

The sweet smell of successful psychiatry

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I must confess that chemistry, not psychiatry, was the first love of my life. The characters of different substances, whether the noble elements or corrosive and caustic chemicals, seemed to reflect the characters of people but in a more interesting way. It was not an original thought. Some famous intellectual whose name I forget wrote a book on a similar theme, under the title *Elective Affinities*. It was a human drama with a chemical metaphor, a tale about the decomposition, so to speak, of a marriage, in which various volatile characters interact and combine like reagents in a flask.

If chemicals resemble people, the same is even more true of perfumes, which are, after all, only mixtures of chemicals. Perfumes, like people, have definite life-cycles: they are created, they mature and they die. In the maturation of a perfume the rough edges are smoothed off, the blend mellows slowly before final deterioration sets in. In perfumes this is brought about by chemical reactions, in people by life experiences.

Disentangling the complex elements which have shaped a personality is one of the most challenging tasks for a psychiatrist, but the breakdown of an unfamiliar perfume is an even more difficult task for the perfumer. This is because to create a successful perfume, the odour identities of the separate ingredients have to disappear, submerged in the new gestalt, to give harmony and to make copying the fragrance more difficult. Unrecognised traces of thoroughly obnoxious materials such as civet can be the making of the successful perfume, just as a touch of psychopathy in the personality of a politician can propel him right to the top.

So perfumes are like people. Does this point to a hidden affinity between psychiatry and perfumery? At first sight the subjects are as different as chalk and cheese. Perfumery belongs to the world of fashion, of glamour and superficial appearances. Psychiatry belongs to medicine, to the world of suffering and painful realities. And yet they share in common a certain stigma, evident at the dinner party when one introduces one's calling ("I'm a doctor . . . Er, a psychiatrist, actually"), and familiar to the male perfumer at least in terms of unstated doubts about his sexual orientation. The corollary is that both

disciplines have tended to retreat from the public gaze and cloak themselves in mystery: the enigmatic "mirror analyst" sitting out of sight, and the equally secretive perfumer jealously guarding his trade secrets and remaining, until recently, a figure of almost total anonymity.

The link between psychiatry and smell goes still deeper, to the basic anatomy of the brain. The limbic system, seat of the emotions, is also the rhinencephalon, the primitive smell brain. Smell is *par excellence* an intimate sense, where the brain reaches out and probes the environment, physically touching the molecules; there is no intermediate structure like the eye or the ear to get in the way. It corresponds to the psychiatrist's intuition, and what it tells us we believe to be genuine.

Herein lies the power of the sense of smell, well expressed in Süskind's marvellous novel, *Perfume* (1987). "The persuasive power of an odour cannot be fended off, it enters into us like breath into our lungs, it fills us up, imbues us totally. There is no remedy for it." For me, that happened 30 years ago in the basement laboratory of Leeds University, a place where I squandered many happy hours of my youth. The air was thick and steamy with the reek of benzene and a dozen bubbling aromatic brews, but one side-effect of working in this fug was barely appreciated by myself or my fellow students at the time: an organic chemist could be instantly recognised at any social gathering by their smell. Whether this contributed to the social status of organic chemists, I do not know. Strength of odour reputedly determined the status of bomber command crew in the Second World War, whose flying jackets absorbed fuselage odours from successive operations. Anyway, it was no use to change your clothes, for the smell penetrated everything; it got into your blood in time.

Years later when I passed the basement laboratory on my way to stressful medical ward rounds, I would catch that familiar whiff wafting down the corridor, and the stresses would melt away. That was what gave me the idea of using odours in therapy, years before the current vogue for aromatherapy. I hit on the theme of seashore smells to reinforce relaxation imagery, and the rest, as they say, is history. The press latched on

to the image of psychiatry at the seaside and have never let go. A *Tomorrow's World* demonstration three or four years ago was a particularly memorable highlight as it offered an experimental paradigm; there is nothing like a live television broadcast before eight million people to elevate the adrenalin a bit. As a soothing antidote I concocted my best ever seashore fragrance and designed a nebuliser to deliver it at just the right moment. (Nothing like being treated to a dose of your own medicine, either!) Actually, the main stress in that broadcast was getting our polygraph to work properly among all the interference from BBC equipment.

It's very nice being an overnight celebrity. For a while there were chauffeur-driven cars, sacks of mail, and I couldn't answer the telephone without finding myself on an American chat show. Mind you, there were some darker moments too. When Esther Rantzen mounted her own clinical trial by thrusting fish and chips under peoples' noses and asking if they felt relaxed and in a holiday mood, I must admit I cringed a bit. Then I calmed down and applied some cognitive therapy. Today's headline, tomorrow's chip wrapper, I thought. No point in being indignant, you've got to see the lighter side.

Very quickly I submerged out of the limelight and sank without trace into the murky waters of the NHS, but the media, having tasted an entertaining story, continued to have great fun playing around with it. In due course a profusion of marine style perfumes appeared in the shops, some of them with advertising copy lifted verbatim from my writings. Without acknowledgement of course, but you can't have everything. I feel strangely pleased when I am told "There's some psychiatrist - I can't remember his name - who says the smell of the sea is relaxing". I take comfort from Süskind's novel, where the hero is a perfume genius, but "if his name . . . has been forgotten today, it is because his gifts and his sole ambition were restricted to a domain that leaves no traces in history: to the fleeting realm of scent".

Fortunately there are some good perfumers whose names have not been forgotten, but are much fêted in the profession. Foremost of these is Edmond Roudnitska (pronounced "Rude Nitska"), creator of most of the Dior perfumes, a Mozart of perfumery whose name is spoken in hallowed tones. I well remember the occasion back in 1979 when I happened to express my admiration for this man to my analyst, a highly regarded training analyst of the Kleinian school. "The name is significant" he said gravely, "its real unconscious meaning is Rude Knickers". My salvation, he went on sternly, depended upon my relinquishing completely this unhealthy and dangerous fixation on perfumery. Psychoanalysis and myself parted company at that point, and

if today I retain a lingering nostalgic affection for the psychoanalytical culture, it is a decidedly ambivalent attachment similar to what many probably feel for their old public school (especially if they have been caned there).

But getting back to the title of my article, what is the sweet smell of successful psychiatry? Or to be more precise, how should the successful psychiatrist smell? Well, there is no lack of choice. On the contrary, the casual observer might conclude that the perfume industry has gone out of its way to help psychiatrists to express themselves, even to the extent of catering for the subspecialities. Specialists in substance misuse can discretely announce their presence with a dash of Yves St. Laurent's *Opium*, while the more assertive of them can splash on the mass market fragrance *Addiction*, just in case anyone hasn't got the message. Trainee male psychotherapists until recently had the opportunity to project their identity more confidently with *Journey* from Boots, a masculine fragrance which purported to be the essence of self-discovery.

That's just marketing, of course, and the marketing message bears only a tenuous relationship to the contents of the bottle. No, the actual odour of successful psychiatry is more likely to be the smell of books, suggesting hours spent delving into learned tomes in search of the answer to the patient's problems. There is a type of ambergris, a component of certain perfumes, which has exactly this smell, of old libraries and cloistered walls, the scent of wisdom and tradition.

Diligent readers who spend substantial time in their libraries will already have a faint whiff of this aroma about their persons, which probably accounts for their successful careers (and you thought it was all those papers you've published). But before the rest of us rush out to buy ambergris perfumes, I ought to mention that the research on the subject suggests it's probably safest to smell of nothing at all. The American psychologist Baron (1988) has published studies showing that wearing excessive perfume can easily backfire in organisations, producing negative impressions.

Finally, a word of warning. To any psychiatrists who are thinking of taking up perfumery and having a whale of a time, I should add that it's not all a bed of roses. It is not for nothing that Helen Keller described smell as "the fallen angel of the senses", and if you're not careful it will drag you down with it. Be prepared for people to look down their noses at you as you pursue your frivolous interest, brace yourself for irreverent headlines like "Whiff You Were Here" from the *New Scientist* (Nuttall, 1988) and worse from the tabloids. Remember that man rose to his present evolutionary heights by standing erect and using

his eyes and brain, forsaking the pleasures of sniffing at lamp-posts like a dog. If after all that you still remain defiant, congratulations! That makes two of us.

References

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