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Stephen D., aged 22, medical student, on highs (cocaine, PCP, chiefly amphetamines).

Vivid dream one night, dreamt he was a dog, in a world unimaginably rich and significant in smells. (‘The happy smell of water ... the brave smell of a stone.’) Waking, he found himself in just such a world. ‘As if I had been totally color-blind before, and suddenly found myself in a world full of color.’ He did, in fact, have an enhancement of color vision (‘I could distinguish dozens of browns where I’d just seen brown before. My leather bound books, which looked similar before, now all had quite distinct and distinguishable hues’) and a dramatic enhancement of eidetic visual perception and memory (‘I could never draw before, I couldn’t “see” things in my mind, but now it was like having a camera lucida in my mind—I “saw” everything, as if projected on the paper, and just drew the outlines I “saw”. Suddenly I could do the most accurate anatomical drawings.’) But it was the exaltation of smell which really transformed his world: ‘I had dreamt I was a dog—it was an olfactory dream—and now I awoke to an infinitely redolent world—a world in which all other sensations, enhanced as they were, paled before smell.’ And with all this there went a sort of trembling, eager emotion, and a strange nostalgia, as of a lost world, half forgotten, half recalled. (Somewhat similar states—a strange emotionalism; sometimes nostalgia, ‘reminiscence’ and déjá vu associated with intense olfactory hallucinations, are characteristic of ‘uncinate seizures’, a form of temporal lobe epilepsy first described by Hughlings Jackson about a century ago. Usually the experience is rather specific, but sometimes there is a generalized intensification of smell, a hyperosmia. The uncus, phylogenetically part of the ancient ‘smell-brain’ (or rhinencephalon), is functionally associated with the whole limbic system, which is increasingOly recognized, before seeing them, the twenty patients who were there. Each had his own olfactory physiognomy, a smell-face, far more vivid and evocative, more redolent, than any sight face.’ He could smell their emotions—fear, contentment, sexuality—like a dog. He could recognize every street, every shop, by smell—he could find his way around New York, infallibly, by smell.

He experienced a certain impulse to sniff and touch everything (‘It wasn’t really real until I felt it and smelt it’) but suppressed this, when with others, lest he seem inappropriate. Sexual smells were exciting and increased—but no more so, he felt, than food smells and other smells. Smell pleasure was intense—smell displeasure, too—but it seemed to him less a world of mere pleasure and displeasure than a whole aesthetic, a whole judgment, a whole new significance, which surrounded him. ‘It was a world overwhelmingly concrete, of particulars,’ he said, ‘a world overwhelming in immediacy, in immediate significance.’ Somewhat intellectual before, and inclined to reflection and abstraction, he now found thought, abstraction and categorization, somewhat difficult and unreal, in view of the compelling immediacy of each experience.

Rather suddenly, after three weeks, this strange transformation ceased—his sense of smell, all his senses, returned to normal; he found himself back, with a sense of mingled loss and relief, in his old world of pallor, sensory faintness, non-concretteness and abstraction. ‘I’m glad to be back,’ he said, ‘but it’s a tremendous loss, too. I see now what we give up in being civilized and human. We need the other—the “primitive”—as well.’

Sixteen years have passed—and student days, amphetamine days, are long over. There has never been any recurrence of anything remotely similar. Dr D. is a highly successful young internist, a friend and colleague of mine in New York. He has no regrets—but he is occasionally nostalgic: ‘That smell world, that world of redolence,’ he exclaims. ‘So vivid, so real! It was like a visit to another world, a world of pure perception, rich, alive, self-sufficient, and full. If only I could go back sometimes and be a dog again!’

Freud wrote on several occasions of man’s sense of smell as being a ‘casualty’, repressed in growing up and civilization with the assumption of an upright posture and the repression of primitive, pre-genital sexuality. Specific (and pathological)
enhancements of smell have indeed been reported as occurring in paraphilia, fetishism, and allied perversions and regressions. (This is well described by A.A. Brill (1932), and contrasted with the overall brilliance, the redolence, of the smell-world, in macrosomatic animals (such as dogs), ‘savages’ and children.) But the disinhibition here described seems far more general, and though associated with excitement—probably an amphetamine-induced dopaminergic excitation—was neither specifically sexual nor associated with sexual regression. Similar hyperosmia, sometimes paroxysmal, may occur in excited hyper-dopaminergic states, as with some post-encephalitics on LDopa, and some patients with Tourette’s syndrome.

What we see, if nothing else, is the universality of inhibition, even at the most elemental perceptual level: the need to inhibit what Head regarded as primordial and full of feeling-tone, and called ‘protopathic’, in order to allow the emergence of the sophisticated, categorizing, affectless ‘epicritic’.

The need for such inhibition cannot be reduced to the Freudian, nor should its reduction be exalted, romanticized, to the Blakean. Perhaps we need it, as Head implies, that we may be men and not dogs. And yet Stephen D’s experience reminds us, like G.K. Chesterton’s poem, The Song of Quoodle’, that sometimes we need to be dogs and not men:

They haven’t got no noses The fallen sons of Eve ... Oh, for the happy smell of water, the brave smell of a stone!

*Postscript*

I have recently encountered a sort of corollary of this case—a gifted man who sustained a head injury, severely damaging his olfactory tracts (these are very vulnerable in their long course across the anterior fossa) and, in consequence, entirely losing his sense of smell.

He has been startled and distressed at the effects of this: ‘Sense of smell?’ he says. ‘I never gave it a thought. You don’t normally give it a thought. But when I lost it—it was like being struck blind. Life lost a good deal of its savor—one doesn’t realize how much ‘savor’ is smell. You smell people, you smell books, you smell the city, you smell the spring—maybe not consciously, but as a rich unconscious background to everything else. My whole world was suddenly radically poorer ... ‘

There was an acute sense of loss, and an acute sense of yearning, a veritable osmalgia: a desire to remember the smell-world to which he had paid no conscious attention, but which, he now felt, had formed the very ground base of life. And then, some months later, to his astonishment and joy, his favorite morning coffee, which had become ‘insipid’, started to regain its savor. Tentatively he tried his pipe, not touched for months, and here too caught a hint of the rich aroma he loved.

Greatly excited—the neurologists had held out no hope of recovery—he returned to his doctor. But after testing him minutely, using a ‘double-blind’ technique, his doctor said: ‘No, I’m sorry, there’s not a trace of recovery. You still have a total anosmia. Curious though that you should now “smell” your pipe and coffee ...’

What seems to be happening—and it is important that it was only the olfactory tracts, not the cortex, which were damaged—is the development of a greatly enhanced olfactory imagery, almost, one might say, a controlled hallucinosis, so that in drinking his coffee, or lighting his pipe—situations normally and previously fraught with associations of smell—he is now able to evoke or re-evoke these, unconsciously, and with such intensity as to think, at first, that they are ‘real’.

This power—part conscious, part unconscious—has intensified and spread. Now, for example, he sniffs and ‘smells’ the spring. At least he calls up a smell-memory, or smell-picture, so intense that he can almost deceive himself, and deceive others, into believing that he truly smells it.

We know that such a compensation often occurs with the blind and the deaf. We think of the deaf Beethoven and the blinded Prescott. But I have no idea whether it is common with anosmia.