

Scent and Subversion

By Jeffrey M. Barnes

Review of *Scent and Subversion: Decoding a Century of Provocative Perfume* by Barbara Herman (Lyons Press 2013)

The paradox and beauty of perfume is that it operates on multiple levels: the rational and the irrational; the visceral, the cognitive and the aesthetic. Perfume's power is that it has one foot in the elevated world of language, and one foot in the primal, emotional and dreamlike.

— Barbara Herman, *Scent and Subversion*

One of the most fascinating aspects of our experience of scent is its capacity to both invite and defy description. In this aspect, the sense of smell may be our most subversive. The host of vague images and emotions that it evokes vie for an errant poet's attention like souls in the underworld. The "notes," by means of which our experience of a scent is structured, particularly in vintage scents, often run the gamut from bright, fresh top notes like bergamot or citrus to sweet, round heart notes like tuberose or jasmine, and then to dark and decaying bases. (The latter derived from animal byproducts since outlawed due to the numbers of animals killed or tortured in their often misguided pursuit.) In this sense, and by means of it, our ephemeral experience of perfume replicates our experience of life itself, which bursts upon us in all its heartbreaking freshness only to decay and die over time. In *Scent and Subversion: Decoding a Century of Provocative Perfume*, Barbara Herman avidly explores this connection and others.

The author of the popular perfume blog www.yesterdaysperfume.com, as well as of a

number of pieces on perfume and scent published in *The State* and *Time Out New York* magazines, among others, Herman has a master's degree in rhetoric from the University of California at Berkeley. This, her first book is divided into three parts. The first supplies an introduction to the topic as well as some engaging background. The second, and by far the longest section of the book, consists of stripped-down versions of vintage perfume reviews that originally appeared on her blog. The book's third and final section, and perhaps its most interesting, came closest to the kind of in-depth consideration to which, I, at least, expected it to aspire throughout. This review addresses each section in order, although the uninitiated reader might do well to begin with the book's "Perfume 101: How to Become an Informed Perfume Lover" before returning to the Introduction.

The Paradox of Perfume

The first part of the book is an introduction to contemporary perfume culture and its implicitly subversive aspects. It is what might be considered the paradoxical nature of perfume that Herman identifies in this first section as the locus of its tendency toward subversion. She discusses Christian Dior's landmark 1972 perfume Diorella here in terms that are highly evocative of the connection between beauty, desire and death that had originally inspired my own interest in the subject:

Perfumer Edmond Roudnitska, in the form of perfume rather than a philosophical treatise, teaches us that ripe smells connote death as much as they do life, and that in fact it's the mortality of bright and alive things that makes them—and Diorella—beautiful.

Later on Herman discusses the "feminine fragrances of the 1920s," characterizing them as "luxe and decadent with a hint of the disreputable." Here she observes that many of them, like Lanvin's *My Sin* and Molinard's *Habanita* "join the Eros of floral notes with the Thanatos of animal-sourced-notes, along with tobacco notes evoking the woman of questionable morality who smoked."

Speaking on its own terms, this first section, with its provocative discussion of scent's various subversive capacities might be considered the book's short-lived top note, one that entices and piques the reader's immediate interest just as the top notes in a fragrance pique the interest of a prospective buyer at the perfume counter. At 15 pages it is the book's shortest section, which is unfortunate since Herman touches on much of interest here.

Decades of Scent

The second section is the book's heart. It is divided by decade, each with its own, usually very brief and often rather simplistic, characterization of the period. For example, the twenties "redefined femininity outside of the innocent floral;" the thirties was the era of the decadent and rich "oriental" fragrance; the sixties is described not in its own but in terms of a twenty-first century television series about the era, *Madmen*. Here Herman reviews a number of what may be considered landmark perfumes, though without necessarily explaining why in each instance. These reviews are arranged chronologically by year of introduction and then alphabetically by name. The extent to which these "reviews" decode perfume, as the book's title declares, or merely subject perfume to an existing code of clichéd decade characterizations is debatable. For this reader the ways in which perfume, in its vintage formulations, subverts the accepted "codes" of a given decade receive less attention from Herman than they might.

The book ostensibly covers only the twentieth century though it begins in the late nineteenth with the earliest "modern" perfumes, the first to use synthetic ingredients. Each perfume receives a review usually of no more than three paragraphs, often much less, and then a breakdown of its top, heart, and base "notes." At the outset, and without further explanation of why she chose this approach, Herman generally ascribes the notes listed to Haarman & Reimer's *The Fragrance Guide*, occasionally "supplemented with additional sources."

It is hard to imagine a plausible explanation for why, on the very first page of perfume reviews Herman neglects to list two of the most significant ingredients in Aimé Guerlain's *Jicky*, lavender and synthetic vanillin, particularly when she explicitly discusses their significance to the 1889 scent in the body of that review. Likewise in the entry for Francois Coty's 1905 *L'Origan* the scent's dominant carnation note is conspicuous by its absence from those listed. Is it possible that Haarman & Reimer's fragrance guide is wrong? Perhaps Herman can be forgiven in the case of *L'Origan* since the clove listed might be doing double duty for the carnation note, but to leave lavender and vanillin out of *Jicky* is like leaving the gin out of a gimlet. To my mind, these glaring omissions early on cast suspicion on the notes listings throughout. I largely ignored them with little detriment to my enjoyment.

In this section, as in her blog, Herman's love of her subject matter and its capacity to inspire literary flights of fancy is clearly evident. Consider her description of Jean Amic's 1964 composition *Y* by Yves Saint Laurent:

Y's visual equivalent would be those sunburst reflections you see in 70's movies. There's always a kind of melancholy quality to those sun rays, which are visual metaphors for being aware of a happy moment, and as a result, no longer inhabiting it fully. Civet functions here in the perfume's unconscious like a microexpression of disquiet or melancholy, barely detectable.

Evocative yes, but why use a Seventies image to describe a Sixties scent, particularly when one is breaking them down by decade?

Or consider 1971's *Weil de Weil*, which Herman lists without a perfumier attribution:

Weil de Weil manages to evoke the transformation of spring to summer, of freshness to ripeness, of innocence to the first stirring of erotic desire. . . . Or, more accurately, it deconstructs those oppositions and suggests that spring already contains the last days of summer; that innocence always contains experience; and that every beginning has seeds of its ending.

Here, no matter their sometimes uneven technical proficiency, Herman's reviews almost always entertain and often spark an interest that itself might lead her readers to the several sources of vintage scents she lists in the book's third section. Nevertheless, she never explicitly and systematically addresses why she has chosen to review the perfumes listed under each decade and not others. Herman also sprinkles provocative perfume print advertisements accompanied by cursory and arguably inadequate analyses throughout this section of the book. For example her commentary on a 1950 ad for *Je Reviens* by Worth, interprets the streamlined structure of the bottle looming in the foreground as "like a tall building." But, given its placement beside water under the beak of a diving bird, isn't the image more accurately read as a lighthouse whose beacon will ensure that the lovelorn wayfarer will "come back?"

Generally the perfume reviews section of Herman's book raises more questions than it answers, at least for those readers who expect it, as promised, to decode "a century of provocative perfume." What of the marketing behind and the public reception of these fragrances? What of the perfumer's intent? The designers'? What of the converging evolution of fashion design and perfume? To what extent was that a function of the department store, or the designer rather than the perfumer? Was the alliance itself subversive in any way and if so of what and how? Granted, the market for texts about perfume these days is growing very rapidly, as Herman herself acknowledges, but isn't that all the more

reason to present a study distinguished by the kind of scholarly rigor with which certain of Herman's allusions (e.g. to deconstructivism or Baudrillard) imply a familiarity?

Visionaries, Provocateurs, and Animalics

Entitled "The Future of Scent and Subversion," the book's third section is itself divided into three parts. The first section consists of a consideration of four "scent visionaries" or "perfume provocateurs," as Herman terms them. Among these is Sissel Tolaas, a Norwegian-born polymath who created a "smell archive" and who in 2006 presented "the FEAR of smell—the smell of FEAR" at MIT's List Visual Arts Center. In this show, molecules taken from the sweat of men experiencing panic disorder were microencapsulated in paint applied to the gallery walls that were then released by the viewer's touch. According to Herman, one of the purposes of Tolaas's project was "to take scent out of context so that we can reorient ourselves toward smell in an open way."

In "Smell Me" Martynka Wawrzyniak, a Polish photographer and video performance artist, created a 2012 installation at Envoy Enterprises on Manhattan's Lower East Side in collaboration with "a team of undergraduate chemistry students from Hunter College." The work was a so-called self-portrait in which visitors were invited to enter a scent chamber that dispensed extracted essences based on the smell of the artist's hair, tears and two kinds of sweat. Herman astutely observes that traditional roles of male and female, viewer and object were reversed in this exhibit where it is the visitor "who becomes the passive object" penetrated by the artist's odors.

A number of the essences she smelled in both Tolaas's and Wawrzyniak's exhibits reminded Herman of certain twentieth century perfumes or notes in those perfumes. She observes: "Although these scents made me appreciate bodily smells more, they also made me appreciate the way in which perfumery has been negotiating with the body in a fascinating dialectic, from the beginning."

From here Herman naturally moves into a more detailed discussion of what have been called the "animalics" or animal notes that often appear in the bases of perfumes, namely civet, ambergris, castoreum, and musk.* Herman writes:

In the twentieth century, before Western culture became pornified and graphic displays of sexuality became the norm, perfume was an adornment

* See my review of Christopher Kemp's 2012 *Floating Gold*, "[For Want of Wonder](#)" on this site.

that helped women to express sexuality in an invisible, subliminal, and hence, socially acceptable way by emphasizing bodily smells with animalic perfumes.

Lamenting “the loss of appreciation for our own scent” as a reflection of “a disembodied, virtual, mechanized relationship to the world that divorces us from our senses,” Herman observes that animalics “remind us of our bodies” and our instinctual attraction to bodily smells. One gets the sense that she endorses the late twentieth and early twenty-first century trend that reintroduced this element to high-end fragrances with perfumers like Christopher Sheldrake, Serge Lutens, and Olivia Giacobetti.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the book concludes with a very helpful and informative section entitled “Perfume 101: How to Become an Informed Perfume Lover.” Here Herman discusses the pyramidal structure of scent, the basic categories of perfume from chypres and fougères to orientals and florals, and the field’s terminology. She also offers tips on vintage perfume collecting. The section contains a helpful glossary and lists a number of popular, online perfume blogs. I intend to explore a number of the texts I have yet to read that are listed in her “Recommended Reading” section.

A Whiff of the Future

In an era when perfume may finally be coming into its own as an “art form” Herman’s book and others like it may be the first serious attempts to chronicle and examine the development of that art form over the past century.* However, such attempts may themselves be subverted at times by the inclination to reduce a disciplined examination to terms easily digested by the popular culture of which perfume has long been considered an artifact. My overall criticism of her book is its forgivable propensity, given the nature of perfume and its emergent status, to vacillate between the two poles. I found myself thrilling at Herman’s sophisticated discussions of perfume’s tendency to subvert and deconstruct our attitudes and attractions toward smell in the first and last sections of the book, its top and base notes, as it were. Nevertheless, its heart—her vintage perfume reviews and the glib, uneven treatment of the accompanying advertising—failed to consistently sustain the same level of discourse. To be sure, it often amused and intrigued from the point of view of

* See “[Nothing to Sniff At](#),” my review of Chandler Burr’s 2012 “The Art of Scent” exhibit at New York’s Museum of Art & Design. See for example *The Essence of Perfume* (Black Dog Publishing, London 2010) by Roja Dove, a former Guerlain “Global Ambassador,” known in the industry as the world’s only *Professeur de Parfum*. Strangely, neither Dove nor his book is mentioned in Herman’s.

popular culture, but for the most part supplied only an alluring whiff of the kind of in-depth, disciplined, scholarly discussion of the phenomenon of scent that Herman has now convinced me the subject deserves. While I hope to see more disciplined examinations of the topic in succeeding publications by Herman and others, as an opening foray in the field *Scent and Subversion* is certainly an enjoyable, titillating, and engaging initiation into a world ripe with potential, both literally and literarily.

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