Conclusion

THE MEN AND WOMEN of the nineteenth century muffled history with the clamorings of their desire. Democrats dreamed of "la Belle République"; Michelet invented "the People"; socialists designed the happiness of mankind; positivists preached the education of the masses. Meanwhile, however, other dialogues were taking place at a more fundamental level; heavy animal scents and fleeting perfumes spoke of repulsion and disgust, sympathy and seduction.

Despite Lucien Febvre's injunctions, historians have neglected these documents of the senses. The sense of smell was discredited. According to Buffon, it was the sense of animality. Kant excluded it from aesthetics. Physiologists later regarded it as a simple residue of evolution. Freud assigned it to anality. Thus discourse on odors was interdicted. But the perceptual revolution, precursor of our odorless environment, can no longer be suppressed.

The decisive action was played out between 1750 and 1880, in the heyday of the pre-Pasteurian mythologies. The history of science, teleological in form, concerned solely with the progress of truth, scornful of the historical consequences of error, has hitherto neglected this drama. In about 1750, the work by Pringle and MacBride on putrid substances, the rise of "pneumatic" chemistry, and the

phantasm of urban pathology suggested a new cause for disquiet. Excrement, mud, ooze, and corpses provoked panic. This anxiety, flowing from the peak of the social pyramid, sharpened intolerance of stench. It fell to the sense of smell to destroy the confused issue of the putrid, to detect miasma in order to exorcise the malodorous threat.

Contemporary scientists, incomparable observers of odors, offered a fragmented, olfactory image of the town; they were obsessed with pestilential foci of epidemics. To escape this swamp of effluvia, the elite fled from social emanations and took refuge in fragrant meadows. There, the jonquil spoke to them of their "I," inspired the poetry of the "nevermore," and revealed the harmony between their being and the world.

Musk, a waste product originating in the putrid guts of the musk deer, began to arouse repugnance. There were threats amassed in it as well. Its evocations of female odor became intolerable. The new fashion for delicate scents expelled it from the court while public health tacticians attempted to purify and deodorize public space.

After the Revolution, with its fascination with corpses and scorn for vegetable scents, the return of musk took on symbolic value. Sprinkled with eau de cologne, drenched in vapors from animal perfumes, the imperial couple broke with rose water. The Restoration also expressed itself in terms of smell. In this respect the faubourg St.-Germain evinced the morbid sensitivity of a chlorotic girl. Vegetable perfumes reimposed their delicacy; their function was to dampen female impulses and to signal a new system of control.

At the same time, fear of the obtrusive presence of a dangerous human swamp replaced the obsession with carrion and ooze, swarming with noxious miasmas. In the hierarchy of anxieties, there was a shift from the vital to the social: instinct, animality, and organic stench became traits of the masses. Repugnance to smell now focused on the poor man's hovel and latrines, the peasant's dung, the greasy and fetid sweat impregnating the worker's skin, rather than on the oppressive vapor of the putrid crowd in general. Flaubert could not sleep for having breathed the odor from the proletarian omnibus; Adolphe Blanqui recoiled appalled from the mephitic blast exhaled by the "ditches of men" where the Lille weavers crowded.

Thenceforth these more discriminatory maneuvers of the sense of smell were required to strengthen what were perceived as increasingly complex hierarchies. Repelled by the secretions of poverty,

the bourgeoisie became alert to subtle bodily messages, the go-betweens of seduction. Their growing importance compensated for the ban on contact.

Far from the odor of the masses, the bourgeoisie set out, albeit clumsily, to purify the breath of the house: rooms had to be aired after the maid had stayed in them for an extended period, after a peasant woman had called, or after a workers' delegation had passed through. Latrines, kitchens, and dressing rooms gradually ceased to give off their intrusive scents. Lavoisier's chemistry made it possible to define precise norms of ventilation. Salons and boudoirs became the settings for a new and skillful arrangement of scents. Troublesome odors would no longer disturb the bedroom, temple of private life and intimacy.

After Novalis, a silent dialogue, woven of symbols, was initiated between flowers and the young girl or woman. Vegetable perfume, issuing a delicate invitation, refined the interchange. It permitted the expression of desire and female solicitation but also the maintenance of physical distance. The fragrant alleys of the bourgeois garden revived amorous dialogue. The lover went there to taste intoxication in the mode of anticipation, whereas the plebeian male, overwhelmed by genetic instinct, seized his conquest. Patient breathing alongside the loved one, a skillful delaying preliminary, guaranteed constancy of desire. Recollection of the smell of the other person's body kept passion alive and nourished desire for the absent one; it was an incentive to the neurotic collection of mementos.

Outside, the deodorization of roads, spurred by the use of chlorides, the utilitarian approach to refuse, and the new intolerance of industrial pollution, no longer satisfied officials' ambitions. They now launched their sanitizing enthusiasms on the dirt of the wretched poor. They launched inspections of insalubrious dwellings, schools, barracks, and bathhouses in sports clubs. But it was a long time before bodily hygiene achieved any decisive success among the masses. For the time being, efforts concentrated on the appearance of cleanliness and particularly on fecal discipline. In this climate of opinion, deodorization encountered muffled resistance. The old patterns of perception and appraisal persisted; habit kept alive nostalgia for free organic manifestations.

It is from the sense of smell, rather than from the other senses, that we gain the fullest picture of the great dream of disinfection and of the new intolerances, of the implacable return of excrement,

the cesspool epic, the sacralization of woman, the system of vegetable symbols. It permits a new interpretation of the rise of narcissism, the retreat into private space, the destruction of primitive comfort, the intolerance of promiscuity. Distinctions and disagreements were deeply rooted in two opposed conceptions of air, dirt, and excrement; they were expressed in the antithetic conduct of the rhythms and fragrances of desire. Only an absence of smell in a deodorized environment—our own—achieved resolution of the conflict.

This episode in the history of disgust, affinities, and purification, spanning the nineteenth century, revolutionized social perceptions and symbolic references. Without knowledge of that history, we can neither measure the visceral depths to which the nineteenth-century social conflicts reached nor explain the present vitality of the ecological dream.

Social history, respectful toward the humble but indifferent for too long to the expression of emotions, must no longer suppress people's elementary reactions, however sordid, on the pretext that the delirious anthropology of the Darwinian period has perverted their analysis.