OLFACTORY ONTOLOGY AND SCENTED HARMONIES: ON THE HISTORY OF SMELL

By STEPHEN KERN

What separates two people most profoundly is a different sense and degree of cleanliness. What avails all decency and mutual usefulness and good will toward each other—in the end the fact remains: "They can't stand each other's smell!"—Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil.*

For some time I have been collecting material for a book on changing attitudes towards the human body. In the course of my research I began to gather some information on a subject that I had not envisioned at the outset—the sense of smell. I gradually came to see that recognition of the role of odors in human affairs was a good index to the extent to which society was willing to concede that human beings were indeed corporeal beings, closely linked with the animal world. Both the hairiness of man and his smells were the most pressing reminders of his animal ancestry. The willingness to study smells was the most convincing evidence that I have been able to uncover in support of the general argument that after 1850 European society began to come to terms with the corporeal side of human existence and challenge the sexually repressive morality that so strongly influenced European life in the early part of the century.

In spite of the emphasis on the role of the senses that dominated eighteenth-century psychology, the function of the "lower senses"—taste and smell—was largely neglected by philosophers and psychologists alike. Kant had assigned little importance to the sense of smell, and there were few studies of it in the early nineteenth century. Hippolyte Cloquet's *Osphrésiologie, ou traité des odeurs, du sens et des organes de l'olfaction* (1821) offered the first systematic study of the physiology and psychology of the olfactory system. Interest in smells was revived around the mid century because of the popular theory

that odors emanating from putrefying organic bodies caused disease—in particular cholera, which had erupted in epidemics in 1831 and again in 1848. The desire to eliminate miasmatic origins of disease became linked with the campaign ro provide adequate ventilation in hospitals, factories, schools, and homes. The "Great Stench" that choked London in the summer of 1858 gave support to the effort that Florence Nightingale had made around that time to improve ventilation in hospitals. The English epidemologist, William Budd, commented on the historical significance of the Great Stench: "Never before had a stink risen to the height of an historic event."[1]

I would speculate that as the public health movement began to get under way around the mid century, and as life became cleaner, Europeans began to become more sensitive to smells, both to body odor and to foul air. The possibility of keeping streets and bathrooms, as well as one's body, clean led to the growing sensitivity to smells that we see developing in the latter decades of the century. Before that time, I would assume, body odor was so overpowering that heightened sensitivity to smell was discouraged rather than cultivated.[2]

The influence of smells on human sex life appears to have been largely neglected during the early nineteenth century.[3] In 1871 Darwin stimulated interest in the role of the olfactory system in sexual life with *The Descent of Man*. Following him a number of studies attempted to argue that the sense of smell, which played an essential role in the sex life of lower animal forms, was still operative in human sexuality, even though civilized morality had tended to minimize its importance. The German embryologist Ernst Haeckel elaborated upon Darwin's speculation about the evolutionary history of the sense of smell and its relation to sex in 1891 in his popular textbook *Anthropogenie.* Haeckel reasoned that the earliest mode of sexual attraction had to be smell or taste, an "erotic chemotropism" that operated through water to bring two cells together. These first sex cells must have had some kind of low mental activity which was linked with their sense of smell. This primeval link between smell and sex continued to exist in the racial memory and remained related to sexual stimulation and sexual processes. The function of smell as an accessory stimulus in human sexuality was therefore a vestige from the age when it alone received sexual sensations and directed the cells towards one another. Haeckel's theory was widely held around the turn of the century.[4]

Freud's intimate confidant during the 1890's, Wilhelm Fliess, devoted a large part of his gynecological research to establishing the connection between nasal and sexual processes. From his observations that during menstruation the capillaries of the nose swell and that application of cocaine to special "genital spots" of the nose reduces menstrual pain, Fliess developed a theory of the periodicity of all human behavior. However, he was not concerned with smell, but rather with the evolution of the nose from the sexual apparatus of lower animals.[5]

The most complete study of the connection between smell and the sexual life of man was published in 1900 by a German physician Iwan Bloch.[6] After surveying the history of the study of smells, reviewing some of the essentials of the physiology of the olfactory system, and recounting the most recent efforts

to link sex and smell Bloch offered his own analysis of the significance of the role of smell in modern life. He regrets the current cultural neglect of the sense of smell in human affairs generally, particularly in relation to sex life, but he is equally disturbed by exaggerations of the importance of smell and certain perversions of it that he discovered in the work of Baudelaire, Zola, and Huysmans. He concludes by calling for an effort to restore the pleasure of natural smells to maximize the enjoyment of life.

Bloch colors his scholarly study with a collection of some folklore on the interconnection of the nose, smell, and sex. The idea that a large nose betokened large genitals and sexual potency was part of popular culture in Europe over the centuries. He also mentions an old belief in the rejuvenating powers of the odor of young people.[7] Accordingly, an older person may revive his sexual powers by smelling, or having intercourse with, a youth. One older man, banking on this theory, slept with two young wet nurses and took milk from both of them. Bloch then recounts a few studies of the attempt to make bad breath grounds for divorce. Paul Mantegazza is his authority that "stinking breath" is grounds for divorce in various law books, although Bloch does not list the books explicitly. He adds from his own research that the Leipzig medical faculty seriously discussed whether bad breath was sufficient grounds for divorce, and he concludes with his own supposition that many unhappy marriages may be explained by "antipathetic smells." His discussion of bad breath as a possible cause of marital difficulty was no doubt a sober reminder to many of the intrusiveness of corporeality in human affairs. That the relationship between a married couple just *might* be rendered unworkable because one of the two had especially bad breath or body odor was a sharp contradiction to the rhapsodic eulogies about lofty ideals that maintain marital happiness which one could read in the countless *feuilletons* and family magazines that were so popular throughout the Victorian age. Bloch's sources suggest that Nietzsche's quip, quoted at the beginning of this article, might have applied to a surprisingly large number of married couples.

Recognition that the sense of smell performs an essential role in adult sexuality involves the rejection of an enormous load of denial that constricted Victorian sexuality. The most prolific and outspoken critic of that sexual ethic, Havelock Ellis, devoted almost eighty pages of his monumental *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* to the role of smell. Ellis's study of smell is largely a bibliographical essay which surveys the literature topic by topic—the history of the study of smell, the psychology of smell, smell in literature, and the perfume industry. His own comment on the fate of the olfactory system in civilized society avoids the equivocation of Bloch's. Ellis laments unreservedly that the sense of smell has given way to the sense of vision which almost exclusively dominates modern sex life. He remains steadfastly convinced that "the latent possibilities of sexual allurement by olfaction, which are inevitably embodied in the nervous structure we have inherited from our animal ancestry, still remain ready to be called into play."[8]

The idea that modern civilization had tended to deny and inhibit the role of smells in human existence—sexual and other—was suggested by a number of

scholars by the turn of the century period. Though their evaluation of that particular repression of human sensual existence varied, all generally agreed that something had been lost in the process. Freud concurred with that view, but broadened his interpretation of its historical significance by relating it to the denial of human corporeality generally. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) he further argued that the repression of smell imposed by civilization was a major cause of mental illness. "With the assumption of an erect posture by man and with the depreciation of his sense of smell, it was not only his anal eroticism which threatened to fall a victim to organic repression, but the whole of his sexuality."[9]

Another sign that the Victorian age did not handle the odoriferous side of human existence with ease is the incidence of fetishes involving smells. The famous experts on sexual pathology of the late nineteenth century, Krafft-Ebing in Germany and Charles Féré in France, agreed that a large number of prevalent fetishes involved smells. The popularity of the handkerchief, the shoe, and underclothing, as well as feet, sweat, and excrement, for such purposes was partly due to the pungent bodily odors associated with them. Bloch explained shoe fetishism by the similarity between the smell of shoe leather and the female genitals. He agreed with Krafft-Ebing's explanation that the rise of the incidence of smell-related fetishes was an exaggerated counter-reaction to the cultural suppression of the sense of smell generally.

The scientific study of smells was by no means limited to the relation between smell and sexuality. Other studies involved the role of smell in stimulating memories, the ethnology of smells (so-called racial or national smells), and the general psychology of smell.

The famous English physician Henry Maudsley touched on an aspect of the psychology of smells that received growing attention in the later decades of the century—the ability of smells to trigger memories. In *The Physiology and Pathology of the Emotions* (1867) he argued that no sense has so strong a power for calling up memories with deep "emotional reverberation." In 1896 the French psychologist Théodule Ribot expanded upon Maudsley's discussion in a general discussion of the memory of feelings. He argued that tastes and smells have particular efficacy in reviving feelings precisely because they are so difficult to remember. Also they are associated with organic and physiological states and hence are able to generate the physical and emotional changes produced at the time of the original feeling. This psychological speculation about the mnemonic power of smells and tastes became the theoretical foundation for one of the greatest literary works of the early twentieth century: Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. In the first volume the narrator, Marcel, inwardly stirred by the taste of a *petite madeleine*, speculates that "what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, linked to that taste, has tried to follow it into my conscious mind." Marcel's rumination inspires him into a long search for the lost world that the taste of the little cakes faintly recalled to him. In the final volume, *The Past Recaptured*, the taste of a *petite madeleine* brings back the feelings and sensations of the world of his childhood. In according such magnificent imaginative powers to the exploration

of a world that was unlocked by a combination of tastes, Proust underlined the extent to which our entire emotional life is linked with that part of our sensorium that psychologists had for so long dismissed as our "lower senses."

The most zealous argument for the importance of smells in human existence was made by the German biologist Gustav Jaeger in a series of essays published in 1881, on "the origin of the soul."[10] He opens his discussion with the complaint that modern man has lost his sense of smell. This sense plays a major role in the most intimate and vital human functions and is essential to his sensuous relation to the environment. He elaborates upon Schiller's often repeated quotation, "While philosophers dispute, hunger and love decide our fate," by arguing that both hunger and love are chemical processes that rely on smell. The intimate relation between a mother and a child is enhanced by odor, and some children detect their mother's smell and will not nurse from a strange breast. The family bond is revealed in the harmonious mixture of the smells of the mother and her children. Different races have unique smells, and various emotional states such as terror and hatred produce specific smells. Jaeger tested this theory on his daughter by smelling her hairnet after she exercised to prove that she indeed smelled differently in calm and excited states. The startling conclusion of all these ruminations is that the production of smells is the unique function of the soul. Hence the "origin of the soul" is odor.

Jaeger achieved more recognition in Europe and America for his system of woolen underwear, rather than for his exaltation of the olfactory system in man. But the two interests are related, as he explained in *Health-Culture and the Sanitary Woolen System.* Jaeger insisted that everybody ought to wear a complete set of woolen underwear at all times to help keep the skin uniformly warm, to offer an outlet for perspiration and to stimulate the skin and circulation. The arguments were not unreasonable in an age when women often wore no underwear and were subject to extreme differences in body temperature, and when clothing often did not allow for adequate perspiration; but Jaeger added to these purely hygienic considerations his strange theory of the penultimate importance of odors in regulating human physical as well as emotional life. "Disease is stink" and, he argued, the "offensive effluvia" emanating from privies are dangerous when they contain germs. And since the proper perspiration of the skin permits the body to expel these disease causing odors, woolen underwear will maximize bodily health by reducing the "noxious principle within the body."[11]

Jaeger's theory was elaborated upon in 1886 by the Frenchman August Galopin, who maintained the central role of odors in human love. In his classic *Le Parfum de la femme* he argued that the mutual interaction of odors constitutes the essence of sexual love. "The purest marriage that can be contracted between a man and a woman is that engendered by olfaction and sanctioned by a common assimilation in the brain of the animated molecules due to the secretion and evaporation of the two bodies in contact and sympathy."[12] Galopin's insistence that love is smell paralleled Jaeger's argument that the soul is smell. Both men defied romantic conventions about the spiritual nature of love by insisting that the sniffing about so long associated with the sexual life of animals

was a central element in the love life of humans.

Another Frenchman, Ernest Monin, published a catalog of various kinds of body odors, normal and pathological.[13] His attempt to characterize such specific odors as those of arm-pits, breath, feet, and genitals reads nowadays like a satire on nineteenth-century quasi-scientific scholarship. A more complete catalog was published by the Dutch psychologist H. Zwaardemaker, whose *Physiology of Smells* (1895) outlined nine specific categories. In 1887 Zwaardemaker developed the olfactometer—an instrument designed to put the study of smells on a truly scientific basis by providing a means of measuring the threshold of the sense of smell. His work was a major effort to surmount the problem of subjectivity which had made the experimental study of smells impossible. In 1894 the German physiologist Carl Giessler suggested that smells could be divided into two major categories—idealizing and unidealizing smells—the division being determined by the effect the respective odors had on human digestive and sexual processes. Like many of his predecessors Giessler concludes with the hope that the sense of smell will be further cultivated.[14] In the following year Heinrich Pudor joined the campaign for the revival of the sense of smell in a popularization of psychological theory, which lamented the general anaesthetization of the human senses that modern life appeared to be producing.[15] Pudor was soon to turn his energies to support physical culture, and in particular the movement for nudism and *Freikörpercultur*.

The complaint that the sense of smell had been neglected was not limited to the obscure psychologists and physiologists we have so far surveyed. A number of important literary figures began to write such graphic accounts of the smells of everyday life that a counter movement was raised in protest. Max Nordau's megalomaniacal display of his disgust at the degeneration which he believed to be slowly corrupting European culture in the 1890's, *Degeneration*, criticized in particular the work of Baudelaire, Zola, and Huysmans for their all too lurid descriptions of smells. Nordau interpreted the preoccupation with smell as "an atavism . . . going back to an epoch anterior to man."[16] His protest against the animalism that smelling suggests was more in keeping with the general cultural climate of the times than the calls for revivication of the olfactory system that I have so far surveyed. But the work of these three great French writers of the period is solid evidence that at least some European intellectuals were willing to explore the most sensuous side of human existence in radical defiance of the dominant aesthetic conventions.

In 1836 Theophile Thoré, whom Baudelaire was later to come to know personally, published *Art des parfums* which developed the idea that smells can be as expressive as colors. While painting and sculpture represent the object directly, perfumes reveal the intuition of things, like music.[17] Baudelaire himself explored the artistic possibilities this theory in his famous poem *Correspondences* (1857): "There are perfumes as fresh as the flesh of a child/ Sweet as the oboes, green as the meadow;/ And others corrupt, triumphant and rich,/ Opening out like infinite things,/ Like amber, like musk, benjamin, incense/ Singing the raptures of spirit and senses."[18] Baudelaire thus related smells to touch (child's flesh), sound (oboes), vision (green as the meadows), and emotional states (cor-

ruption and triumph). Baudelaire sings the praises of woman's body odors, particularly the odor of her hair, in several poems in *The Flowers of Evil.* "Parfum exotique" recalls the sensuous pleasure of the smell of a woman whose breath is a guide "toward charming climates." In *La Cheveleure* he longs to lose himself in the smell of a woman's hair; ". . . O odorous wood!/ My soul, as other souls put forth on the deep flood/ Of music, sails away upon thy scent instead."[19] He further explored the sensuous pleasure of a woman's hair in *Un Hemisphere dans une cheveleure* (1869). "Let me breathe forever the scent of your hair and immerse my whole face into it. . . . What things I hear in your hair! My soul travels on fragrance as the soul of other men travels on music. [In your hair] the air is perfumed by fruit, by leaves, and by human skin. . . . In the burning hearth of your hair I breathe the scent of tobacco mixed with opium and sugar."[20] On the basis of his reading of these and other similar rhapsodies on the beauty and charm of odors, Nordau dismissed Baudelaire as an atavistic "smeller" along with those other two French degenerates—Zola and Huysmans.

Zola's fascination with odors was sufficiently pronounced in his work to inspire a complete study by Léopold Bernard, a Professor of Philosophy at Montpellier. Bernard's essay credited Zola with elevating the impoverished language of odors by including descriptions of the fine nuances of smells in his novels. Zola's materialism, Bernard argues, convinced him that man is essentially a system of organs, and those involved in nutrition and reproduction are naturally dependent on the olfactory system. Each living body has its odor, and the novelist ought to try to record them to fully portray the unique individuality of the characters. "For Zola, the description of a character is not complete unless he has noted the expressive odor which he exhales." Interest in Zola's preoccupation with odors led to the performance of a detailed autopsy of his olfactory system. The examination showed that the development of his olfactory system was "below normal."[21]

Bernard surveys the particular novels in which attention to smells is particularly obvious. In *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875) Albine is described as smelling like a bunch of flowers, the effiminate Serge was "robbed of his manly smells," and the virgin Desirée smelled like health. And when Albine commits suicide because her love with Mouret is impossible, she fills her room with bouquets of flowers and is asphyxiated by their fragrance. *Le Ventre de Paris* (The Belly of Paris) includes detailed accounts of the odors of the marketplace, and in *La Curée* Zola explores the smells of lovers and points out the connection between the odors of religion and those of sex life. In *Nana* (1880) Zola fills out his description of Count Muffat's first visit to see Nana backstage at the theater with an account of its "haunting" smells: a composite of "the reek of gas, of the glue used in the manufacture of the scenery, of dirty dark nooks and corners, of the questionably clean chorus-girls . . . the acid scents of toilet-waters, the perfumes of various soaps emanating from the dressing rooms . . . an odour of womankind—a musky scent of oil and essences mingling with the natural pungency exhaled from human tresses."[22] The most famous instance of Zola's account of smells—the symphony of cheeses in *L'Assommoir* no doubt

was the inspiration for a similar "symphony of odors" conducted by the hero of Huysmans' *Against Nature*.

While Zola kept his descriptions of odors in the language that a layman could easily understand, Huysmans gilded his accounts with the specialized language of the world of medicine and chemistry. The aristocratic hero of *Against Nature*, the dissolute Des Esseintes, retreats from the banality of bourgeois life to a country estate where he begins to lead a life of "studious decrepitude" which involves a systematic indulgence and exploration of each of his senses. He lavishes upon himself combinations of strange colors and sounds, unnerving readings, and exotic art. He devises a "mouth organ"—a modified organ that tips forward a small vial of different liqueurs as he pushes on different keys—in an effort to play "internal symphonies" to himself with liquers representing musical instruments. And so he composes quartets and symphonies instrumented by oboes (kummel), trumpets (kirsch), and coronets (gin). Des Esseintes explores the possibilities of olfactory sensation with the exactitude of a scholar. He sought to master "the grammar, the syntax of smells," and to come to understand the rules that govern them. He ventured to develop "scented harmonies" and "aromatic stanzas" by opening stoppered bottles containing various odors in specified combinations and sequences. He attempted to "unscrew the separate pieces forming the structure of a composite odour" and began to develop to a high degree his ability to detect and enjoy different smells.

Against Nature was intended to assail the popular idea that natural experiences and pleasures represented the height of human sensual enjoyment. Huysmans believed that the natural was simplistic and boring, and that only artificial sensations produced by the inventive human mind are worthy of aesthetic interest. His exploration of the self-indulgent sensualism of Des Esseintes struck many of his readers as the hieght of perversity, and the novel quickly became a manifesto for the decadent movement in literature and art. Its reverent attention to smells was a challenge to drawing-room sensibilities and a further reminder to a generation in flight from the animal and corporeal origins of life that human existence is not merely cerebral and spiritual but that it has a persistent material basis in the human body. Jaeger's wild olfactory ontology, like Zola's symphony of cheeses and Huysmans' "scented harmonies" were minor side shows in the general course of European culture, but they were also symbols of protest against the tradition of denial and neglect which had for so long suppressed serious consideration of the role of smell in human affairs and which had so persistently viewed it as the "lowest" of the human senses.

NOTES

[1]Quoted in Rene Dubos, *Louis Pasteur: Free Lance of Science*, New York, 1950, p. 305.

[2]Compare the situation in the late nineteenth century with that of the seventeenth, as recounted in a recent history: "In the neighborhood of the Louvre, in several parts of the court, on the great stairway, and in the passageways, behind the doors, and just about everywhere, one sees a thousand ordures,

one smells a thousand intolerable stenches, caused by the natural necessities which everyone performs there every day." From David Hunt, *Parents and Children in History*, New York, 1970, p. 141.

[3]In *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Selection in Man*, Philadelphia, 1905, p. 79, Havelock Ellis concludes: "Most of the writers on the psychology of love at this period, however, seem to have passed over the olfactory element in sexual attraction, regarding it probably as too unaesthetic. It receives no emphasis either in Sénacour's *De l'Amour* [1808], Stendhal's *De l'Amour* [1822] or Michelet's *L'Amour* [1858]."

[4]Some early pioneers of the study of sex who accepted Haeckel's theory were Charles Féré, Wilhelm Bölsche, and Iwan Bloch.

[5]Wilhelm Fliess, *Die Beziehung zwischen Nase und weiblichen Geschlechtsorganen*, Leipzig, 1897.

[6]Albert Hagen, [pseud. for Iwan Bloch] *Die sexuelle Osphresiologie: Die Beziehung des Geruchsinnes und der Gerüche zur menschlichen Geschlechtsthätigkeit*, Breslau, 1900.

[7]See J. H. Colhausen, *Von den seltenen Art, sein Leben durch das Anhauchen junger Mädchen bis auf 115 Jahr zu verlangern*, Stuttgart, 1847.

[8]Havelock Ellis, *Studies*, p. 110.

[9]Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, New York, 1961, p. 53.

[10]Gustav Jaeger, *Die Entstehung der Seele*, Leipzig, 1881.

[11]Gustav Jaeger, *Health-Culture and the Sanitary Woolen System*, Translated from the German, Chicago, 1886, p. 45.

[12]Quoted in Havelock Ellis, *Studies*, p. 78.

[13]Ernest Monin, *Les Odeurs du corps humain*, Paris, 1903.

[14]Carl Giessler, *Wegweiser zu einer Psychologie des Geruchs*, Hamburg, 1894.

[15]Heinrich Pudor, *Hohe Schule des Sinnenlebens*, Munich, 1895.

[16]Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, Translated from the German, New York, 1895, p. 503.

[17]Cited in Enid Starkie, *Baudelaire*, 1957, p. 272.

[18]Baudelaire, "Correspondences.." Translated by Eugen Weber, *Paths to the Present*, New York, 1965, p. 204.

[19]Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil*, Translated by Edna St. Vincent Millay, New York, 1962, p. 21.

[20]Baudelaire, *Oeuvres completès*, Paris, 1961, p. 252-253.

[21]Léopold Bernard, *Les Odeurs dans les romans de Zola*, Montepellier, 1889, p. 11.

[22]Emile Zola, *Nana*, translated from the French, New York, 1970, p. 123.

Stephen Kern is Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois.