

Michael Stoddart

Adam's Nose and the Making of Humankind

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Scientific literature in English is certainly the most represented today: nevertheless, no matter how positive and understandable the ambition to be read worldwide may be, it results in such a variety of expressive styles and even grammars that sometimes a piece of work may well seem written in a new, „international language“ with some similarity to English. That is why the English of Michael Stoddart, a Scot born Professor Emeritus at the University of Tasmania Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies, sounds so refreshing. Of course, this would not have necessarily been so, had Stoddart not been so deeply in love with his profession and subject. He studied zoology in Aberdeen, worked at Oxford, King's College London, at the University of New England in New South Wales, and at the University of Tasmania while becoming a world expert for population dynamics, endocrinological basis of scent production, and – the sense of smell. As his colleague Rathjen once formulated, Stoddart has been “the epitome of what one would imagine the perfect university professor to be – gentlemanly, considerate, eloquent, diplomatic, productive and, above all, astute and extremely clever.”

Stoddart reminds us of something we are far too rarely aware of: that smell is the only sense we cannot „switch off“ due to its tight relation to our breath. Even though evolutionally suppressed, smell still strongly provokes complex combinations of feelings (for instance, while smelling freshly printed books) or bizarre associations of bad smell and pleasure (cf. Napoleon's message to Josephine: „Do not wash yourself! I am arriving...“). Paradoxically, it is the sense we have long been trying to avoid – camouflaging the „unused well of genetic information“ from armpits, using soaps and perfumes with animal or plant scents – but at the same time the sense that has evolve into an entire industry providing pleasure to cuisine, wine, or sex gourmets all

over the world. The attitude toward smell, however, has not always been the same: the Ancient Greeks despised smells, as well as Kant and Hegel later. The Egyptians and Romans, on the other hand, developed a scent market comparable to the one of our days.

In Chapter 1, „The enigma of smell,“ Michael Stoddart talks precisely about those historical curiosities, like the funeral of Poppaea, when her husband Nero „burned as much incense as the whole Arabia could produce in 10 years,“ or of the fact that today, „over 1,000 new fragrances are launched onto the world market each year.“ In Chapter 2, „An evolutionary perspective,“ Stoddart’s excursion into the mini-study on monogamy as a prevention of infanticide reveals a passionate evolutionist. „How smell works“ is explained in Chapter 3, entering the cellular and genetic levels. Chapter 4 („To catch a whiff“) is devoted to the 19th-century pseudoscience of „nasology,“ reading character from the shape of the nose, as well as to the organs of smell in other species. „Making sense of a sense“ (Chapter 5) depicts the neural analysis of smell reception, while in Chapter 6 („Sex, smell and ADAM“), smell is related to sexual behaviour. In Chapter 7, entitled „The scent of humankind,“ a real intellectual history of smell is told, departing from the fact that, actually, „until the late Middle Ages, all townfolk in Europe smelled,“ analysing the production of that natural human body odour through the activity of the skin and hormones. A particular Chapter – 8 – is treating the „Armpit evolution,“ suggesting the axillary scent is serving primarily the pair-bond between the couple members of a monogamous species. In „Incense and perfume“ (Chapter 9), Stoddart builds the culture of perfume industry, concluding that „our paranoia about body odour comes from the fact that we dare not actually smell of the animal we are, because at high concentration animal smells are overpowering and unpleasant.“ In the following two chapters – „Smell and high culture“ and „Art and literature“ – a series of historical examples is provided of the use or interpretation of olfactory imagery by painters, writers, psychologists, etc. Although mentioned, slightly underestimated in the book seems the novel *Perfume* (from 1985) by the German Patrick Süskind (and later, in 2006, the film), probably because the author’s *licentia poetica* does not always match scientific ground mastered and advocated by Stoddart. The last chapter (Chapter 12), on „Adam’s nose and the making of humankind,“ is a kind of summary: humans are able to display emotions more readily than other animals needing senses for it. Thus, the evolution of smell in humans actually is the story of the making of humankind.

What Stoddart offers us is not just a study of one of the neglected human senses: it is a story about the cultural influence of smell. Polished language combined with profound thoughts reveal the touch of a connoisseur: while writing about a sense, he actually judges modern society which results in changing our own perspective upon the unjustly neglected fascinating topic.

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