WINE, BODY AND SOUL

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Session III: Wine and Nature

Wine is from the outset an artefact, created by the profound fusion of human endeavour with nature. At once agricultural product, scientific concoction and artistic creation, it is to its primary constituents what olive oil is to olive trees - or chocolate to cocoa trees. Like olive trees especially, vines have been selected by man, picked, displaced, replanted. Both require human assistance to bear enough fruit, and to become edible, usable, enjoyable. And in both cases, production methods and fruit species together determine the final impact on taste, texture, odor, finish - varying qualities that can be appreciated by those attentive or knowledgeable enough to grasp and compare them.

This sort of attention and knowledge has generally become fashionable. Metropolitan cultures everywhere, from New York to Tokyo via London, Berlin and Madrid, are abuzz with the culture of health-oriented gustatory appreciation and a new consumer sophistication. Our society is saturated with oenophilia, its magazines, critics and ratings, experts and producers at the four corners of the globe. But the -philia is broader. A terminology has sprung up to describe olive oils, chocolates and teas that matches the language of oenophiles. Moreover, these things are good for you, as the press (rightly) proclaims: a glass a day keeps the doctor away, and so does a spoonful of olive oil, a square of chocolate and a cup of green tea. Designer health spas now offer *vitis vinifera* face creams, *olea europea* lotions, *theobroma cacao* scrubs and *cammelia sinensis* body wraps. Antioxidizing acids are pursued as the panacea for health and beauty, inside and out.

I mention all this because in order to start a discussion about the nature of wine's nature, so to speak, one must first acknowledge the cultural context of such a discussion. The very creation of a discipline called philosophy of wine can itself be seen as an instance of the metropolitan attention to nature's bounty - one I entirely and joyfully partake in, of course. This attention comes with a scientifically informed awareness of the impacts of

industries and agro-industries on nature, leading to calls to respect its order, to the growing popularity of organic and biodynamic wines and foods - to the sorts of activities spearheaded by Carlo Petrini and Slow Food. The more nature is saturated with human presence, the more we fantasize a return to an uncontaminated world. That dream fantasy does have a cut-off point, however, if one sees agriculture itself as a wound inflicted on the earth. (In Pietro Laureano's words: "L'agricoltura ferisce e viola il terreno, distrugge l'ambiente originario.")[1] We have profoundly participated in the creation of the nature we live off; the evolution of human culture and botanical species is intertwined.[2] We were once like bees, at best. But we have indeed become a pest. Now we strive to undo the harm, and want to to work with, not against the natural order - to rediscover, as biodynamic wine producers tell it, the connections between microcosm and macrocosm, man and nature, earth and universe.

Neither the concept of microcosm and macrocosm, nor the vision of a natural order that must be respected lest the multifarious connections that sustain life be destroyed, are new. They are as ancient as human thought, and can actually help us understand what relation wine bears to nature. This is what I will try to explain here.

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The ideal of a harmony is possibly universal - humans everywhere have always striven to understand their place in nature. In the West, the concept of microcosm and macrocosm probably originated with the Pythagoreans, and was formalized and ritualized in the Renaissance, when it was recast along Hermeticist lines, justifying sometimes heretic alchemical and magical practices. Our quest for the natural or, to use a seemingly less ambiguous or question-begging term, authentic, thus cannot even begin without a cultural bias, and comes as a bundle of contradictions.

Certainly, there is a clear distinction between a local, small artisanal bottle and an "artifical", industrial wine that reeks of vanilla barrique and flavours, that has been oxygenated to bursting point or boosted with sugar like an athlete on steroids. A wine in which one has used substances that were not even thinkable before the era of industrialization does differ notably from a wine that does not contain these additives; and a "natural", "authentic" wine would be one whose terroir speaks through its fruit - clean,

unmasked, unfussed with. But such a wine can be produced with sophisticated modern techniques that manipulate nature and distort local tradition. There is a scale of naturalness. The pre-modern manipulation and exploitation of plants was not at all more "natural"; old does not entail pure. Greeks, who generally appreciated an aged amphora,[3] adulterated their wine just as we do in order to preserve it, or adjust its acidity: instead of sulphates, they used chalk or lime, seawater, resin or gypsum. They sometimes flavoured it with plants and herbs like anis and myrrh.[4] Wine varieties were each recognized and purposely cultivated. Fertilization, for its part, has always been necessary for cultivation, and most peasants have welcomed efficient pesticides whenever these were available, regardless of harmful fallouts. Wine-making, in short, is not natural at origin; and so authenticity is hard to trace to the widely fluctuating, under-determined cultural traditions that guided production. Take the case of Italy: wine has been made for millennia here, from the Etruscans on, or even before. But in antiquity, it was only with the growth of Rome and the birth of a metropolitan market for good quality amphoras that production was refined, controlled by individual producers who sold their goods to the sophisticates in the big city,[5] just as is the case today.

In other words, standards shoot up in proportion to cultural literacy - of which basic wine literacy is one legitimate part. Wine made without expertise is rarely any good: basic plonk is clearly not what a wine drinker wants from nature. Wine is not a mere ethylated drink: it engages all the senses, and also what the Scholastics called the inner senses of the mind - reflexion, memory, discernment. There are innumerable stages to the degustation of this intense liquid - just as there are innumerable stages to the transformation of fruit into wine. It is because of its inherent complexity as a living organism that wine taunts us with the need to seize it through vocabulary, metaphor, repetition - and that it could have a central role in religious liturgy, for that matter. Wine experience is at once appetitive and evaluative, and the dual nature of wine as brutely generic alcoholic product and individual, complex, aesthetic, soulful substance calls for literacy in those who drink it - for considerations on the relations between the drinker and the drink. Arguably, there is an analogy between humans and wine: the transformations undergone by grape-derived liquids mirror the transformations that our organism undergoes during its life-cycle, and echo the transformations that wine effects on our organism.

It is perhaps not so surprising, then, that, as long as there has been wine, there has been a wine literacy of sorts. In the ancient Greco-Roman world and thereafter in the West, wine literacy was part of a cultural baggage that helped to account for the natural effects of wine on the body and mind or soul, and thereby to teach how to control excessive intake and wayward passions. What made such an account possible without modern chemistry or physiology was the holistic theory of the humours. Humours were fluids, four in number, first imagined in 5th-century Greece by the Hippocratics (followers of Hippocrates, the legendary founder of medicine to whose authorship the Hippocratic texts were later ascribed) and consolidated by the 2nd century physician Galen. These fluids were thought to flow within the organism and to determine everything about body and mind, character and temperament, mood and emotion, health and illness. Since wine inflected our humoural balance, considerations upon it embraced medicine, dietetics and ethics. It was a wine psychology that is worth recalling, since, I argue, it is played out in the concerns we have today with the naturalness of wine, and which reflect our deepest, often ethically tinged preoccupations with bodily and environmental health.

The four humours were one aspect of the unity of nature and the universe: they each corresponded to one of the four elements that the Presocratics, and in particular Democritus, had determined were present everywhere - just as atoms are for us. So blood corresponded to air, phlegm to water, yellow bile or choler to fire, and black bile or melancholy to earth. Each one of these elements, and therefore each humour, was endowed with two qualities: air and blood were hot and wet, water and phlegm were cold and wet, choler and fire were hot and dry, melancholy and earth were cold and dry. We were endowed with all four humours, in varying proportions that, for Galen, constituted individual complexion, or the "naturals"; this complexion, and its temperature and humidity, shifted along with age, time of year, state of health, time of day, and with the "non-naturals": these non-naturals, in turn, were mood and emotion, air and environment, and lifestyle, that is, *diaita* in Greek: where one lived, how much one slept, exercised, had sex, eliminated (via defecation, vomiting or bloodletting), and of course what one ate and drank. Balance was a function of the right proportion between intake and output.

The intake of wine was as regimented as that of all foods, prescribed and proscribed according to circumstance and state of health. According to the Hippocratics, wine was humourally warm, and therefore warming. Inebriation occurred when an excess of wine

heated the brain. Fever could follow. The fifth-century BC *Problemata*: XXX, 1, one of the earliest and most quoted texts on the notorious humour that is melancholy, began with a comparison of effects of that humour to those of wine. The author - possibly Theophrastus, though for long one believed it was Aristotle - described how temperaments shifted along with the ingestion of wine: so a quiet type might turn "loquacious", and grow progressively more assertive as the evening went on and the glasses were refilled, until he became "violent, even exalted", and then collapsed into inanity. Other drinkers might instead turn quiet or lustful, wrote the author, or brave, or generous. In other words, the short-term effects of wine were akin to the long-terms effects of "nature" - nature here signifying the complexion given at birth. Wine could thus shift humoural balance through modulations in the amount of heat produced in the body, either enhancing creativity or obfuscating thought, just as black bile did, or as did yellow bile, itself exacerbated by wine at times, and correlated with fits of rage. For when the humours were imbalanced, the body's spirits reacted - liminal elements that travelled in the blood and were responsible for perception, sensation, emotion and cognition in the various seats of the soul. These spirits would run amok, and reason could then lose its grip over the passions.

This theory of humours, complexions and temperaments, with its fourfold divisions and attention to the four qualities, survived well into early modernity (if not until today, as I argued in the book I wrote on the subject). Throughout, the contraposition of hot and cold, dry and wet, in body, environment, food and drink, informed the classification into degrees of pharmaceutical plants and herbs (compiled in various editions of *Materia medica*); and it determined the ways to prescribe wine use. One should remember that, until the importance of hygiene and sanitation were understood, and until infection was discovered, water was rather dangerous, especially in urban centers; so wine was a safe, healthy alternative, which had also long been used to clean wounds, since Egyptian and even Mesopotamian antiquity. (Wine does have powerful anti-bacterial properties.) Treatises such as the *Regimen sanitatis salernitatum* were highly popular from the late middle ages because they offered guidance to preventing disease in an age when disease was easy to catch and hard to treat. The *Regimen* delivered a precise humoural legacy according to which one should be "sparing of undiluted wine", but also use wine to "replenish" the "more productive" spirits in the blood that might be depleted in the wake of otherwise healthful, necessary phlebotomies.[6] Wine was a principle of life, like blood.

But wine could also be classified just as any other natural, botanical product. Yann Grappe, in his book *Sulle tracce del gusto: Storia e cultura del vino nel medioevo*, reports that, according to one *Tacuinum sanitatis*, yellow wine ("vinum citrinum") was cold and dry to the second degree, while an aged, perfumed wine ("vinum vetus odoriferum") was hot to the second degree and dry to the third, and a coarse red wine ("vinum rubeum grossum") was less hot and dry, because lower in quality. Because of these varying degrees, some wines could cool and humidify the body. Medieval wine literacy was profoundly related to dietetics, as Grappe shows us; so in the winter, food should be spicier, and therefore warming, in order to compensate for the cold and humidity, and the wine should be less diluted with water.[7]

Such remained the standard theories of dietetics available to medical authorities in the Renaissance. In 1584, a Bolognese physician called Baldassare Pisanelli, pupil of the great natural historian Ulisse Aldrovandi, published what would become a popular and oft-reprinted *Trattato della natura de' cibi e del bere*, whose last chapter was devoted to drinking and wine. It opened with a medical regimen of prescription and proscription, where one reads that one should not drink either water or wine on an empty stomach, or after defecation, or after coitus or other exercise that causes rapid breathing or sweating, since it would harm the head, brain and nerves, perhaps even cause alienation of mind.[8] Wine was forbidden to young children, whose minds would be disturbed by it. Plato, Pisanelli reminded his readers, ruled that wine should be forbidden to generals, judges, governors and the like who were exercising their functions, to couples trying to procreate, and to youths under the age of 18. Pisanelli suggested that it was because the young "have a hot, fervent nature" that "their soul and body risk becoming passionately inflamed and furiously agitated" by wine.[9] Wine caused no problems to the over- 40s; and the elderly could and should drink wine, since its heat reduced cold, characteristic of old age. In antiquity, Pisanelli reported, women were forbidden wine too, because "with its use they close the door to virtue, and open it to all vices."[10]

Generally, though, the humoural effects of wine were perfectly virtuous when it was drunk at the right moment and in moderation. Pisanelli reported that with its ingestion, "the mood is more tranquil, the soul expands, the spirits are comforted, happiness increases and displeasures are forgotten".[11] And wine was good for the body: "By contributing to nutrition, concoction and digestion, it helps generate blood". It distributed

the humours, believed to be concocted in the liver out of the hot chyle produced by food, and had countless virtues: "feeds rapidly, gladdens the heart, chases wind, provokes urine, increases natural heat, fattens convalescents, opens the appetite, moves sweat, helps to sleep, clarifies cloudy blood, opens obstructions, carries nutrients to all parts of the body, thins thick humours, chases away bad skin colour, and helps excretion."[12] In excess, of course, wine caused all sorts of moral vices and physical debilities; it could even be the cause of sudden death.[13]

Excesses aside, a wine's goodness concerned not only its effects on health and virtue, but also its taste. A wine's quality was presumed to influence the physical, psychological and moral effects it would have on body and soul. A good wine, appropriate to season, place and constitution, remained a salutary adjunct in the health regimen, precisely because of its inebriating powers, which, well calibrated, could distill the better parts of moral character. And a wine's age mattered. Augustine wrote that wine became purer and better as it aged.[14] Pisanelli noted that old wine should be "quite odoriferous, potent, spiritous, not acidic nor bitter, but pleasing to all the senses", in which case it would be effective against bad humours and wind.[15] The 15th-century novella writer Matteo Bandello argued, very much along the lines we later read in Pisanelli, that, if drunk in moderation, "good, mature, clear and odorous wine is a highly suave liquor, providing sustenance to human life, regeneration to the spirits, gladness to the heart, and acting as a powerful and efficient restorer of all the bodily virtues and actions".[16] If wine could be harmful, that was not its fault, because, as Bandello put it, it was "in itself marvelously profitable for our bodies; but the harm comes from men who do not know how to govern themselves".[17]

It is interesting to see how, within this explanatory framework for the functions of life, biology and mind, wine was a liminal substance like the blood's spirits - at once material and spiritual, a force for passion and for reason. It was the product of the integration of human microcosm and natural macrocosm; and at best it was a factor for health, since health was a matter of harmony between natural elements and humoural balance, favoured by the integration of the natural body within the natural environment. Wine was endowed with powers similar to those of our humours and of the spirits travelling within them.

As I wrote in an article on "Wine psychology" for the Mollo family's journal *Tacuinum vitineum*, the association of a wine's spirits with the spirits in the blood continued to be played out in later centuries. One noteworthy 17th-century natural philosopher, the Dane Nicolaus Steno, reported how, for some thinkers, the "animal spirits" were akin to "wine spirit":[18] like blood, wine could be the principle of life, and the container of the soul. William Harvey, who, in the 1620s, gave the authoritative, empirically validated account of the circulation of the blood, suggested that "in their different ways blood and spirit, like a generous wine and its bouquet, mean one and the same thing. For, as wine with all its bouquet gone is no longer wine but a flat vinegary fluid, so also is blood without spirit no longer blood but the equivocal gore."[19] Blood without its soul was merely a gory liquid signifying death, a body without its humours was a cadaver, and a wine without bouquet or spirit was vinegar, dead wine. In the age of Harvey, harbinger of the new science, wine still carried the burden of spirituality, as it had from the Old to the New Testament, from instrument of religious and communal sociality to incarnation of Christ's blood.

The ritual value of wine was preserved into the Enlightenment. I had referred in that previous article to Mozart's *Magic Flute*, where Papageno, upon drinking the glass of wine he had been longing for, awoke to the reality of his need for love, and, concomitantly, of his failure, through lack of virtue, to ensure he would obtain it. His longing for wine was at once spiritual, physiological and psychological: but it was also a longing for the transformation that wine ensured. Papageno was incapable of Tamino's virtue, but he had healthy needs, a good heart, a balanced psyche. The glass of wine led him to a state of heightened lust, but also to a new self-perception and a state of melancholic despair at having lost (so he thought) the love he had nearly obtained. A new set of emotions and a dawning rationality emerged out of this glass of wine. The humoural body's intelligence led to wine intake, and was exacerbated by it.[20]

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I don't think we have lost Papageno's innocence when it comes to wine. But on the face of it, wine literacy today no longer has anything to do with humoural theory, with heat, life principle, microcosm and macrocosm. A highly literate wine drinker or wine philosopher, as it were, will know about the chemistry of vine and wine production;

identify how much expertise went into a bottle, how much tinkering was involved and whether the tinkering has been of the right sort; debate about barrique vs. anti-barrique, globalization vs. terroir, industrial vs. traditional, modern vs. organic or biodynamic techniques.

Yet wine literacy is also the ability to appreciatively distinguish one wine from the other, to sense its appropriateness to food and context, eventually to engage one's senses in such a way that the wine's components are identified and translated into communicable language - that the wine experience, as I call it, become a shared, social, still ritualized, aesthetic event. This engages something other than literacy; it engages the humours themselves, insofar as humours are a physical embodiment of emotions. One might say that the wine is cognized through the senses and humours that are set in action by it. As Roger Scruton wrote, "I have not swallowed the wine as I would a tasteless drug; I have taken it into myself, so that its flavour and my mood are inextricably bound together".[21] Mood, humour, flavour partake of the same order. To name the effects of wine requires that one recognize them in oneself; and this attentiveness requires a good degree of judgement about what one might call biological appropriateness - a sense, not entirely accountable in rational terms, that a wine should taste of where it came from, regardless of age, technique, prowess.

This is how, I believe, our newly urgent need for "nature" and "authenticity" remains in a direct continuum with a putatively outdated holistic theory. Biodynamic producers have explicitly adopted Rudolf Steiner's ideas, which recycled the notion of a correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, out of a combination of Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Paracelsianism, Vitalism and Romanticism updated to the 20th century. This is an extreme choice, couched in a particular, esoteric language not even mainstream humouralists used when they broached the subject of wine. But the existence of such a movement today does bear witness to the relevance of some of its practices to those who take seriously the culturally informed return to methods respectful of nature's complex rhythms. Awareness of these rhythms was diminished by industrialization and mechanization, and it makes sense that one should try to understand old theories about them in order to start reverting the effects of industry on the planet. Meanwhile, one can only hope that the virtues inherent in good wine enhance human virtue - for the good of nature, and of our precious vines.

[1] Pietro Laureano, “Rose di gerico”, in Bollati Boringhieri’s catalogue of its new *Oltre i giardini* collection (2008), p. 8.

[2] See for instance Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[3] Marie-Claire Amouretti, “Urban and Rural Diets in Greece”, in Jean-Louis Flandrin & Massimo Montanari, ed., *A Culinary History of Food* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2000), pp. 79-89: 83.

[4] Phyllis Pray Bober, *Art, Culture & Cuisine: Ancient & Medieval Gastronomy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 121.

[5] Jeremy Paterson, “Italy, Magna Graecia, and Roman Italy”, in entry on “Italy”, in Jancis Robinson, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 367.

[6] See Noga Arikha, *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2007), p. 100.

[7] Yann Grappe, *Sulle tracce del gusto: Storia e cultura del vino nel Medioevo* (Roma-Baris: Laterza, 2006), pp. 47-48; p. 143.

[8] Baldassare Pisanelli, *Trattato della natura de’ cibi e del bere* (Venice, 1584: 1611; facsimile ed. Bologna: Arnalod Forni, 1980), p. 160: “chi è stato al bagno, chi usato coito, o fatto altro essercitio, tanto violento, che si sia accresciuta la frequentia della respirazione, o sudato: se prima non si prende resettione di cibi, perché nuoce alla Testa, al Cervello, a Nervi, e fa alienatione di mente”.

[9] Ibid., p. 161: “havendo essi una natura calida, fervente, portano pericolo di essere infiammati gagliardamente nell’anima, e nel corpo, e di esser furiosamente agitati”.

[10] Ibid., p. 162: “perché con l’uso di quello chiudeno la porta alle virtù, & danno l’ingresso a tutti i vitii”.

[11] Ibid.: “L’animo si rende più fedele, e più mansueto: l’Anima si dilata, gli Spiriti si confortano, l’allegrezza si moltiplicano, & i dispiaceri si scordano.”

[12] Ibid., p. 163: “Il Vino conferisce alla nutrizione, alla concottione, alla digestione, & alla generatione del sangue. Egli distribuisce gli humori, che sono concotti, nutrisce con velocità, rallegra il cuore, caccia le ventosità, provoca l’urina, augmenta il calor naturale, ingrassa i convalescenti, risveglia l’appetito, muove i sudori, fa dormire, rischiarisce il sangue, ch’è torpido, apre l’ostruttioni, porta il nutrimento a tutte le parti del corpo, assottiglia gli humori grossi, manda via il cattivo colore della cotica, & aiuta a fare uscire tutti gli escrementi del corpo”

[13] Ibid., p. 164: “Percioché oltre che estingue il lume dell’Anima Rationale, molte volte è cagione di morte subitanea”.

[14] Augustine, *De mor. Eccl. cath.*, II, 16.44: “Chi ignora, in verità, che il vino invecchiando diventa più puro e migliore?”, cited in Ilaria Prosperi, *Gnoseologia e fisiologia del gusto nella tradizione neoplatonica-agostiniana e in quella aristotelico-tomista* (PhD Unibo 2007).

[15] Pisanelli, *Trattato*, p. 165: “Che sia odorifero assai, potente, spiritoso, che non sia acetoso, ne amaro, ma grato a tutti i sensi”.

[16] Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, ed. Gi Brognoligo (Bari: Laterza, 1912), vol. V, p. 151; cited in Stefano Ugo Baldassari, “Una disputa rinascimentale sul valore nutritivo del vino”, *Schede umanistiche*, 1999:2, pp. 95-106: 96n: “il buon vino maturo, chiaro e odoroso, è uno liquore soavissimo, vero sostenimento della vita umana, rigeneratore degli spiriti, rallegratore del cuore e restauratore potente e eficacissimo di tutte le vertuti e azioni corporali”.

[17] Ibid., p. 96: “in sé è mirabilmente giovevole ai corpi nostri; ma il male proviene dagli uomini che non si sanno governare”.

[18] See Nicolaus Steno, *Discours sur l’anatomie du cerveau. A Messieurs de l’Assemblée de chez Monsieur Thevenot* (Paris, 1669), pp. 6-7. See also Noga Arikha, “Form and Function in the Early Enlightenment”, *Perspectives on Science*, 14:2 (2006), pp. 153-188: p. 158. Some of this was published in Noga Arikha, “Wine Psychology”, *Tacuinum vitineum* 1, 2007, pp. 90-105: 98.

[19] William Harvey, *The Circulation of the Blood*, in *The Circulation of the Blood and other writings,* trans. Kenneth J. Franklin (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1963), p. 150. Some of this was published in Arikha, “Wine Psychology”, *Tacuinum vitineum* 1, 2007, pp. 90-105: 98.

[20] This is a version of a paragraph from Arikha, “Wine Psychology”, ibid.: pp. 100-102.

[21] Roger Scruton, “The Philosophy of Wine”, in Barry Smith, ed., *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2007), p. 6.