

OBJECTS, PERFUMES, LANGUAGE

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I happened to be talking to a potential publisher, Profile Books, and at the end of the discussion they were kind enough to leave me a copy of the book *Perfumes: The Guide* by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez. When I opened this up I found that the book actually consists of an alphabetically ordered review of some 1,500 fragrances. I have never actually worn a perfume, and I don't believe I have ever purchased a perfume for anyone else, except maybe cheap Christmas presents for informants during fieldwork. Yet one week later I find that I am reading this book cover to cover. There are two reasons for this. Firstly I am intrigued with this work as an exposition of the relationship between the material, the immaterial and language. Secondly because its utterly brilliant.

My fascination with the issue of immateriality and language arose a very long time ago when I read a volume called *Wine and Conversation* by the linguist Adrienne Lehrer in 1983. I am writing from distant memory but as I recall it documented a series of blind testing of people talking about wines. This included lay wine quaffers and professional wine experts from California. The point was that wine has developed an extraordinarily rich vocabulary of description, but was that actually effective in conveying something about the wines themselves? To cut to the chase, the book seemed to suggest that most people, including experts, could not actually identify wines based merely on such verbal descriptions. It implied that this language existed for social and symbolic purposes that falsely presumed the communication of substance and managed to survive happily even when this was largely illusory.

Now that could be seen as essentially a negative take on things like wine buffs, pretentiousness etc. But you could turn this around and see it instead as an interesting argument for the creativity of descriptive language itself even in the absence of actual denoted objects. Wine description developing its own artistic agility precisely because of the difficulty of its project. The present volume on perfume makes this much more plausible. Because I think it would generally be agreed that if taste is difficult to convey through language alone then smell is a great deal harder. It seems about the most intractable of the senses. Now I have no idea whether this book succeeds or not in creating the kind of objectivity that is ascribed to wine. Certainly it starts with an introduction that explains the chemistry and dynamics of perfume construction much as one might for wines, and I certainly imagine that the authors believe that language can actually convey substance, just as those wine experts were convinced that that is what they were engaged in doing when talking about wine.

But for me this ceases to matter when one comes up against the other quality of this book and the one that drives me to read it in full. What I mean by claiming that it is brilliant, is that the quality of the writing itself transcends any such link to either the material or immaterial. It's not just the richness of metaphorical extension required in trying to convey smell. The point of the book is unflinching adjudication and this is where it excels. The put downs are often incredibly funny and so devastating and terse as to be an absolute delight. But then one is equally carried away by the

soaring praise of what they consider the emperors of scent, and the sense of the ecstatic that they ascribe to the experience of perfumes such as Chanel No5 or Beyond Paradise.

It is the scale, the distance they create between their peaks and troughs that make reading about 1,500 scents such a joy. We are driven right down to 'as near nonexistent it as it is possible to be while still remaining technically a fragrance' or 'the worlds most expensive lemon sorbet flavour' or 'hideously screechy' or 'probably first rejected for use in industrial drain cleaner.' We are carried all the way up to 'it is an ideally proportioned wonder, all of a piece, smooth to the touch and solid as marble, with no sharp edges or extraneous fur trimming, a monument of perfect structure and texture' or 'Laurent married grapefruit instead with an intensely pink floral accord and somehow gave it durability and that elusive quality of radiance; the ability to project an accurate image of itself at a distance' or 'a husky voiced come on' or 'one of the great emancipated fragrances.'

I suspect for some people the writing is too extreme, even vulgar. But then I like coral reef and Nirvana. I am not sure I could ever become completely entranced by smell, but I now find that I can certainly be captured by these florid tendrils of descriptive phrasing wafting by my nose.