

Unholy Smoke

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Smoke Signals

Smoke is a temporal matter, a subtle substance that is looped and latticed with time. It is a substance born into and itself invoking inversiveness. Smoke is always mobile, it is the form of a passage, the passage of matter coming into form. Smokes are commonly thought of as rising or aspiring, hence their significance in the various holy smokes of ceremony and sacrifice. But smoke is also cadent, and therefore lowering, the softness of its fall cloaking its unavoidability. Smoke is the body volatilised whether into spirit or intellection (Sherlock Holmes famously smoked his way through prodigious quantities of tobacco, almost in the process subliming himself into pure smoke). But it is always the sign too of the reversibility of that sublimation, of the dying fall into soot, dust or cinders.

Perhaps this is why smoke is always so premonitory. In the expression ‘no smoke without fire’, it functions as the index of indexicality itself, of the fact that nothing can come of nothing, that everything has been something else, elsewhere, otherwise, elsewhen. Smoke testifies not just to the slow, insensible but irresistible drift of things, but also to their testifying function, as the drift of witness, witnessing of drift. Smoke is a spontaneous semiosis, a cryptic figuring. Smoke says that something has happened, or insists that something else soon will. Smoke can be aftermath and preparation – the residue of an explosion (*the smoking gun*) or the hint of an explosion to come (*the whole thing's gonna blow*). It is a remaining and a passing away, the passage of a remainder, the lingering of a passage (*when a lovely flame dies/smoke gets in your eyes*). There is always something to be made out in, made out of smoke, some clue, some secret, some mnemonic, some taking place that is no longer or not yet in place, some imminence or proximity: ‘Murder’s as near to lust as flame to smoke’, says Shakespeare’s Pericles (*Pericles* 1.1, 138). Smoke is a discloser of things, which is why they can be ‘smoked out’, but it also screens what it imports. Since 1878, the puff of smoke that issues from the Sistine Chapel chimney indicates the election of a new Pope if it is white, or the failure to agree if it is black. Smoke is there and not there, it is the being-there of a vanishing, the persistence of an unbeing. It clings tenuously

to that to which it can never be again conjoined: 'We must pass like smoke or live within the spirit's fire;/For we can no more than smoke unto the flame return', writes George Russell. Smoke is a recording – one of the ways in which world gets itself by heart – without remembering.

For Thoreau, smoke was above all the air-print of human habitation:

See yonder thin column of smoke curling up through the woods from some invisible farmhouse, the standard raised over some rural homestead.... It is a hieroglyphic of man's life, and suggests more intimate and important things than the boiling of a pot. Where its fine column rises above the forest, like an ensign, some human life has planted itself,—and such is the beginning of Rome, the establishment of the arts, and the foundation of empires, whether on the prairies of America or the steppes of Asia.

Smoke is the sign of human habitation, which is why smoke passes into the designation of cities – like 'The Smoke', a name both for London and for Birmingham, and Auld Reekie for Edinburgh. Chimneys have for long been a metonym for a household, which is why the Domesday Book speaks of 'fumage', otherwise known as 'smoke-farthings', a tax paid for every chimney in a house.

Stinking Antidote

Smoke has two distinctly opposed sets of associations. It can be thought of as cleansing, clarifying and enriching – the word 'fumigate' means to subject to the action of smoke. This practice may well have arisen from the use of smoke to dry and preserve foods; for early periods unaware of the bacteriological basis of decomposition, the arresting of purulence and putrefaction could easily be mistaken for a clarifying or redeeming function. Smoke has positive associations in sacrifice: The early use of smoke to signify any vapour accounts for its smoky residue in the word 'perfume', which signifies the odour imparted through smoke.

Crusaders against smoking, like James I in his anti-smoking pamphlet of 1604, *A Counterblaste to Tobacco*, have to struggle against the stubborn belief in the salutoriness of smoke. James inveighed against what he called 'the stinking Antidote', and the 'precious stinke' of tobacco smoke, and the idea that 'the braines of all men, beeing naturally colde and wet, all dry and hote things should be good for them; of which nature this stinking suffumigation is, and therefore of good use to them' (James I 1604,).

The intimacy of smoke is reflected in early theories of the functioning of the human body, which made much of the idea that the body produced various kinds of inward smoke, or fumes. Nightmares, bad dreams, drunkenness, delusions and madness were all regularly ascribed to the effect of fumes from ill-digested, or imperfectly-concocted food ascending into the brain. Lust, anger and religious mania were also thought of as the effect of fumes. Fumes were the corruption of the higher by the lower, a vitiated visceral parody of the refined animal spirits that it was the function of the inner organs to distil. The Royal Chaplain Richard Allestry spoke in a sermon of 1660 of ‘the fumes of Carnality, which clog the Spirit’ (Allestry 1669, 9). ‘Melancholy’ was literally ‘black choler’, a smoky humour that was thought to have been scorched by the process of digestion. At the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero evokes this idea of inward smoke when describing the lifting of the spell of illusion: ‘their rising senses/Begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle/Their clearer reason’ (*Tempest*, V.1,). Smoke is also the most intimate proof of the interchange between the body and the world, which is why chimneys are so often said to ‘belch’ forth smoke. Volcanoes are often implicated in understandings of the smoky or explosive nature of human passions: Thomas More explained that ‘As the fire of the burnyng hyl of Ethna burneth only it self, so doth the enuious parson, fret, fume, & burne in his owne hert’ (More 1557, 85).

For James I, the danger of smoking lay in just the closeness of this relation between physics and physiology:

euen as the smoakie vapours sucked vp by the Sunne, and staied in the lowest and colde Region of the ayre, are there contracted into cloudes and turned into raine and such other watery Meteors: So this stinking smoake being sucked vp by the Nose, and imprisoned in the colde and moyst braines, is by their colde and wett facultie, turned and cast foorth againe in waterie distillations, and so are you made free and purged of nothing, but that wherewith you willfully burdened your selues. (James I 1604,)

The word *funk* was used to mean reek or smoke into the eighteenth century; to be in a funk, or in a blue funk, first recorded as Oxford academic slang in Junius’s *Etymologicum anglicanum* in the late seventeenth century, probably means to be whelmed in a cloud of fearful uncertainty: Junius suggests that it is from Flemish *fonck*, which he glosses as ‘turba, perturbatio’ (Junius 1743, sig. Xx2r). The variation on the phrase, ‘to be in a blue funk’ may lend extra credence to this derivation. But funky music is music that has the earthiness and crude familiarity of smoke. Smoke evidently is us.

And perhaps the proof of the familiarity of smoke is its diabolical unholiness. James concluded that smoking was ‘A custome lothsome to the eye, hatefull to the Nose, harmefull to the braine, dangerous to the Lungs, and in the blacke stinking fume thereof, neerest resembling the horrible Stigian smoke of the pit that is bottomlesse.’ The ‘Chapter of Smoke’ of the Koran warns ‘expect thou the day when the heaven shall bring obvious smoke [10] to cover men--this is grievous torment!’ Lady Macbeth summons smoke both to disguise and make possible her mooted murder of Duncan in his bed: ‘Come, thick night,/And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,/That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,/Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark/To cry, “Hold, hold!”’ (*Macbeth* 1.5, 50-4)

Distemper

Smoke is not just matter out of place, invasive, insidious, miscegenating, it is also time out of joint; it is the mark of a distemper. The office and vocation of smoke is to rise, to evaporate, to disperse. The great innovation of the modern city is not the increase in smoke as such, for we may assume that human settlements have often been smoky, but the institution of the chimney, as the celestial cloaca, the sewer into the sky. No architectural form characterises modernity’s relation to the natural world better than the chimney – the vertical drain or exhaust pipe, that aims to expel noxious wastes into the topless heights of the sky, as we do our less volatile effluents into the similarly unfigurative immensity of the oceans. The chimney connects, but in order precisely to keep at a distance, two regimes of space. At one end, there is the hearth, furnace or kiln – in which interiority is brought to a focus. This is centripetal space, space that tends inwards – one gathers round the hearth, after all. At the other end, there is open or centrifugal space, in which precisely, the centre flies out or away.

But these two spaces are also different times. The hearth connotes the here-and-now, the at-hand present. The air is the prospective past, a kind of translucent temporal sink in which our effluents can be not only *à perte de vue*, but also *à perte de mémoire*, lost in and from memory.

Smoke is the sign of the reluctant vanishing, of the clinging, malign persistence of the past, its refusal to be over and done with, to become out of mind because out of sight. The chimney attempts to give smoke abstract verticality, to direct it, make it function as a vector. But the chimney always raises the possibility of a return, of the vertical become vortical, contorted and convulsive as to direction. Smoke rolls, ravel, coils, perversely, inversively, near-chaotically, heterochronically.

The first analyst and poetic chronicler of modern smoke is John Evelyn, who published in 1661 a pamphlet entitled *Fumifugium: The Inconveniencie of the Aer and Smoak of London Dissipated*. Evelyn's ire was directed particularly at the use of inferior Newcastle coal or sea-coal, which he called

that Hellish and dismal Cloud of SEACOAL? which is not onely perpetually imminent over her head... but so universally mixed with the otherwise wholesome and excellent *Aer*, that her *Inhabitants* breathe nothing but an impure and thick Mist accompanied with a fuliginous and filthy vapour, which renders them obnoxious to a thousand inconveniences, corrupting the *Lungs*, and disordering the entire habit of their Bodies; so that *Catharrs*, *Phthisicks*, *Coughs* and *Consumptions* rage more in this one City than in the whole Earth besides (Evelyn 1661, 5)

But his work is really a reflection upon the spatial paradoxes of living in a city, in which smoke becomes a kind of autistic, self-inflicted wound. He declares himself amazed:

that where there is so great an affluence of all things which may render the People of this vast City, the most happy upon Earth; the fordid, and accursed Avarice of some few Particular Persons, should be suffered to prejudice the health and felicity of so many: That any Profit (besides what is of absolute necessity) should render men regardlesse of what chiefly imports them, when it may be purchased upon so easie conditions, and with so great advantages: For it is not happiness to possesse Gold, but to enjoy the Effects of it, and to know how to live cheerfully and in health, *Non est vivere, sed valere vita*. That men whose very Being is Aer, should not breath it freely when they may; but (as that Tyrant us'd his Vassals) condemn themselves to this misery & *Fumo prae-focari*, is strange stupidity: yet thus we see them walk and converse in London, pursu'd and haunted by that infernal Smoake, and the funest accidents which accompany it wheresoever they retire. (Evelyn 1661, sig A1^v)

Smoke is a lowerer and leveller, a disturber of relations of distance and propinquity:

I have strangely wondred, and not without some just indignation, when the South-wind has been gently breathing, to have sometimes beheld that stately House and Garden

belonging to my Lord of *Northumberland*, even as far as *Whitehall* and *Westminster*, wrapped in a horrid Cloud of this Smoake, issuing from a *Brew-house* or two contiguous to that noble Palace. (Evelyn 1661, 7)

Evelyn warned the King, the principal addressee of *Fumifugium*, that disordered air was likely to be the cause of political disorder:

the Aer it selfe is many times a potent and great disposer to Rebellion; and that Insulary people, and indeed, most of the Septentrion Tracts, where this Medium is grosse and heavy, are extremely versatile and obnoxious to change both in Religious and Secular Affaires. (Evelyn 1661, 1)

Evelyn's solution was a reassertion of the space that smoke, with its tendency to insinuate, penetrate, mingle, invade and pervade, sets at naught. He proposes that all the furnaces and chimneys of brewers, bakers and other trades be banished to beyond Greenwich hill. And then, as though recognising the improbability of ever being able to effect such a quarantine, he offers a strange, daft, but rather visionary alternative. Instead of trying to put London at a distance from its smoke, he proposes instead that the outskirts of London be divided into plots and planted with a range of sweet-smelling herbs and plants:

Cowslips, Lillies, Nareissus, Strawberries, whose very leaves as well as fruit, emit a *Cardiaque*, and most refreshing *Halitus*: also *Parietaria Lutea, Musk, Lemmon, and Mastick, Thyme: Spike, Cammomile, Balm, Mint, Marjoram, Pempernel, and Serpillum, &c.* which upon the least pressure and cutting, breathe out and betray their ravishing odors. (Evelyn 1661, 25)

The idea is to purge and redeem the air by transformation, rather than to trying to purify it by separation of the salubrious from the noxious. If smoke goes in the direction of time, and is a kind of figuring of irreversibility, then this accepts the fact of smoke, and offers a solution which goes in the same direction, which is to say towards mixing and mutability, rather than attempting to send smoke upstream or downstream of time.

Faces as Men's Faces

Smoke is slow, but it also figures a violent alteration of tempo in things, in which the ordinary processes of regular, long-term abrasion – the calculus of diminishment worked out by the tides as they slowly moil and riddle rocks

down to sand – are unnaturally accelerated, hurrying things into their dust, substituting explosion for erosion, collapsing for elapsing.

In the Book of Revelation, the apocalypse is signified, not just by the destruction of fire, but also by the eruption of smoke. The sudden rushing up into the air of the deep is a geological correlate to the convulsion of time in the ending of days:

And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven fallen unto the earth: and there was given to him the key of the pit of the abyss. And he opened the pit of the abyss; and there went up a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit. (Revelation, 9.1-2)

The smoke here is both destructive and spontaneously generative; where smoke had commonly been used to exterminate vermin, this smoke pours forth locusts, each equipped with scorpion stings, as well as other appropriately metamorphic qualities – they are shaped like warhorses, and wear crowns on their heads; they have women's hair and lions' teeth, but 'their faces were as men's faces (Revelation, 9.7) A tradition of commentary has grown up which sees in this the prefiguring of the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb, encouraged by the traditions of pictorial renderings, such as Hans Holbein the Younger's illustration for the Zwingli Bible in 1531, reworked 10 or 20 years later as a fresco by Tzortzis on the wall of the monastery in Dionysiou, Mount Athos. More recent interpretations have been encouraged by the breastplates of iron and the sound of the locusts' wings 'as the sound of chariots and many horses rushing to war' to see here the prefiguring of the helicopters of Vietnam and the Gulf War (Raggio, n.d.). Others have made connections between this and the bombing of the World Trade Center (Anon 2007).

The king of the bottomless pit is the Hebrew demon Abaddon, or in Greek Apollyon, clearly a reworking of the god Apollo, for the Greeks the God of solar rationality, but also associated, especially by later Christians, with a demon who inhabited the gulf of prophecy in the Delphic Oracle, from which intoxicating fumes were said to enter the head and, according to some, the genitals of the pythia, or prophetic priestess, whose very name derives from the reeking body of the dragon slain by Apollo on the spot (Greek *puthein* is to rot).

Smoke is a mediator between the archaic and the modern. Among the strangest responses to the pictures of the burning World Trade Center was the determination among apocalyptic Christians to see the faces of demons

in photographs and videos of the smoke (Emery 2001). The Christian Media website explains their presence as follows:

People may ask themselves, why would there be faces in the smoke, and also, why so many? I believe I know the answer to that question.

Demons can feel and experience things like we can. Consider that picture of the demon below that has its head sticking up like it is on some kind of rollercoaster ride. An act of hatred and violence is a thrill ride for a demon, they not only participate, in so far as influencing someone to commit acts of violence, they get a thrill during the act. Demons knew what was going to happen in New York and they gathered there to jump in at the point of the impact, like a human jumping onto a moving train to have a thrill.

Most acts of violence are not as huge as this one, or last as long, or kill this many people, so this was Disneyland for demons. (Fortner, n.d.)

Diabolic shape-making from smoke is to be found in other traditions, along with other mingling of present and past. In what purports to be an ancient Hindu text on the sacred arts of aeronautics, we can read of the following magico-mechanical manoeuvres:

by producing the 32nd kind of smoke through the mechanism, and charging it with the light of the heat waves in the sky, and projecting it through the padmaka chakra tube to the bhyravee oil-smearred Vyroopya-darpana at the top of the Vimaana, and whirling with 132nd type of speed, a very fierce and terrifying shape of the Vimana will emerge, causing utter fright to onlookers.

13. Roopaantara: As stated in "Tylaprakarana," by preparing griddhrajihwaa, kumbhinee, and kaakajangha oils and anointing the distorting mirror in the Vimaana with them, applying to it the 19th kind of smoker [4-5] and charging with the kuntinee shakti in the Vimana, shapes like lion, tiger, rhinoceros, serpent, mountain, river will appear and amaze observers and confuse them. (Bharadwaaja 1973, 4-5)

Fumaticks

Smoke is everything and nothing. Smoke has a kind of disproportion built into it: as James I wrote, mock-apologetically in his *Counterblaste to Tobacco*, ‘since the Subject is but of Smoke, I thinke the fume of an idle braine, may serue for a sufficient battery against so fumious and feeble an enemy’ (James I 1604,). Imogen, in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, describes her dream as ‘a bolt of nothing, shot at nothing,/Which the brain makes of fumes’ (*Cymbeline*, IV, 2):A satirical pamphlet of 1641 mocked ‘enthusiastick fumaticks, who talk so much of the Spirit’, making fume the degraded form of ‘pneuma’ or spirit (Anon 1641, 7). But smoke in fact is not neither fumious, nor feeble. Perhaps this, too, is part of its diabolic power.

For us, smoke has become an omnitude, the indelible, circulating residue of all our days and ways, and a haunting allegory of the vanishing of open space, especially the open space of the receptacle air. Michel Serres calls it a ‘world-object’, an object which connects us to the world and makes it impossible for us to live locally any more, in spaces set apart, from each other or from the world. Peter Sloterdijk has made a similar point about what he calls the ‘explicitation’ of the air that followed the first use of poison gas in 1915 (Sloterdijk 2004, 95-101). This makes unholy smoke the harbinger of a curious utopia, beyond the privative and appropriative cartographies of the past. It separates us from the archaic space of separations, which evaporates, ‘just like our own smokes’ (Serres 2008, 70, my translation)

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