such as *Perfume and Literature*, accompany the texts that Meena Alexander wanted to write for this publication.

Below are some of the reflections that were made during conversations with Marco Fazzini – her main translator in Italy – revealing the significance that perfumes have always transmitted to her sensibility as both a poetess and woman, evoking memories and sensations of the places she has been to:

I do think of scent as so akin to music. It is evanescent and yet changes everything, as the angle of light might, or love. So I have carried with me the perfumes of earth and tree and air, of kitchen and bedroom from my childhood days in South India, through the souks and desert air of North Africa and now in the wintry landscape of North America. How can I forget the scent of spices in a Kerala kitchen, scents I learnt to distinguish, the sharpness of them, even bitterness, and then the unexpected sweetness. Scents of raw fruits, of flowers too, of the bark of trees, of the soil.

Meena Alexander is a woman of our times: her universe – geographical, historical, intellectual and spiritual – roams beyond the borders of a traditional life. Born, as she herself remembers here, in the South of India, she lives in Sudan, studied in England and then returned to India where she taught first at Delhi University, and then at Hyderabad University, a city that will always be close to her heart. It was from here that she drew inspiration for the poem *Attar*, with its evocation of the essences that permeate the life around her, reviving the spirit. Meena tells us about it:

When I used to live in Hyderabad there was a street in the old city, near the Charminar that was filled with attar shops. It was there that I became familiar with the extraordinary variety of scents sold in the tiny glass bottles. My favorite was the attar of the first rains on dry earth. Indeed it had a whiff of the first monsoon rains on the dry earth. Indeed this was a scent from my childhood that I carried with me in memory, all over when I traveled. I was amazed to find it instilled into a perfume.

In an elegy I wrote for the poet Czesław Miłosz August 14, 2004 I have these lines evoking passage, the transience of life, the sharpness of desire:

*"On a dresser made of mahogany
A woman's hand arranges a display of attar,
Each vial culled from a separate continent –
Jasmine, lilac, rose – last of all, attar of earth
Red earth in pouring rain..."*

And in those lines I wrote is a hidden evocation of the famous love poem from the classical Tamil, telling us how the lives of the speaker and beloved are mingled like red earth and pouring rain.

The idea of the gift is indeed crucial to this little poem At- tar. The essence of the perfume, the purest distillation of memory, allows one to enter into history. There is some- thing else, too. Attar is so strong that you should not just dab it to your wrist. The scent would overpower. You are sup- posed to let the air reach it, and then after it has breathed in the air, or summoned souls, as the poem suggests, it is ready for your own skin.

Today Meena Alexander is living in New York and it is from this metropolis, the heart of international contemporary culture, that she composes her poetry, ranging from mythical figures,

memories of love, perfumes of far-off places, and hidden paths made up of literary readings and influences.

The poem *Half Rhyme of Scent* was inspired by one of her frequent visits to Venice, and it is to this city that it returns, on the occasion of this book. The poetess describes its origins:

I think I do need the natural world so much. Without it neither I nor my poem could exist. I made the first draft of this poem in Venice some years ago, so it is only right that the poem should return there. I was reading at the time the Spanish poems of Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Seven Trees Against the Dying Light. I was so struck by his mythic trees so this was an homage. But also as a child I used to run away from my grandparental house when the tutor came and hide in trees and sit there, or hang upside down and dream my life away. I could not have survived without the friendship of trees. So they do take on a mythic life here, in my poem. Yes, you are right, memory makes the path for me.

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