



HAL
open science

Following One's Nose: Olfaction in Faulkner's Fiction

Paul Carmignani

► **To cite this version:**

Paul Carmignani. Following One's Nose: Olfaction in Faulkner's Fiction. Mississippi quarterly, 1990, Special Issue - William Faulkner, XLIII (3), pp.305-315. hal-01740545

HAL Id: hal-01740545

<https://hal.science/hal-01740545>

Submitted on 22 Mar 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

FOLLOWING ONE'S NOSE : OLFACTION IN W. FAULKNER'S FICTION

P. CARMIGNANI
Université de Perpignan

ALTHOUGH W. FAULKNER'S WORK encompasses the whole range of sensory impressions, only such intellectualized, socialized and civilized senses as sight and hearing have so far been thoroughly explored. Yet the unquestionable predominance of vision and voice in interpersonal communication or literary creation should not make us minimize the importance of more primitive, carnal senses like touch or smell for an author who has rightly or wrongly been labelled "the first great novelist of the unconscious."¹ Smell has seldom been taken into consideration by literary critics and the reason for this unfortunate sin of omission is not far to seek : there apparently exists in Western culture an unconscious prejudice against the organ of smell and "the refusal to consider it as an instrument of knowledge stems from the rejection of the animality that is inherent in human nature, and from the concomitant overestimation of reason."²

CHILDHOOD SCENTS

With its acute sensitivity to secret correspondences, smell is par excellence the sense of reminiscence : "it shifts from knowing to remembering, from space to time and no doubt from things to beings,"³ a property Faulkner in turn acknowledges when he has Miss Rosa state : "*That is the substance of remembering—sense, sight, smell...*"⁴ Thus in *Absalom, Absalom!* "the dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and oversweet with the twice-bloomed wistaria" (p. 4) is intimately associated with Miss Rosa's evocation of Charles Bon's tragic fate. But the connection between smell and remembrance of things past is more cogently evidenced in *The Unvanquished*, a novel telling of Bayard Sartoris's adolescence and confirming

1. J. P. Amette, "Le Premier grand romancier de l'inconscient" in *SUD*, 14/15, 1975, p. 7.

2. A. Le Guérer, "Les Philosophes ont-ils un nez ?" in *Autrement*, n° 92, September, 1987, p. 51. My translation.

3. M. Serres, *Les Cinq sens* (Paris : Grasset, 1985) p. 185. My translation.

4. *Absalom, Absalom!* Corrected edition (New York : Random House, 1986), p. 1150.

in the process that scents *are*, in G. Durand's felicitous words, “the signifier of archetypal childhood.”⁵

Bayard's growth from childhood to maturity is punctuated with numerous references to smells ; the description of his father, Colonel Sartoris is a case in point :

He came toward the steps and began to mount, the sabre heavy and flat at his side. Then I began to smell it again, like each time he returned, like the day back in the spring when I rode up the drive standing in one of his stirrups-that odor in his clothes and beard and flesh too which I believed was the smell of powder and glory, the elected victorious but know better now...⁶

Bayard goes on to evoke “that smell of Granny that her clothes and bed and room all had” (p. 32), “the rain smell of /Drusilla's/ hair” (p. 213), or “the cabin which smelled of new whitewash and even (still faintly) of Negroes” (p. 109). The duel with Grumby is a welter of sensory impressions where “the smell of man sweat [...] of horse sweat and wood smoke and grease” stands out (p. 209). Thus a complex network of olfactory sensations runs throughout the text and culminates in the last section with its evocative title, “An Odor of Verbena”.

The odor of verbena, which pervades and even saturates the last section of *The Unvanquished* (it recurs twenty times or so), is first mentioned enigmatically on p. 251 : “there was plenty of time still for verbena although I would have to reach home before I would realize there was a need for it.” As we learn later, verbena is the emblem of Drusilla, the Amazon and high-priestess of the southern code of honour, who always wears a few sprigs of it “because she said verbena was the only scent you could smell above the smell of horses and courage and so it was the only one that was worth the wearing” (pp. 253-254). But this is not, by a far cry, the only function of verbena ; it belongs to a botanical code in which various plants are endowed with classic or typically Faulknerian connotations. For instance, in Roman antiquity, verbena “was regarded as a sacred plant and it was customary to touch a treaty with a sprig of it in order to bestow greater authority upon the covenant [...] Ambassadors wore crowns of verbena in blossom. The plant also served to lustrate and purify the altars of Roman deities.”⁷ This is an interesting clue to the symbolical import of the scene in which Drusilla hands two duelling-pistols and two sprigs of verbena to Bayard. Drusilla, “the Greek amphora

5. G. Durand, *L'Imagination symbolique* (Paris : P.U.F, 1968), p. 82. My translation.

6. *The Unvanquished* (New York : Vintage Books, 1966), p. 11.

7. J. André, “Verbena,” *Lexique des termes de botanique en latin* (Paris : Klincksieck, 1958). My translation.

priestess of a succinct and formal violence” (p. 252), thereby seals a pact with Bayard and sends him on a cruel embassy to avenge the death of her husband and of his father :

She faced me, she was quite near ; again the scent of verbena in her hair seemed to have increased a hundred times as she stood holding out to me, one in either hand, the two duelling pistols. “Take them, Bayard,” she said... Again I watched her arms angle out and upward as she removed the two verbena sprigs from her hair [...] already putting one of them into my lapel and crushing the other in her other hand... (p. 273).

The present is a sort of symbolical dubbing turning Bayard into his namesake, the “Knight without fear and without blemish”, and he will henceforth bear the arms and wear the scent of his “Belle Dame Sans Mercy.” But it is also a spell with which the young woman tries to bewitch her lover. As Bayard walks towards Redmond, the man he must challenge to a duel, he feels as if he were “mov[ing] in a cloud of verbena” (p. 283), a subtle and deleterious scent holding him under Drusilla's sway. Bayard can free himself from it only by renouncing the duello code and tradition of vendetta embodied and perpetuated by Drusilla. He will let his opponent fire at him twice without firing back, thus compelling him to leave town. Thanks to this unheard-of gallant gesture, the spell is broken as witness the fact that Bayard can smell the fragrance of other flowers “above the verbena in [his] coat” (p. 291). This is a complete reversal of situations and values ; after his renunciation of a heritage of violence, Bayard finds on his bed, as a tribute to his gallantry and a token of his emancipation, a third sprig of verbena.

Drusilla's fascination with Bayard is not innocent of sexual undertones and it is not surprising to see that memory being, in the words of G. Bachelard, “a gynoecium of memories”,⁸ smell is closely associated with that period when the adolescent, awakening to love, is in “the throes of puberty, that dark soft trouble like a heard forgotten music or *scent or thing remembered though never smelt nor seen*, that blending of dread and longing.”⁹ Thus, as we shall see, it is with a feeling of fascination for “the sweet young smell of invisible girlflesh,”¹⁰ or of repulsion for “the cloying jungle of female flesh,”¹¹ that the Faulknerian adolescent—

8. G. Bachelard in *La Poétique de la rêverie* (Paris : PUF, 1986), p. 119. My translation.

9. “A Portrait of Elmer,” in J. Blotner, ed., *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York : Random House, 1970), p. 620. Emphasis mine.

10. “Moonlight”, *op. cit.*, p. 497.

11. “A Portrait of Elmer,” p. 624.

from Elmer Hodge to Joe Christmas, Benjy and Quentin Compson—enters the labyrinth of sex with its “troubling ramification.”¹²

ODOR DI FEMINA

A carnal sense, enmeshed with instinctual and affective life, smell plays a prominent role in texts dealing with desire and sex, and Benjy, the idiot, is the archetype of the character dwelling in the fragrant aura emanating from feminine presence. His universe is no less full of sound and fury than of scents : “a lunatic,” says novelist Peter Süskind, “sees with his nose more than with his eyes.”¹³ Thus, Benjy lives in a chaos of sense perceptions and his personality still bears the stamp of that “olfactory Ego [...] preceding and underpinning an aural Ego and a tactile Ego.”¹⁴ Though unable to reason, Benjy is none the less perfectly able to find out things by the sense of smell : “he smell what you tell him when he want to.”¹⁵ The world around him is one big nosegay : Benjy can “smell the cold” (p. 6), “the clothes flapping, and the smoke blowing across the branch” (p. 15) or “the sickness” (p. 70), but he is particularly sensitive to the scent of his sister Caddy who smells “like trees” and “like leaves” (pp. 9., 6-7, etc.). This sweet virginal scent is a sort of *axis mundi* supporting the tranquillity and stability of Benjy's existence ; were it ever to disappear, Benjy's universe would collapse. Such is the case when he sees Caddy with her beau in the swing ; he starts crying and Caddy must take the kitchen soap and wash her mouth hard to remove the stain/stench of sin and recover her treelike scent.

When Caddy ceases once for all to smell like trees, and leaves with her husband, Benjy projects the memory of his beloved sister on to two flowers, jimson-weed (associated with lunacy and death)—he puts a “withered stalk of jimson-weed” in an empty bottle that Dilsey calls “his graveyard” (p. 64)—and narcissus (a symbol of death, sleep, rebirth and idealization).

Benjy's brother, Quentin Compson, shares the same obsessive attachment for Caddy whom he associates with the heady and bewitching smell of honeysuckle. He is also equally susceptible to olfactory impressions : “my nose,” he says, “could see gasoline, the vest on the table, the door” (p. 199) or smell “the odor of summer and darkness” (p. 194), honeysuckle,

12. “Adolescence,” *op. cit.*, p. 460.

13. P. Süskind, *Le Parfum*, trans., B. Lortholary (Paris : Fayard, 1986), p. 23. My translation.

14. J.-J. Chavagnat and D. Richard, “Les Odeurs en tête,” in *Autrement*, p. 112. My translation.

“the saddest odor of all” (p. 194), and “the stinking mud of the hog-wallow” (pp. 156-57) into which he plunges with rapture during a scene rich in symbolical and mythical connotations conveying both the fascination and repulsion that sex and womanhood exert on him. Later, Quentin's ravings are accompanied by what one might call an “olfactory delirium” : the smell of honeysuckle eventually impregnates the whole of nature :

I stood on the bank I could smell the honeysuckle on the water gap the air seemed to drizzle with honeysuckle... (p. 172).

When it bloomed in the spring and it rained the smell was everywhere you didn't notice it so much as 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 (p. 194).

Honeysuckle is endowed with a twofold symbolical meaning : as “caprifolium”/“goat's leaf”, it is associated with lust, concupiscence, but as witness its second, rustic name of “herbe à la vierge” (literally, “virgin's weed”), honeysuckle evolves into a quasi-mystical signifier of sisterly virginity. As an epiphany of the lost object, its smell evokes both presence and absence, and tortures Quenty with the harrowing awareness of Caddy's existence and inaccessibility as an object of desire :

The scent of one's beloved brings for a short lapse of time the illusion of her presence. It makes one believe that one can attain her innermost being, in a word, reach her soul. The scents of love are akin to epiphanies of the soul. But a scent, just like the soul, is a mere lure. One can feast on it, wallow in it, plunge into it, but one can never possess it. In that sense, a scent is the hallmark of the other's irreducibility.¹⁶

So it is but a short step from the haunting effluvium (“odor di femina”) to the fluvial waters (“aqua femina”) Quentin plunges into ; his feverish mind had already associated liquidity, dissolution and honeysuckle with femininity which evokes “liquid putrefaction like drowned things floating like pale rubber flabbily filled getting the odor of honeysuckle all mixed up” (p. 147). There is “something fatal in scent ; whichever way one chooses to flee, one always reverts to it and gets drowned in it.”(*Ibid.*, 146).

References to honeysuckle recur in other works too, such as *Sanctuary* where “the couple Horace/Little Belle appears as a degraded version of Quentin and Caddie Compson.”¹⁷ Horace Benbow can no longer bear his wife whom he associates with the smell of the box of

15. *The Sound and the Fury*, corrected ed. (New York : Random House, 1984), p. 6.

16. B. Mercadé, “Odor di Femina,” in *Autrement*, p. 144. My translation

shrimp he fetches for her from the station every blessed Friday. Who knows, he may have experienced the disappointing transmutation of the scents of love that French philosopher, J. Brosse describes in his *Inventory of the Senses* ?

She was the sea. On her skin I could smell the salt of spray, in her secret hollows the bracing tang of sea-weed, yet after love, faced with her oyster eyes, a doubt crept into my mind ; didn't she in fact smell of high tide ?¹⁸

Be that as it may, Horace feels drawn towards his daughter-in-law, Little Belle, who is haloed with the fragrant scent of honeysuckle as is shown in the scene when Horace, rapt in wonder, gazes at the photograph of the young woman :

Communicated to the cardboard by some quality of the light or perhaps by some infinitesimal movement of his hands, his own breathing, the face appeared to breathe in his palms in a shallow bath of highlight, beneath the slow, smokelike tongues of invisible honeysuckle. Almost palpable enough to be seen, the scent filled the room and the small face seemed to swoon in a voluptuous languor, blurring still more, fading, leaving upon his eye a soft and fading aftermath of invitation and voluptuous promise and secret affirmation like a scent itself.¹⁹

If this extraordinary scene is “revelatory of the power of the mind's eye,”²⁰ it is none the less evocative of the strange connection between fascination and olfaction. In his study, *Metaphysics of Sex*, J. Evola claims that “the Latin word *fascinum* was originally and literally connected with the sense of smell.”²¹ Even if etymology does not apparently bear out this assertion, the imaginary register at work in Faulkner's texts more than confirms its symbolic truth : one is captivated by the Other's scent and “there is no love without the improbable harmony of kindred scents.”²²

Should there be any doubt about this, *Light in August* would dissipate it. In this work illustrating the whole paradigm of femininity (in the form of the Virgin, the Mother, the Prostitute and the Hysteric female) with its attendant humors (menses, sweat, tears), the Passion of J. Christmas unfolds in an atmosphere suffused with “the reek of pollution.”²³ Whe-

17. A. Bleikasten, *Parcours de Faulkner* (Paris : Ophrys, 1982), p. 271. My translation.

18. J. Brosse, *L'Inventaire des Sens* (Paris : Grasset, 1965), p. 62. My translation.

19. *Sanctuary*, corrected ed. (New York : Vintage, 1987), p. 234.

20. M. Gresset, *La Tyrannie du regard ou la relation absolue*, Diss. Paris-Sorbonne, 1976, vol. II, p. 396. My translation.

21. J. Evola, *Métaphysique du sexe* (Paris : Payot, 1976), p. 50. My translation.

22. M. Serres, *op. cit.*, p. 185. My translation.

23. *Light in August*, corrected ed. (New York : Vintage, 1987), p.424.

ther it be knowledge of sexuality or Negro-ness, the protagonist's initiation affects above all his sense of smell. In fact, Negro-ness and sexuality are intimately linked as witness the scene in which Christmas after his first visit to “the womanshenegro” is literally assailed by unbearable effluvia (“smelling the woman, smelling the negro”) inducing him to kick the poor woman viciously. Later, when he lives among black people, he tries to breathe into himself the dark odor of his ebony-black mate in order to assimilate the spirit or pneuma of the race of Cham :

He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, *trying to breathe into himself the dark odour, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the odour which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial* (p. 248 ; emphasis mine).

A pitiable mockery of Genesis in which it is no longer God who breathes life into man's nostrils, but his creature who tries to remodel itself in the image of the Other by inhaling its breath. Such olfactory transference is emblematic of the tragic ambiguity of Joe Christmas's racial identity since the protagonist combines in himself the essence of whiteness and blackness, the twin terms of an alternative that the novel presents as being both antagonistic and complementary.

FRAGRANCES AND MIASMAS

The works previously quoted also point up a strange property of odors : their connotations bear upon the moral categories of good and evil. If the smell of trees symbolizes innocence and ignorance in sexual matters, the odor of honeysuckle has for Quentin the dark fascination of sin. In the same way, Popeye is described by Horace Benbow as “smell[ing] like that black stuff that ran out of Bovary's mouth” (*Sanctuary*, p. 7), and Woman is according to Doc Hines “the walking shape of bitchery and abomination already stinking in God's sight” (*LIA*, p. 412). Unlike vision which is the unintentional vector of Evil (“there's a corruption about even looking upon evil” [*Sanctuary*, p. 134]), smell, “the sense of intuitive knowledge,”²⁴ apparently is the irrefutable instrument of discrimination between good and evil, purity and impurity, virtue and vice. In Antiquity for instance, “*eunodia*” or sweet smell was a characteristic of the Gods while “*dysosmia*” or foul smell was the hallmark of the villain. Thus in the

24. A. Le Guérec, *op. cit.*, in *Autrement*, p. 53. My translation.

“olfactory dialectics of Good and Evil, the opposite of sweet-smelling Good is stinking Evil.”²⁵

The Wild Palms, a novel W. Faulkner defined as “a story of two types of love”, brings into play in the Harry Wilbourne/Charlotte Rittenmeyer chapters dealing with the affair between a thematics that ties in with the opposition just described and is expressed in similar terms, *viz.* the odor of sanctity (“the dulcet smell”) and stench (“the Bad Smell”).²⁶ The religion of romantic love to which Charlotte tries to convert Harry is at variance with the young man's convictions. Eroticism is, according to G. Bataille, a form of squandering—whether of energies, feelings or resources—partaking both of *consummation* (carnal intercourse) and of *consumption* (waste, sacrifice, useless expenditure) ; it is a form of excess “compensating for the avarice and sordid calculations of everyday life.”²⁷ Wilbourne, as a dyed-in-the-wool Puritan, just aims at reducing all forms of expenditure, whether monetary or emotional, hence the asceticism of “his monastic life” (p. 26) and his guilty conscience when Charlotte leads him astray to explore eroticism, “which undermines by the plethoric chaos it sets in an order of things expressive of a mean and closed reality,”²⁸ and amounts, in his opinion, to sin. Wilbourne's malaise manifests itself in the delusion that the couple attracts notice by a foul exhalation : “they must have disseminated an aura of unsanctity and disaster like a smell” (p. 60), which is nothing but the mark of scandal. When, at the beginning of their “honeymoon”, Charlotte asks her lover to promise that between them it will be “either heaven, or hell : no comfortable safe peaceful purgatory” (p. 83), Harry still wonders whether it is “more seemly to die in the dulcet smell than to be saved by an apostate from convention” (p. 85), a reflection that won't preclude him from fleeing the danger of settling down to some sort of bourgeois routine existence (i.e. sanctioned by law and sanctified by procreation and “the smell of infant urine,” p. 134), a situation he depicts as “the mausoleum of love...the stinking catafalque of the dead corpse borne between the olfactoryless walking shapes of the immortal un sentient demanding ancient meat” (p. 139).

As for the “Bad Smell”, materialized by one of Charlotte's grotesque figures, it embodies the corruption lying at the core of all people and things ; one must guard against it and

25. R. Scheps, “Les Dieux, l'amour, la mort,” in *Autrement*, p.41. My translation.

26. *The Wild Palms* (New York : Penguin, 1987), pp. 85, 95, etc.

27. *La Part maudite* (Paris : Le Seuil, 1967), p. 106. My translation.

avoid it like the plague. The figure fulfills the role of a scapegoat ; no sooner has Charlotte molded it than she foists it off on someone else to exorcize bad luck. It is noteworthy that the fear of corruption underlies Charlotte's conception of love, which is, she says, like the Ocean : “if you begin to make a bad smell in it, it just spews you up somewhere to die” (p. 83). Good is thus, to paraphrase Hemingway's famous definition less “what makes me feel good after”, than “what makes me smell good after” or a combination of the two as witness, at the end of the novel, the example of the Tall Convict who, surrounded by the triple emanation from a new uniform, a good cigar and a fresh haircut (“saturnine and grave, in his new bed-ticking, [...] smelling faintly of the prison barber's pomade [...] the cigar burning smoothly and richly in his clean steady hand,” [p. 331]), recounts to a captive audience the tale of his (mis)-adventures.

After Charlotte's death, this “Lovers' Progress” culminates in a riot of scents : “the sour smell of salt flats” (p. 307), “the smell of swamps and wild jasmine (p. 324), and above all the tang of “the black wind” which seems to deride the pitiable fate of Harry, now behind bars, and to bring a note of freshness if not purity to a sordid world :

The palm beyond the window began to murmur, dry and steady, and he felt the cool morning breeze from the sea, steady and filled with salt, clean and iodinic in the cell, above the smell of creosote and tobacco-spit and old vomit...(p. 216).

It is also noteworthy that this many-faceted novel, which is also an indictment of modern man, emphasizes the atrophy of the senses—and above all smell—which has set off the process of degeneration affecting civilized man :

thinking how man of all creatures deliberately atrophies his natural senses and that only at the expense of others ; how the four-legged animal gains all its information through smelling and seeing and hearing and distrusts all else while the two-legged one believes only what he reads (p. 105).

This is a key passage that has interesting parallels with what A. Le Guérer writes in her study of smell :

It is again this subtle olfactory organ which brings to light the sickly nature of civilized man castrated by morals leading him to blush at his own instincts. No longer able to give them free rein, he represses them and destroys himself. The transmutation of this human animal into a conscience-ridden man gives off a stench : that of a being losing its animality and its will to power.²⁹

28. G. Bataille, *L'Érotisme* (Paris : Ed. de Minuit, 1957), p. 115. My translation.

29. A. Le Guérer, in *Autrement*, p. 52. My translation

Harry Wilbourne is a perfect illustration of such repression in contrast with the Tall Convict, the more instinctive and less guilt-ridden hero of “Old Man”.

THE WAY OF SCENT

If the partial and provisional nature of the previous observations precludes us from applying to W. Faulkner what Nietzsche was wont to say of himself, viz. that “all his genius lay in his nostrils,”³⁰ their recurrence and convergence prove that it would be highly rewarding to pursue further the exploration of smells and scents this essay merely sketches out. Besides, does not Faulkner's fiction—as witness the last quotation from *The Wild Palms*—call for a multisensory critical approach not only able to see and to reason but also to smell things, to follow various scents ? Be that as it may, there is hardly any doubt that the sense of smell enables Faulkner to explore an essential dimension of the realm of imagination or of the reality that he apprehends as much through smell as through sight. Places, for instance, are almost systematically described in olfactory terms : Elmer Hodge smells “rich earth in overquick fecundity—sugar and fruit, resin and heat,”³¹ then evokes, as the farm worker in “Nympholepsy”, “the high odorous cavern of the barn” suffused with “the acrid scent of sweated leather, of ammonia and beasts and dry dust richly pungent ; of quiet and solitude, of triumph fear change” (p. 619). The tribunal in *Sanctuary* is “laden with [...] that musty odor of spent lusts and greeds and bickering and bitterness,” (pp. 295-296) and the store-cum-courtroom in “Barn Burning” is redolent of cheese. One could multiply instances, but it is already obvious that a critic gifted with flair will notice that some features of Faulkner's fiction are related to olfaction (e.g. the dialectics of evanescence and permanence, the symbolism of breath, the theme of corruption, not to mention the strange relationship between scatology and literary creation) ; he may even discover unsuspected connections between olfaction and Faulknerian idealism. If Faulkner is so fond of looking up to the azure sky where the falcon hovers majestically, is it not because he just sensed or scented like Mallarmé before him that “Here below stinks like a scullery ?”

30. *Ibid.*, p. 51. My translation.

31. “A Portrait of Elmer,” *op. cit.*, p. 629.