

Sur les implications métaphysiques du *Parfum*

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Résumé: Dans les interprétations du roman *Das Parfum* de Patrick Süskind, l'introduction de la "Dialectique des Lumières" est une approche frappante, et le niveau métaphysique de cette approche demeure à être découvert. En se basant sur la similitude entre la technologie de fabrication du parfum et la manière dont le concept traite ses objets, l'article montre que Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, protagoniste du roman, peut être compris comme le sujet littéraire de la métaphysique rationnelle. En outre, selon les deux niveaux de concepts et le double objectif de la métaphysique, Grenouille illustre le deuxième objectif de la métaphysique, à savoir la saisie du non-conceptuel au moyen de concepts, qui incarne la contradiction la plus profonde de la métaphysique. Enfin, en comparaison avec l'*Odyssée* et les romans de Sade, cet article montrera que le roman représente l'image négative de la raison des Lumières, qui est plus proche des romans de Sade. L'époque de Süskind est le 20ème siècle, dans lequel la dialectique des lumières est pleinement répandue, donc sa création est consciemment plus proche de l'absurdité de la raison.

Mots clés: *Parfum*, concept d'odeur, métaphysique, dialectique des lumières

On the metaphysical implications of *Perfume**

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Abstract: Interpreting Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume* together with the introduction of "Dialectic of Enlightenment" is a striking approach, and the metaphysical level of this approach remains to be opened. Based on the similarity between the perfume making technology and the way in which concepts deal with their objects, the article shows that Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, protagonist of the novel, can be understood as the literary subject of rational metaphysics. Furthermore, according to the two levels of concepts and the two-fold aim of metaphysics, Grenouille represents the second purpose of metaphysics, namely, grasping the non-conceptual by means of concepts, which embodies the deepest contradiction of metaphysical. Finally, in comparison with the *Odyssey* and Sade's novels, this article will show that the novel represents the negative image of Enlightenment reason, which is closer to the novels of Sade. Writing in the 20th century, a time in which the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" has been widely circulated, Süskind's creation is consciously closer to the absurdity of reason.

Key Words: *Perfume*, Odor concept, metaphysics, Dialectic of enlightenment

France and Germany are next to each other in Continental Europe, with venerable histories and traditions, but different cultural characters. Compared with the rigor and speculation of the "nation of thinkers"¹, France is more romantic and sensitive. However, there is no lack of exchange and communication between the two cultures. From the Enlightenment to the French Revolution, the passion of the French directly flowed into the rational system of German philosophers, while German classical philosophy also provided nourishment of thought for French intellectuals for a long time while German classical philosophy also influenced French intellectuals for a long time, releasing the sober thought into the radical critical spirit of the French again and again. Of such cultural exchanges, Patrick Süskind's *Perfume: The story of a murderer* (translated by John E. Woods, Penguin Press, 2001. This book will be cited below with page numbers only) is the concentrated expression. As a German writer, Süskind tries to tell a typical French

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¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Carol Diethe, Cambridge University Press 1994, p. 38.

story, and among the many interpretations of this story, references to the German philosophical tradition have become a striking angle. The story of the novel written in the 1980s occurred in the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, while the author's perspective and starting point already contained the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" in the twentieth century. Although Süskind chose the "classical" narrative method deliberately, the interpretations of the novel can only rely on the framework of "modern" or "post-modern" art. These creations and interpretations are full of tensions and blending between Germany and France. In fact, this tension can be regarded as the internal tension of the whole western civilization, because the sharp oppositions between sensibility and reason, intuition and concept, internality and transcendence, goodness and evil expressed in the novel have dominated western civilization from the beginning. Unlike other literary critics who expanded on Horkheimer and Adorno's "Dialectic of Enlightenment" and Adorno's literary theory, aesthetic theory and even psychological theory, the author of this paper deeply engages with the metaphysical level of "Dialectic of Enlightenment", namely the "negative dialectics" that distinguishes two levels of concept (the conceptual and the non-conceptual), and compares the characters that are discussed in the two "excurses" of the chapter "The concept of enlightenment", in order to make headway in this interpretative direction.

1. Eternity and strangling: metaphysical code words of *Perfume*

In the beginning of *Perfume* there is a brief account of the protagonist: Jean-Baptiste Grenouille lived in France in the eighteenth century. He is the most gifted abomination like famous names such as Sade, Saint-Just and Bonaparte of that age. But his name has long been forgotten, "because his gifts and his sole ambition were restricted to a domain that leaves no traces in history: to the fleeting realm of scent." (p. 8) We could interpret this from at least two aspects: firstly, what do Grenouille's "gifts" and "ambition" mean? Secondly, what does "the fleeting realm of scent" mean, to which Grenouille's "gifts" and "ambition" was restricted?

According to the story, Grenouille's gift was that he was sensitive to smell. And when the scent genius experienced the fragrance of a young girl selling yellow plum, he awakened, making him aware that "the meaning and goal and purpose of his life had a higher destiny: nothing less than to revolutionize the odoriferous world"; "He must become a creator of scents. And not just an average one. But, rather, the greatest perfumer of all time." (pp.44). As for what this revolution means, Grenouille was presented its blueprint in his dream that night: firstly, "he examined the millions and millions of building blocks of odor and arranged them systematically: good with good, bad with bad, fine with fine, coarse with coarse, fetid with fetid, ambrosial with

ambrosial. In the course of the next week, this system grew ever more refined, the catalog of odors ever more comprehensive and differentiated, the hierarchy ever clearer”, while the fact that “a murder had been the start of this splendor” “was a matter of total indifference to him”. (p. 45) It could be said that Grenouille’s “ambition” was to build a systematic building of scents; in the last part of the story, Grenouille’s success even made him obtain the status and power of God. However, as the author of the novel points out, the realization of this ambition has its price: the ruthless “murder” of human lives, which bore these fragrances. “Murder”, the thematic word appearing in the subtitle of the novel, is also a clue of the story: from the birth of Grenouille, the main characters in his life died unexpectedly in succession after he left. After he was aware of his gifts and mission, a series of “murders” became the ladder of his success. On the one hand, the structure of this story metaphorizes the grandeur and exquisite structure of Grenouille’s odorous career; on the other hand, it implies that this career was entangled with strangling life from beginning to end.

This mutual entanglement between grandeur and apathy could be traced back to the basic materials of the building of scents, meaning the internal structure of different odors preserved. In industrial society and even post-industrial society, the materials for making perfume are readily available. So, “speculative” perfume makers like Pelissier in the story could hide in the corners of the city using the manufactured essence directly, without having to see the flowers all over the mountains and the plains on the farm. “Scent as pure scent” was invented in the sixteenth century, and this invention was “comparable really only to the greatest accomplishments of humankind, like the invention of writing by the Assyrians, Euclidean geometry, the ideas of Plato, or the metamorphosis of grapes into wine by the Greeks. A truly Promethean act!” (p. 54) Undoubtedly the invention of perfume is the achievement that marks civilization, but “just as all great accomplishments of the spirit” it offered “humankind vexation and misery” along with its benefits, “for now that people knew how to bind the essence of flowers and herbs, woods, resins, and animal secretions within tinctures and fill them into bottles”, the art of perfumery was becoming simple and facile, without waiting with both feet on the ground; “They could simply follow their olfactory whims and concoct whatever popped into their heads or struck the public’s momentary fancy.”(p. 54) This superficial “invention” was unforgivable to the old perfume maker like Baldini. And for Grenouille, it was no more than insignificant skill. Grenouille was addicted to experimenting, with the goal of requiring the technology he needed. What he paid particular attention to was how to fix and grasp the “spirit” of the scents of natural objects and how to make pure fragrance. To be precise, if the ordinary manufacturing technology of perfume was the way to grasp the fragrance of flowers, Grenouille was looking for a similar way to grasp the fragrance of other life, namely of the girls in the story. Perhaps the general reader did not notice that Süskind reminded his readers from time to time in the novel: perfume making itself was actually a process of “killing”, because flowers, even any other natural object generating fragrance, would be deprived of life in the process of having aroma

extracted. In fact, this metaphor has been extended in Grenouille's story of growth, that is, from killing thousands of flowers by means of technology to killing human lives.

Advanced technologies always allow people to live in a pure and clean circumstance, which makes people feel at ease to forget the miscellaneous and unclean origin of these technologies, thus covering up their essence. Grenouille's life is just at the two ends of mutual tension. From Paris to glass, it is a pilgrimage for Grenouille, a perfume maker, and a process of tracing back the origin of pure fragrance. Grenouille was full of enthusiasm for the method and process of extracting plants, because "that scented soul, that ethereal oil, was in fact the best thing about matter, the only reason for his interest in it"; the rest was "of no concern to him. They were mere husk and ballast, to be disposed of". (p.91) He began to learn the preliminary perfume manufacturing technology from Baldini, a perfume manufacturer. When he studied in Glass, the author made a more direct and detailed description of another technology for extracting the fragrance of narcissuses: baskets of narcissuses were poured into a soup, "they lay on the surface for a moment, like eyes facing instant death, and lost all color the moment the spatula pushed them down into the warm, oily embrace. And at almost the same moment, they wilted and withered, and death apparently came so rapidly upon them that they had no choice but to exhale their last fragrant sighs into the very medium that drowned them. And it was not that the dead blossoms continued to give off scent there in the oil-no, the oil itself had appropriated the scent of the blossoms." (p.157) It is not difficult for us to understand from the novel that the manufacturing process of perfume is essentially a process of transferring the perishable life of flowers to a stable medium and locking it firmly. Süskind repeatedly uses the word "possess" in his novels to show that it is the essence of perfume manufacturing technology, and further implies that it is the nature of Grenouille.

In fact, the perfume manufacturing technology that makes Grenouille obsessed is a real part of the history of human civilization, just like the famous figures and social phenomena of that time mentioned by the author. The author uses a realistic documentary technique to pull the reader from the fantasy journey of Grenouille, the "geek", back to the thinking of human reality and history; like a mythical figure in antiquity, Grenouille wandered around the civilized world, showing the readers the contradictory structure of civilization. In western civilization, the women murdered by Grenouille were generally regarded as the symbol of nature and the object of being dominated and demanded. Just as the fundamental motivation of perfume manufacturing technology is to absorb and possess the fragrance of natural objects, so is any other human technology. We can even say that the essential motivation of technology is to seize and dominate the natural force, making it obey orders and serve human life.²

² In fact, this is the essence of enlightenment, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press 2002, p. 1.

However, the process of controlling natural forces must also be the process of strangling natural life. The anthropological motivation of technology actually exists in the basic unit "concept" of metaphysical thinking in an abstract way. Generally speaking, "concept" means "grasping" and "grab", that is "begreifen" in German, the verb form of German "Begriff". "Like the material tool.....as a thing..... so the concept is the idea-tool which fits into things at the very point from which one can take hold of them."³ What could be grabbed and grasped must be stable and lasting, which directly conflicts with the temporariness, transience and individuality of natural life. In Adorno's words, this is the most essential internal contradiction of metaphysics, that is, the contradiction between the concept and the non-concept. Therefore, it is not difficult for us to find that the paradox of perfume manufacturing technology is actually the paradox of the whole technological civilization and even rational metaphysics. Generally speaking, the concept is the condition of being "analyzable and determinable". In order to make the object analyzable and determinable, we must sublimate the object. In philosophical terms, it is to transcend the phenomenon of the object, then grasp the essence of the object, and draw an insurmountable wide gap between the phenomenon and the essence. From a practical point of view, the operation of this concept itself is hostile to life. Just as Grenouille must kill the body of flowers in order to possess their spirits, the concept must first regard objects as inanimate things, things that can be dismembered and denied, in order to obtain the essence of objects. In Hegel's words, this dismemberment and negation is intellectual thinking, and "is the power and work of the Understanding, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power"⁴. Dismemberment leads to death, and the power of death is also the power of survival. The negation of flowing deformation is the means to achieve eternity. This coincides with the birth of metaphysics in ancient Greece. According to Aristotle, the first philosophers "think nothing is either generated or destroyed, since this sort of entity is always conserved...they say nothing else comes to be or ceases to be; for there must be some entity ...from which all other things come to be, it being conserved"⁵. And Aristotle believes that the pursuit of eternity is the highest wisdom, which occurs out of human "nature".

Just like the metaphysicians, Grenouille was also engaged in his perfume business out of "nature". From this aspect, it can be said that although the novel tells the strange story of the strange protagonist, its connection with real history is extremely "direct", which also shows that the strange Grenouille was not a role of anti-rationality and anti-civilization. On the contrary, this man who was obsessed with perfume making technology was a weird undertaker of Enlightenment rationality. In addition to caring about the manufacturing technology of perfume, he also has many other characteristics

³ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, p. 31.

⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press 1977, p. 18.

⁵ Aristotle, *Works*, Translated under the editorship of W. D. Ross, Oxford University Press 1942, P. 2212.

of Enlightenment rationality, such as calmness and even indifference, patience and calculation for self-preservation, and taking everything as a necessary means to achieve his goal, etc. On the one hand, he has no passion. Even smell is only a special cognitive ability for him, so it can be said that no other impulse would affect his perception and planning. Süskind's Grenouille "decides vegetatively", and he was also like a tick: "The ugly little tick, which by rolling its blue-gray body up into a ball offers the least possible surface to the world...the tick, stubborn, sullen, and loathsome, huddles there and lives and waits. Waits, for that most improbable of chances that will bring blood, in animal form, directly beneath its tree." (p. 25) Moreover, Süskind also set up a matching role for Grenouille, that is, Richis, the father of girl Laure. Richis was a typical bourgeois and an "enlightened thinker". He not only owned a huge industry and exchanged his wealth for noble social status, but also had the wisdom of a bourgeois. The difference between him and Grenouille was only that he was "not thinking in olfactory categories, but rather in visual ones"(p. 182). But on the essential level, namely on the level of systematic method and idealistic motive, Richis and Grenouille were interlinked; because, Richis had "picked up his opponent's trail with his own refined and analytical powers of reasoning", and he had great "admiration for the murderer-an admiration, admittedly, that reflected back upon him as would a polished mirror". (p.182-183) In Richis's view, the competition between him and Grenouille was not "different" from his business; and they actually "need" Laure, just as Laure's fragrance was the last stone of Grenouille's building, she "was also the keystone in the edifice of his, of Richis's, own plans" (p. 183). Both Grenouille's nature and his interlinking with Richis reveals the intention of Süskind to imply his secret affinity with western metaphysics and the history of rational civilization.

2. Concept of odor and the contradictory structure of metaphysics

If Grenouille is identified as the subject of Enlightenment or a role similar to the subject of Enlightenment, a thornier problem is bound to be encountered, that is, the conflict between his mission (and ideal) and his genius at a more fundamental level. Because Grenouille's dream, that is, to build a castle of fragrance and a system of fragrance concepts, extremely, even irreconcilably conflicts with the field of fragrance and smell. As Süskind implies, Grenouille has long been "forgotten" by the world, because his genius career was launched in the "fleeting realm of scent" (p. 8). To fully understand this implication, we must understand the western traditional philosophical context of the concept of scent, vision, smell, light and shadow. Generally speaking, the most prominent one among various human senses is vision corresponding to light and shadow, especially from the perspective of knowledge, while smell is rarely valued in civilized society. As the metaphysician Aristotle said, "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their

usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.⁶ At the same time, Aristotle also made a minor comment on smell: the human nose is a mediocre organ, and the human sense of smell is inferior to that of animals; smell is closely related to emotion. Smell is not suitable for abstraction and lacks specific vocabulary.⁷ It is not difficult for us to understand this, because the existence of smell means the disappearance of smell, which itself is a direct resistance to eternity and stability. "Vanishing existence" is simply a paradox for metaphysicians. In Aristotle's framework, vision corresponding to light and shadow is the closest to knowledge and wisdom, because it is most suitable for abstraction, while smell corresponding to scent is the complete opposite. This priority of vision is not only reflected in philosophical concepts; as we know, idea, form, Enlightenment and so on are all derived from vision, and affect people's daily thinking, for example, viewpoints, perspectives, views and other words also express ideas related to vision. This difference is explained by father Terrier. He believes that the nose is the "primitive organ of smell, the basest of the senses..., 'The fool sees with his nose' rather than his eyes, they say, and apparently the light of God--given reason would have to shine yet another thousand years before the last remnants of such primitive beliefs were banished." (p. 19) It can be said that this hierarchical opposition between vision and smell, light (and shadow) and scent has become the basic structure of the tradition of western civilization and the common sense of western culture. Even if thinkers try to challenge this common sense from time to time (such as the French materialist in the 18th century who tried to "restore the reputation of smell"), it could not change this mainstream. In this context, the design of Grenouille, the protagonist of the novel, shows originality, because his mission is essentially a revolution and Enlightenment, but this revolution and Enlightenment happens in the field of scent and smell, which is "not suitable for abstraction" and the farthest from reason. This is obviously the dramatic effect that the novelist intends to achieve in his creation, and it also echoes the paradoxical logic in the historical development of rational metaphysics.

Contrary to the traditional consensus of western civilization, Süskind deliberately highlights the cognition function of Grenouille's gifted sense of smell, which could form concepts and construct systems, even higher than vision in this respect. In his childhood, Grenouille knew the world through the sense of smell, not through vision like ordinary people. For example, Grenouille did not speak his first word ("fish") until he was four years old, "which in a moment of sudden excitement burst from him like an echo when a fishmonger coming up the rue de Charonne cried out his wares in the distance. The next

⁶ Aristotle, *Works*, Translated under the editorship of W. D. Ross, Oxford University Press 1942, P. 2205.

⁷ See Annick Le Guerier, *Scent, the mysterious and essential powers of smell*, translated by Huang Zhongrong, Hunan Literature Publishing House 2001, pp. 165-167.

words he parted with were 'pelargonium', 'goat stall', 'savoy cabbage', and 'Jacqueslorreur', this last being the name of a gardener's helper from the neighboring convent of the Filles de la Croix, who occasionally did rough, indeed very rough work for Madame Gaillard, and was most conspicuous for never once having washed in all his life". (p. 27) For Grenouille, the word "fish" is related to his birth. Just as the first word spoken by ordinary babies is "mama", which comes from its first impression of the world, Grenouille's first impression was the stench of dead fish, because his biological mother is the owner of a "fish stall" in the most stinking place of the stinking capital (Paris), namely the "food market" built on the place of the former "Cimetiere des Innocents". Therefore, the stench of the dead fish symbolized Grenouille's initial connection with his mother, and all the words he first learned were related to the strong odor, including the name of the gardener's helper who never washed his face. It could be seen that every word Grenouille learned was accompanied by a strong stimulation of the olfactory organs. It was Grenouille's unique way of learning.

In pace with Grenouille's growth, he had accumulated many "olfactory notions within himself", for which "everyday language soon would prove inadequate"; "Soon he was no longer smelling mere wood, but kinds of wood: maple wood, oak wood, pinewood, elm wood, pearwood, old, young, rotting, moldering, mossy wood, down to single logs, chips, and splinters-and could clearly differentiate them as objects in a way that other people could not have done by sight". (p. 28) The concepts of Grenouille's accumulation were all related to smells of the objects, and the smells were closely connected with the material of the objects. According to the materialism of the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus, human perception and understanding of the outside world are mediated by the movement of atoms. Because atoms are the common material of the cognitive subject and the cognitive object, the sense of smell could be said to be the direct effect of both sides, the direct channel between the body and the objects. As we all know, the visual sense and the sense of hearing have some indirectness. Light and shadow and sound waves could only be produced with the help of the existence of a third, other than the cognitive person and cognitive object. In this sense, vision and hearing are more suitable for abstraction than smell and touch, that is, they are easier to be conceptualized. Compared with Plato's idealism, which explains the world based on light and visual metaphor (Idea originated from the visual form of the object.)⁸, Democritus attempted to explain the world in a "material" way (similar to the way of smell). Although it is closer to common sense, it is not conducive to the interpretation of spiritual activities and the construction of conceptual system. Therefore, Democritus reluctantly interpreted spiritual activities as the movement of fire atoms, which showed the clumsiness of materialists. Grenouille's cognition also followed a materialistic way, and the clumsiness of materialists was manifested in his defects: "With words designating nonsmelling objects, with abstract ideas and the like, especially those of an

⁸ See Plato, *Parmenides*, translated and commented by Chen Kang, The Commercial Press 1982, p. 41.

ethical or moral nature, he had the greatest difficulty. He could not retain them, confused them with one another, and even as an adult used them unwillingly and often incorrectly: justice, conscience, God, joy, responsibility, humility, gratitude, etc.-what these were meant to express remained a mystery to him.” (p. 28) In fact, these concepts are also difficult to grasp by Democritus’s atomism, but he has to interpret them forcibly by the movement of atoms in order to obtain a philosophical “system” similar to the idealism of Plato. Grenouille’s mission was actually also an effort to fulfil this kind of impossible task, namely, he wanted to build a “system” of odor concepts. From this perspective, Süskind tells a story about the sense of smell in the framework of visual metaphor.

From the perspective of the levels of tension and intensity within cognitive concepts, it is not difficult to divide concepts into ordinary concepts with universal things as their contents and concepts with nonconceptual things as their contents directly. In Adorno’s words, metaphysics is a philosophical form with concept as its object, and from the structure of concept, we can analyze the twofold aims of metaphysics: the one is the open aim, that is, to build a universal concept system, the other is the secret aim, that is, to capture all things opposite to the conceptual form. Corresponding to the metaphors of vision and smell, the former tells a story of vision with visual metaphor, while the latter tells the story of smell sense with visual metaphor, that is, using abstract concepts to grasp the fragrances that is most unsuitable for abstraction. In Adorno’s view, grasping the universal content in the form of universal concept is essentially nothing but the invalid knowledge as tautology. Only grasping the sensory and special content in the form of universal concept could have truth, but this kind of knowledge contains the irreconcilable contradiction between universality and particularity, rationality and sensibility. In this regard, metaphysics ultimately has only one aim and one essence: just as perfume manufacturing technology aims to capture fragrance, the real goal of metaphysical concept is to grasp the phenomenon of flowing deformation. Therefore, the philosophical concept expressing the essence of metaphysics is not “idea” or “form”, but Aristotle’s “pure material” and “This One” (individual substance), or Kant’s “thing in itself”, or Adorno’s “the Nonidentical”, because only they show the essential aim and at the same time the core contradictions and difficulties of metaphysics. Of course, the contradictions are not the end of metaphysics, because like Grenouille, metaphysical philosophers have a mission, which is almost impossible to be accomplished. If the mission is forcibly completed disregarding its impossibility, it would inevitably have false factors and shows some unsolvable contradictions. In addition to Democritus’s forcible interpretation of spiritual phenomena, this kind contradiction manifests between Aristotle’s “Such as” (Universal) and “This one” (Individual), and in Kant’s transcendental illusion and Hegel’s logical contradiction. Grenouille’s system of smell categories could be seen as moving forward in this direction. To construct the systematic building of scents concept, Grenouille needed a higher category of odor, namely the

aroma, which is the special body fragrance of beautiful girls in the novel.⁹

The fragrance of the girl selling plums enlightened the young Grenouille, and “he had the prescience of something extraordinary-this scent was the key for ordering all odors, one could understand nothing about odors if one did not understand this one scent, and his whole life would be bungled, if he, Grenouille, didn’t succeed in possessing it. He had to have it, not simply in order to possess it, but for his heart to be at peace.” (p. 40) Grenouille is undoubtedly an indifferent character, and his only impulse was the pursuit of the girl’s body scent. Like metaphysical effort, this pursuit was non-erotic, but was calm and rational. As mentioned above, in order to complete this mission, he must learn the technology of extracting fragrance from living beings. For this reason, he also wandered from Paris to Grasse, which was the holy land of perfume makers. Grenouille finally mastered this technology through experiments in Grasse, which could set off a “revolution” in the fragrance world, because the scent of young girls “contained within it was the magic formula for everything that could make a scent, a perfume, great: delicacy, power, stability, variety, and terrifying, irresistible beauty”, Grenouille regarded this scent as the “most important” means to complete his mission (P. 44). On how to appreciate Laura’s beauty, whose fragrance is the peak of Grenouille’s scent system, his genius smell sense even began to despise vision, because he thought that people who use vision are “stupid and use their noses only for blowing, but believe absolutely anything they see with their eyes, they will say it is because this is a girl with beauty and grace and charm. In their obtuseness, they will praise the evenness of her features, her slender figure, her faultless breasts. And her eyes, they will say, are like emeralds and her teeth like pearls and her limbs smooth as ivory-and all those other idiotic comparisons”. (p.154) These people did not know why they could not resist the girl’s “magic”, because it came not from the charm of appearance, but from “her incomparable, splendid scent”, which only Grenouille knew. (p. 154)

In fact, it is not difficult for readers to understand that the girl’s magic and unique scent are in a sense true, and the fragrance extracting technology is also true, but Grenouille’s possession of the girl’s charming body fragrance by virtue of this technology could only be understood as a fiction of the novelist. The novel starts from real things both in content and writing style, but it always extends from the reality, pointing to a direction of fiction, exaggeration and fantasy. Of course, Süskind also set this direction in Grenouille’s nature. Just as Kant said that the nature of pure reason is using cognitive concepts beyond the limits of experience, this fiction and exaggeration also has a certain metaphysical inevitability. Of course, as mentioned above, the price of this inevitability was the strangulation of life. Grenouille still possessed the special body fragrance of

⁹ The narrative perspective of this novel is typical Male chauvinism, according which “as a representative of nature, woman in bourgeois society has become an enigma of irresistibility and powerlessness”. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical Fragments*, p. 56.

twenty-five girls just as philosophers found pure categories. In Grasse, Grenouille realized the essential difference between him and the ordinary perfume makers; the later were “maceraters, distillers, and blossom crushers” “like Druot”, they were “primitive pillager of scents”, but he was “the greatest perfumer in the world” (p. 173). Grenouille would not possess the fragrance of flowers like an ordinary perfume maker, moreover, he wanted to possess the scent of the girl: “He must design a diadem of scent, and at its sublime acme, intertwined with the other scents and yet ruling over them, his scent would gleam. He would make a perfume using all the precepts of the art, and the scent of the girl behind the wall would be the very soul of it.” (p. 173) Grenouille’s diadem of scent included twenty-five scent categories. He has possessed twenty-four girls’ scents “by cold-oil enfleurage”, “digestion”, “lavage” and “distillation” over the last year, and in the same way, he would fetch “the twenty-fifth, the most precious and important of all” from the body of Laure. (p. 188) Of course, Süskind could not demonstrate in detail how these different scent categories, as pure essence, were obtained according to the rules of technology, and how these twenty-five kinds came to be. However, Grenouille finally succeeded in constructing the scents system, completed his life mission, and obtained supreme power with help of the magic of the girls’ scents. His opponents, whether the enlightened bourgeois Richis or the noble bishop, bowed before him. Whether truth or illusion, these were actually imitations of the rational enterprise of metaphysics. The metaphysical illusion and the fiction of Süskind’s novel reach the same goal by different means.

3. Intellect and sin: contradictory personality of Grenouille

As mentioned earlier, Grenouille’s gift was the sense of smell that was most unsuitable to be abstracted, that is, the farthest part of human nature from reason, yet this genius had to complete a mission similar to reason. This kind of contradiction is similar to the structure of the reason concept in philosophy: out of its own mission, reason is required to grasp the perceptual object in direct contradiction with itself. Therefore, it is not difficult for us to find concepts in the history of philosophy that can be equal to the “scent concept” in this novel, which are “pure material”, “this one”, “thing in its self” and so on. This extremely contradictory structure is corresponding to Grenouille’s personality structure. Grenouille’s personality was full of similar contradictions: he was born in the foulest place in the world, but his mission was to possess the purest scent and build a magnificent fragrance building; he was humble and pitiful, ugly, but finally obtained the power similar to God with the magic of scents, while he was regarded as a devil because of his inexorable violence; his gift was based on his sensitive sense of smell, and he could smell anything and anyone, but he did not have any odor. Beauty and ugliness, good and evil, apathy and passion, cognition and

possession, all of which coexist directly in Grenouille's personality. In the history of western literature, the literary protagonist closest to Grenouille is probably the protagonists of Sade's novels, who was a French pornographic novelist in the 18th century and mentioned by Süskind at the beginning of this novel. Whether Herzog von Blangis in *120 days of sodom* or Dolmancé in *Philosophy in the bedroom*, they were rational manipulators of lust. When they "pushed pleasure to the supernatural level, indulgence would be reversed into procedures, concepts and numbers, and natural desire would disappear, leaving only apathy.....The strange unity of fanaticism and apathy was close to Kant's moral philosophy understood by Horkheimer and Adorno: apathy is understood as the premise of subjective virtue, and indifference to perceptual stimulation is the premise of moral sense."¹⁰ In a sense, Grenouille was also engaged in a similar enterprise. Odor and lust are not only closely connected, they also are the direct opposites of reason. From a philosophical point of view, this direct opposition is the contradictory structure of the special kind of concept like "pure material".

If the protagonists in *Perfum* and Sade's novels represent the other side of rational enlightenment, to be exact, the negative side, the positive side of rational enlightenment also has its representative in this novel. It is Grenouille's opponent, Richis, the father of Laure, who had "fabulous wealth". Richis also regarded Laure as his wealth, "the most precious thing" that he possessed. He planned to exchange Laure's marriage for the power similar to the feudal aristocracy that ordinary capitalists dream of, with "baron de Bouyon" who was "of good reputation and miserable financial situation"; he was eager to possess Laure in terms of lust, and had to "choked down this dreadful lust" with "chaste fatherly" love. (p. 180) He "needs" Laure in every way, just as Grenouille "needs" Laure. In a sense, the conflict between Richis and Grenouille was actually a competition for Laure. In Richis's view, this kind of competition was seen through the intentions of the competitor, which ultimately overmastered him; just like in the business, Richis was "a natural fighter, a seasoned fighter", he had fought for all his wealth and office, "with doggedness and deceit, recognizing dangers ahead of time, shrewdly guessing his competitors' plans, and outdistancing his opponents..... And in no other way would he counter the plans of the murderer, his competitor for the possession of Laure-if only because Laure was also the keystone in the edifice of his, of Richis's, own plans. He loved her, certainly; but he needed her as well." (p. 183). Bourgeois Richis obeyed typical bourgeois norms of morality. Using fatherly love to "choke down" the "dreadful lust" was actually the apathy producing moral. Just as Kant and Sade were interlinked, so were Richis and Grenouille. In the history of western literature, there were many protagonists like Richis, and they were all imitations of Odysseus, the protagonist of the epic *Odyssey*.¹¹ According to the interpretation of Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus was

¹⁰ See Xie Yongkang, Freedom and Sin. Kant, Sade and dialectics of enlightenment, in: *Modern Philosophy*, 2019, Vol. 4.

¹¹ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, p. 38.

the prototype of the bourgeois and the rational enlightenment subject.¹² We all know that Odysseus was a mortal, but because of his steadfast self-preservation, he had become a hero among mortals, he even could deal with Gods, and he finally became a half man and half god existence; Odysseus was a friend of Zeus, the sun god. He was strongwilled and very calculative. He even deceived and teased the natural Gods who represented a more ancient era in history; at the same time, Odysseus was a ruler. After he triumphed over the cruel Gods of nature, he imposed the same violence on his own kind ruled by him.¹³ Odysseus not only defeated his external nature, but also had the powerful ability to control his internal nature. On this point, Richis was completely consistent with him.

Of course, we cannot simply equate Grenouille with the protagonists of Sade's novels, because although Süskind deliberately referenced the 18th century and even implicitly paid a tribute to Sade, after all, the 20th century is no longer the classical era of literature. In addition to the updated writing style, Süskind arranged a lot of solitudes and inner monologues for introverted Grenouille. For example, from section 23 to 29, Grenouille spent seven years alone in a cave in the Plomb du Cantal, the location farthest away from the crowd in France. When the outside world underwent social or political upheavals, Grenouille enjoyed silence alone and spent time meditating and dreaming, which was obviously contradictory to Grenouille's character of being good at calculating. In "the only world that he accepted", "nothing lived but the scent of the naked earth", "for it was much like the world of his soul", where "most liberating for him was the fact that other people were so far away". (pp. 108,107). There were many ascetics living in isolation in the world. They were to get close to God and wait for God's order. But Grenouille did not believe in God. "He had withdrawn solely for his own personal pleasure, only to be near to himself.....He lay in his stony crypt like his own corpse, hardly breathing, his heart hardly beating" (p.113), yet he lived "dissolutely", because only the inner empire was the place for debauchery. He dreamed of achieving great achievements in his Empire and browsing the "book of odors" comfortably "chez soi". Finally, a "catastrophe" interrupted his dream: he knew that the "fog" "was his odor, could not smell it": "completely drowning into himself, for the sake of everything in the world, he couldn't smell his own odor"¹⁴ (translated from German by the author). For Grenouille, to live alone with few desires was the same as debauchery, because from the perspective of odor, he was completely empty, the only state which could hold "everything in the world". Grenouille's ruling relationship with the outside world was based on his gifted nature, but his relationship with himself was in deep crisis, because the odor of his "Self" was nothingness, which led to Grenouille's fear on the one hand, and intensified his ruling relationship with the world on the other hand: he must possess and manipulate all scents and use them to dress up himself, and with the help of his

¹² See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, p. 35.

¹³ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, p. 61-62.

¹⁴ See Patrick Süskind, *Das Parfum Die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Diogenes Verlag AG Zürich 1985, S. 163.

gifted sense of smell and his nihilistic nature, Grenouille in the end occupied the top of the hierarchical world of smells, and he manufactured "a diadem of scent". It is not difficult for us to associate Grenouille, the olfactory genius's odorless nature, with the imagelessness of God and the non-material character of a transcendental subject, because in a sense, this vitium is exactly the basis for occupying the world.

Judging from the layout of the novel, this experience is the key to connecting the beginning and ending. In terms of content, Grenouille's self-reflection is the most profound part of the novel, because although Grenouille realized his mission when he knew the scent of the girl selling yellow plums, he only realized the specific way to complete the mission in the cave in Plomb du Cantal, which was to possess the most precious scents in the world to compensate for the nothingness of his own nature. Grenouille's distance from the world exacerbated the tension between him and the world, which strengthened his motivation to occupy the world. In this regard, it is not difficult for us to return to the theme of philosophy and rationality, because philosophy should be far away from the world out of its nature in order to grasp the world, resulting in the "separation" problem between concepts and its objects (e. g. Plato), that is, the more removed from the world, the more difficult it is to grasp the world. This also caused the transcendental problem of the Self in modern philosophy, that is, the more we want to go beyond the empirical world, the more difficult we form an effective concept of empirical things. It can be said that the history of philosophy has always been entangled in this problem of "separation", and metaphysicians are trapped in the anxiety caused by this. The anxiety of ancient philosophy is the certainty of the world, while modern philosophers find that the certainty of the world is ultimately their own certainty, and their own nothingness brings more fundamental anxiety. The fear of their own nothingness leads to the "self-preservation" becoming the "true maxim" of rational civilization.¹⁵ If Odysseus's adventure eventually created a powerful rational subject and a ruler, Grenouille finally achieved supreme power, but went to nothingness and death, that is, he returned to his nature. These are two different understandings of the rational subject.

Whether the protagonists of Sade's novels or Odysseus, Richis or Grenouille, even though their images and endings were different, these rational subjects had a calm mind and did not believe in God, and they even tried to get close to the God who controls everything, just as Hegel claimed that the rational subject was almost God. Grenouille's situation was even more special, because his origin and nature were the furthest away from God. According to the hierarchical framework of Neoplatonism, he was the furthest away from the ether, the best, and nearest to the material and the sin, but at the same time, he had no odor and was the purest. As early as infancy, Grenouille was frightening. His nursing mother found that he had no human odor at all and asserted that he must

¹⁵ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, p. 22.

have some relationship with the devil; Father Terrier, who studied theology could not tolerate that Grenouille smelled him outrageously with his nose. Terrier felt that Grenouille's nose seemed to pierce his clothes blocking sights from other people, which made him feel naked and ugly. Finally, he could not wait to send him away: get out! The devil! Then Grenouille grew up fortunately in the nursery of Madame Gaillard, who had lost her sense of smell. There, Grenouille had to pretend to be harmless like a tick all his life, but in fact, he secretly promoted his enterprise of constructing a system of odors and the concept of a scent building. Finally, because of his crimes, people concluded that "He was most certainly in league with the devil, if he was not the devil himself", and then others asserted that "the culprit was none other than the devil himself". (pp. 199,201). If pursuing the concepts of smell must be accompanied by indifferent separation, Grenouille developed this pursuit to the extreme, that is, in order to grasp the perfect magic of scents, he did not hesitate to kill life at the cost of any kind. Of course, Grenouille could not realize this due to his defect nature. Because of his rationality everything was merely instrumental and he just needed everyone. In the language of Kant's moral philosophy, Grenouille's sin was based on his rational, indifferent, conscious and free pursuit of emotional happiness, or, he realized reason through the sensibility, and this reason means the evil itself. However, this had obviously gone to the extreme opposite of enlightenment morality. Of course, evil itself could not be truly topicalized in theory, but this does not prevent it from being set to be the topic in a literary way.

According to the tradition of rational metaphysics, freedom, consciousness and apathy belong to the intellectual part, namely the divine part of human nature. Thus, Süskind finally gave Grenouille the power of God, which not only defeated the opponent, bourgeois subject Richis, but also directly subverted religion, because the devil would have divinity based on its freedom. When Grenouille sprinkled his perfume on the execution ground, everyone worshiped it. Even "Monseigneur the Bishop, who, as if he had been taken ill, slumped forward and banged his forehead against his knees, sending his little green hat rolling-when in fact he was not ill at all, but rather for the first time in his life basking in religious rapture" (p. 212) This statement implies that the bishop's previous religious belief was false. In fact, like Richis and Odysseus, he did not believe in a religious God.¹⁶ His first religious fanaticism came from the Dionysian who made him sick and vomit, and he was intoxicated with the wonderful scents from Grenouille: "The result was that the scheduled execution of one of the most abominable criminals of the age degenerated into the largest orgy the world had seen since the second century before Christ." (P. 213). Christian asceticism, the independence and moral obligation of the enlightenment were all destroyed by the magic of Grenouille's perfume, and all mortals were submissive to him. Thus, the devil Grenouille turned into a God directly, "He was in very truth his own God, and a more splendid God than the God that stank of incense and was quartered in churches." (P. 214) However, we know that this God is not a

¹⁶ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, p. 40.

substance, because Grenouille himself has no odor, and all the scents he owned were essentially a kind of dress, so he finally returned to his origin, eaten by mortals and returned to be nothingness.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the difference between novel and epic lies in the degree of author's creation, that is, the degree of purposeful spiritual intervention.¹⁷ Therefore, the epic is closer to the mythological materials it inherits, while the novel can make up the plot more freely to correspond to the author's thinking logic. This difference is also what we need to be careful with when reading the two "excursuses" of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. However, Süskind is different from Sade. He is facing not only the unfinished project of Enlightenment, but also the full unfolded paradox of Enlightenment. His era is no longer the era of the rapid development of subjective metaphysics, but of the collapse of metaphysics. Therefore, his novel *Perfume* can be considered closer to the dialectics of enlightenment, especially its deep metaphysical contradictions. Of course, all novelists want to maintain the openness of their works, and Süskind does not give the interpreters a definite direction. But for this reason we could open up without difficulty a path of interpretation from the perspective of the dialectics of enlightenment and metaphysical history, based on not only the writing techniques and the age in which the story takes place, but also the hints of the characters in the novel and even some philosophical terms. It is worth mentioning that besides the paradox, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno should also contain a certain "positive" concept of enlightenment, while the novel *Perfume* only exposes the former sharply. However, it is rather the responsibility of philosophers to explore the way forward for human civilization.

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¹⁷ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, p. 35.

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