Wine Psychology

Noga Arikha

Tacuinum Vitineum: Philosophy of Wine, 1 (2007)

Wine is definable under many aspects: it is a drink; an alcoholic beverage one may want for its alcohol; the natural by-product of fruit fermentation; an agricultural artifact, the result of millennia of human selection and practice; an object of perception, and an aesthetic object in both the etymological and strict senses; a cultural product, named, categorized, and recognized as such; an economic, marketable entity whose value is dependent on all of the above. The relations between these various aspects of wine constitute its ontology; and epistemological and aesthetic questions inherent to the knowledge and perception of wine tend to absorb much of the philosophical effort one might expend on the topic.[1] But they tend to leave out the psychological dimension of the experience of wine.

Questions regarding aesthetic norms or the status of reputation[2] pertain to wine as much as they do to painting or music, and so they are similar - though not identical - to those broached within aesthetics or social epsitemology. But of all the cultural artifacts that are, like works of art, analysable in aesthetic terms, wine is nearly alone - gastronomic delicacies apart - in being aesthetically experienced mainly through the senses of smell and taste. These senses are classically associated with bodily experience and “lower” knowledge, and are traditionally opposed to the noble, visual sense. What requires contact - taste and touch, especially - has historically been considered farther away than sight from the “high”, nobler rational soul that may contemplate eternal truths or the highest good.

Wine has always been an artifact, but it has not always been the same sort of artifact, insofar as its nature has fundamentally changed over the millennia. The experience of drinking wine, at once sensorial and intellectual, at once appetitive and evaluative, is partly based on what is expected of it: and so to drink wine is to engage in a cultural practice. Since the artifact has changed throughout history, as any artifact does, the experience of it, too, has been inconstant. Yet one constant aspect of wine experience, to call it that, is the remarkable balancing act it exhibits between cognition or recognition on the one hand, and brute sensation or pure sense-perception on the other. It is an alcoholic beverage that differs from beer or spirits, in that its aesthetic dimensions are multiple, but the motivations behind drinking it do not always differ from those behind the urge for any alcohol. Wine experience can be mediated by reflection, knowledge, thought and language, but it is processed chemically and, as one would have said until just a few centuries ago, humourally.

I propose to trace here the humoural flow of wine from sense-perception to internal appropriation, without which it would not be available for aesthetic evaluation or critical and philosophical appraisal. I shall do this by recounting how it has been used or

perceived as an adjunct to passions and as an agent that transformed, enhanced or deviated from them, for better and for worse.

1. Humoural tempers

Wine experience is at once embedded within cognitive structures and crudely material: to drink wine is to engage in a noble activity when it is disengaged from immediate appetite and bounded by rationality. But it is a vulgar one when the intention behind drinking is to aim exclusively for intoxication, without paying attention to the multiple dimensions of this “liquid which slides smoothly into the body, lighting the flesh as it journeys past.”[3] The state of intoxication impedes the balancing act, characteristic of wine appreciation, between sense-perception and rationally mediated attention. Indeed, the qualities of wine are recognizable by reason: the ineffable distinctions between tastes and sensations result from sophisticated acts of aesthetic apprehension, where sense-perception and recognition are fully, dynamically entwined. Yet wine is also an alcoholic drink, and as such, its effects on the body include the transformation, weakening or suppression of rationally mediated cognition.

Wine is thus a liminal substance, just like the body’s own chemicals or humours - not only because, like them, it is constituted of many distinguishable but interacting chemical parts, but also and, for our purposes, especially because its experience, like that represented by humoural activity, is necessarily physiological. A historically informed analysis of this liminality can help us understand what it is we are doing, in psychological terms, when we are drinking, evaluating, remembering, comparing, discussing, nursing, abusing, suffering from, or indeed enjoying, the more or less noble, more or less appreciated, more or less prized or expensive grape-based ethylated liquid in our glass.

The history of one of the four humours, the notorious black bile or melancholy, officially begins by positing an analogy of its effect on the soul or state of mind with that of wine. Early on in the influential pseudo-Aristotelian text known as the *Problemata*: XXX, 1, the author - possibly Theophrastus - compared the effects of the ingestion of abundant wine to the melancholic temperament: it triggered modes of being similar to those due to the black bile responsible for the various kinds of melancholy, he assured us. Quiet types might turn “loquacious” after that extra glass, progressively turning self-assured, even “violent, then exalted”; yet another glass and they seemed like idiots and collapsed, he wrote on, very much like those afflicted with excessive melancholy, or like those afflicted with what was then known as the “sacred disease”, and recognizable to us as epilepsy. Others might turn quiet, others courageous, and still others lustful.

In short, the effects of wine on character were here said to be comparable to those of “nature” - that is, of the person’s given, humoural constitution: both determined modes of being, wine for a short time, and “nature” for life. The mode of the effects of each was heat, and just as many melancholic illnesses were due to air, so air was a constituent of wine: air was what accounted for the foam that wine could produce, especially red wine, which was warmer and had more body. Air was also what accounted for the physiology

of lust and arousal, which is why melancholics could be as lustful as were those who had drunk too much wine.[4]

The pseudo-Aristotelian author then moved on to discuss the melancholic humour on its own terms, leaving the topic of wine behind. But it is worth picking up the thread that began in this text, where wine, as a substance one ingests, was a fundamental aspect of a humoural account of passions and character. The tenth-century Persian philosopher and doctor Rhazes, for instance, was referring to the old association of wine with lust when he reminded those afflicted with love-melancholy that they should avoid wine and stick to water - while for the twelth-century Jewish philosopher and doctor Maimonides, wine would help induce the somnolence required to help disperse the vapors produced by melancholy.

In fact the thread can be traced back to the fifth-century BC Hippocratics, for whom drunkenness could itself cause insanity. But there were always variations on the theme of wine as desirable medicine or dangerous drug. The Stoic Seneca, in the first century AD, talked of wine as a substance one could prescribe to boost tranquillity: “Sometimes energy will be refreshed by a carriage drive, a journey, a change of scene, good company, and a more generous wine. Upon occasion we should go as far as intoxication, half-seas over, not total immersion”.[5] The uses of wine were fundamentally different in each case: for the pseudo-Aristotle, wine was a humour-like inebriating substance that could artificially induce a change of character similar to the naturally occurring effects of humours on character. For Seneca, the very intoxicating effects of wine could calm the soul and be prescribed as a salutary adjunct in the health regimen - it had medical effects on the humoural constitution, and therefore on the state of the soul, but these could, and indeed should be precisely calibrated.

Wine was thus prescribed as well as proscribed; the measure in which it was ingested was a measure of character. Wine was a modulator of virtue: to identify the modulations of virtue was akin to identifying the modulations of wine’s effects on character, and the measure of one’s ability to calibrate one’s intake of wine was akin to one’s ability to put reason to use in order to control one’s passions.

2. Earth and blood

In humoural terms, and since the Hippocratics, wine was warm, and therefore warming. This was how, in physiological terms, it modulated character and state of health: it was because wine heated the brain that it caused inebriation, and even fever. Montaigne, despite his at times intense mistrust of physicians and medicine (still humoural in his time), did not doubt the truth of this humoural conceit,[6] and could understand why, for some, wine should be a medical substance first and foremost. As he reported, “Lycurgus ordered wine for the sick Spartans: Why? because they abominated the drinking it when they were well; as a gentleman, a neighbor of mine, takes it as an excellent medicine in his fever, because naturally he mortally hates the taste of it”.[7]

This is not so different from the notion that wine is a uniquely special drink insofar as its effects on the constitution are uniquely special, that its qualities can be gauged in terms of the characteristics it has once inside the organism. But at first blush, it seems very different indeed from the notion of wine as an aesthetic object whose appreciation begins outside the organism - in the glass or bottle, or indeed with the grapes and chosen methods of production.

The notion of wine as a special medicinal substance, endowed with properties able to substantially modify the state of soul and body, depended in part on the notion that these very properties were analogous to those that constituted us. It is not just that the humoural framework in any case emerged out of the idea that there operated a correspondence between the microcosm of our bodies and the macrocosm of the world, that both were made of the four elements and their corresponding qualities; it is also that wine itself was easily understood to be constituted of a body and of a soul, analogously to us.

This idea perseveres to this day - one says of an overaged bottle that it is all body but has lost its soul, for instance. One seventeenth-century natural philosopher, the Dane Nicolaus Steno, reported how, for some thinkers, the “animal spirits” - liminal elements that travelled in the blood and were responsible for perception, sensation and cognition in the various seats of the soul - were akin to “wine spirit”.[8] The analogy between wine and humans still works: the transformations undergone by grape-derived liquids mirror the transformations that our organism undergoes during its life-cycle, and they echo the transformations that wine effects on our organism. Historically, while animal spirits accounted for the physiology of emotion and perception, wine acted on all aspects of the soul, behaving as a medicine for body and mind, either enhancing creativity or obfuscating thought just as melancholy did. A body without its humours and animal spirits was dead; a wine without spirit was, at best, vinegar.

The visible liquid that is wine, in short, was akin to the blood; and its emergent qualities, one might say, were akin to the spirits thanks to which the liquid substance - blood or wine - had the qualities and functions it had. Both were here defined in terms of qualities and related functions. Wine was invested with enough power to be conceived in terms similar to those that characterized blood, always considered the principle of life and container, in some way, of the soul. The idea has a prolonged continuum, from Dionysian rites on. The medieval *Regimen sanitatis Salernitatum* indicated that phlebotomies, however beneficial to overall health, did lead to a loss of the “more productive” spirits in the blood; but then all that was needed to “replenish” these spirits was wine.[9]

Christianity had deepened the analogy between wine and the vital principle in the blood, retaining it as the central element of liturgy it already was in Judaism. And wine remains an effective respository for our ideas about what constitutes a living thing. Indeed, it is a living thing in more than one way: not only does it emerge out of seed and soil, partaking of species and place; and not only is it the product of culture (in all senses): it also has a lifetime and evolves in the bottle, where it develops its temperature and temperament, emerging into the glass endowed with a character, a body and a soul.

Even William Harvey, who, in the 1620s, gave the authoritative, empirically validated account of the circulation of the blood, managed to undermine the usefulness of the old notion that animal spirits were separate from blood by suggesting 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.”[10] Blood was necessary for life, and therefore it was the seat of life’s principle. Blood without its soul was merely a gory liquid signifying death, just as wine without bouquet was vinegar, dead wine. The divine blood of Christ, of course, never had been gore, and only wine could ever have instantiated it.

3. The body’s judgement

No other drink is capable of sustaining the weight of such an analogy, and of symbolizing quite so vividly the blood that defines life. Nor has any other drink come to embody the divinities whose celebration is so often marked by the presentation, pouring, sharing and absorption of wine. Its powerful role in anthropological terms, as Roger Scruton argued, has something to do with its very nature as the product of history, culture, place and transformation, and by the fact that, when one takes it into one’s organism, one is in direct contact with all of the layers that compose it. For Scruton, “the wine enters the very self of the person who drinks it”; it is, he writes, “soul-transforming”. And if the appreciation of this substance is “intoxicating”, it is so insofar as its “mental effect forms *part* of the gustatory quality”, and insofar as drinking wine is akin to “an inward transformation, in which a person *takes something in* to himself”. This is why wine can only be experienced, as he says, by rational creatures.[11]

If one can so easily envision wine as a substance that possesses the organic quality of our embodied, ultimately rational soul, then it understandably has always made sense to cultivate and exploit its powers for religious, contemplative purposes. Medieval and Renaissance scholastic psychology - where psychology denotes views about the constitution of the human soul - had inherited from the Greeks a tripartite system that had divided the soul into an appetitive, a sensitive and a rational part. Reason towered above, but participated of the activities of the two other sets of faculties, while sensation and emotion were profoundly entwined with reason. The body had intelligence, and wine could do it justice. Embodied humans could contemplate the divine realm while bringing wine to lips, drinking in the liquid that was at once the emissary of human communion with divine powers, and the testament to divine immanence on earth.

Wine could also inform the most complex notions of Enlightenment perfectly well. In Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, to take such an instance of Enlightenment culture, Papageno, after drinking the glass of wine he has been longing for, awakes 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 is spiritual, physiological and psychological: but it is also a longing for the transformation that wine ensures. Papageno is dim-witted and incapable of the Stoic-like virtue required of and displayed by Tamino, but he has healthy needs, a

good heart and clear perceptions - in short, a balanced psyche. The glass of wine leads 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 believes) the love he has nearly obtained. A new set of emotions regarding another person, together with a dawning rationality - in the guise of self-criticism - emerge out of this glass of wine. The humoural body's intelligence leads to wine intake, and is exacerbated by it.

The post-Enlightenment body's intelligence has survived the disappearance from culture of the cult of divinities, which has given way to the cult of trends. But the chthonic depth of wine has resurfaced into our modern culture in a particular way. Never before has there been such a widespread cultivation of wine - of its drinking, knowledge, and production - in response to its perception as one of the "good foods". It was never a culturally neutral drink - always both social companion and aesthetic object, and always coloured, in an infinity of shades, by its partaking of deep earth and sky, human origins and divine forces, lust and contemplation. But it has now become a new sort of cultural product, a new artifact, carefully and scientifically grown in more and more parts of the world.

In fact, it is now a commodity, closer in kind to fashion and design than to other alcoholic beverages, insofar as the market now defines products in terms of their place within patterns of consumption, in terms of associations and general styles. We live in an age where these patterns matter, and where a computer could predict that someone who buys, say, Californian Chardonnay is also more likely to spend holidays in, say, the Caribbean and to buy business self-help books, and that someone who seeks out Bordeaux Grands Crus is more likely to summer in Normandy or Tuscany and to buy gardening books. These examples are crude simplifications, of course, but they illustrate the point that wine has become another style accessory that defines the social persona as consumer.

Thankfully, wine is surviving its commodification, because increasing knowledge of it does lead to higher levels of discernment in more places. Consumers are the new worshippers, no longer of gods but of the wine itself; they demand precision, ordering and precise identification. This has led to improvements in wine quality - though also, less positively, to the transformation of aesthetic judgment into numbers. The capacity for appreciation has become a mark of virtue, as if the qualities required of the expert corresponded to those required of the virtuous person, whose rational, sensitive and appetitive souls are united and in harmony. Scientific production and evaluation has changed wine cultivation at the literal root, too. And the body of literature on wine has grown commensurately, from the incidental - Falstaff's paean to sherry in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, for instance - to the specific and scientific.

It is also significant that general adjectives descriptive of states of mind, character, mood and humour - happy, slow, mellow, generous - are less popular for the description of wine than those derived from the botanical world, especially that of berries, and from ordinary objects, such as leather or stone names. Descriptions are now analogies with the natural world, rather than with human psychology, soul and body. The analogy between wine and human is less present to culture now. But regardless of what has been lost,

enough good wine is being made that one's experience of it remains as humoural, irreducible, and necessary as it always was.

© Noga Arikha

ENDNOTES

[1] See Barry C. Smith, ed., *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2007).
[2] See Gloria Origgi, "Wine epistemology: The role of reputational and rating systems in the world of wine", in ibid., pp. 183-197.
[3] See Roger Scruton, "The Philosophy of Wine", in ibid., p. 7.
[4] See Pseudo-Aristote, *Problèmes*, XXX, 1, in Patrick Dandrey (ed.), *Anthologie de l'humeur noire: Ecrits sur la mélancolie d'Hippocrate à l'Encyclopédie* (Paris: Gallimard/Le Promeneur, 2005), pp. 39-41.
[5] Seneca, "On Tranquillity of Mind", in Moses Hadas (ed.), *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca: Essays and Letters* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 105.
[6] See Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 37, *On the Resemblance of Children to their Fathers*: "I experimentally know that radishes are windy, and senna-leaves purging; and several other such experiences I have, as that mutton nourishes me, and wine warms me".
[7] Ibid.
[8] 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.
[9] See Noga Arikha, *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2007), p. 101.
[10] 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.
[11] Scruton, "The Philosophy of Wine", in Smith, *Questions of Taste*, p. 7.