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## The aesthetics of wine



**19 Mar 2015** In view of Ferran's very interesting article *Is wine a tasting note or a drawing?* published earlier this week about 'drawing' rather than describing wine, we are republishing this account of a lecture I gave in Oxford in 2012. Incidentally, I will be returning to Oxford this coming Wednesday at 4 pm to host a wine tasting and talk as part of the Oxford Literary Festival. Details [here](#) in case you would like to join Sheila Dillon of BBC Radio's Food Programme and me at University College.

**25 Sep 2012** Every year *The British Society of Aesthetics* meets at some British university, gathering together philosophers from around the world. Every year they ask an outsider, a supposed expert in a related field, to deliver the Empson lecture given in honour of the literary critic and poet Sir William Empson at the end of the only full day of the conference. Recent Empson lecturers have included the poet Geoffrey Hill; author and art critic Martin Gayford; The Independent's former chief art critic, Tom Lubbock; and Guardian journalist and Turner Prize

*judge Jonathan Jones.*

Of course I was hugely flattered to be asked last January to deliver this year's Empson lecture, and so thrilled that wine was considered a worthy subject to join these established art forms, that I accepted immediately. But as the due date, last Saturday, approached, I became more and more apprehensive. And my nerves were hardly calmed by sitting through the presentation before mine delivered by a hugely confident young female Bulgaro-American philosopher on the extent to which historical inaccuracies could be considered artistic flaws, however beautiful The Queen's College, Oxford (left) looked outside. Below is a rough transcript of my talk on The Aesthetics of Wine. *But what I should have done, of course, is suggest that they asked our Alex to give the lecture instead.*

I feel as though I am here under false pretences. Admittedly I read Maths and Philosophy at Oxford (St Anne's 1968-71) in the first year of that faculty's existence when the total number of students was three, which meant I had Michael Dummett as a tutor and went to small seminars led by A J Ayer. My moral tutor was Gwyneth Matthews but it would have been the novelist Iris Murdoch if I'd got there one year earlier.

I'm particularly happy to be at Queen's again as our son studied Ancient and Modern History here a few years ago.

And I must thank, even if I can't pronounce, Ole Martin Skilleas, who is here today and who kindly sent me the fascinating and extremely well-informed book he wrote with Douglas Burnham, *The Aesthetics of Wine* - even pointing me in the direction of the most relevant chapters.

But I'm afraid my philosophical skills, such as they were, have long since atrophied to have been replaced by an obsession with wine, to the extent that I really wonder whether I can supply you with sufficient mental grist at this august event. For me, serious, contemplative thinking has been replaced by reacting to external objects and tracing relationships between them.

Because I know so much more about wine than I do about aesthetics, I hope you will forgive me for concentrating on the former at the likely expense of a deep understanding of the latter.

I think I may have been invited on the strength of how I fell in love with wine in the first place... My encounter with a bottle of *Chambolle-Musigny, Les Amoureuses 1959* truly was an aesthetic experience. I knew nothing about wine at the time, but in that glass I could perceive not only a huge amount of sensual pleasure but the sense that in this glass was history, geography and the human hand in some form. The beauty in that wine lit the flame for a lifetime's fascination with wine for me.

But strangely enough **beauty** is word rarely used in wine literature. In the 72,000 *tasting notes* [now approaching 110,000 - JR in Mar 2015] on JancisRobinson.com, only 366 contain the word beauty or beautiful, roughly 0.5%

Why? I suspect we're looking for more precision. We know that if we were to submit to simply visceral reactions to wine, we wine professionals would be laughed at. We need a complex, arcane and, it has to be said, extremely imprecise language to validate this wonderful way of earning a living - perhaps not unlike you philosophers?

I was amused, trying desperately to understand a bit more about your field, to read about Schmidhuber's theory that 'the aesthetically most pleasing observation might be the one with

the shortest description'. I have long said the ideal tasting note is just a 'Hmmm' of pleasure.

But instead of such expressive shortcuts we have built up and use a **language of tasting** which does have some very particular distinctions and difficulties.. There is no external, objective scale of colours or musical notes we can all agree on. Tasting is a very private, hidden activity, making it very difficult to make comparisons with each other's experiences. How do I know I am tasting what you are tasting, not least because you almost certainly have such different sensitivities?

So, when we describe the smell of a wine, we describe aromas/flavours, we do it by referring to other more objective flavours. But our language is extremely imprecise (we use 'spicy' to describe Gewürztraminer when that grape doesn't smell of any spice at all, for example).

On the palate we note the structure, vital statistics and basic tastes such as acidity, sweetness, bitterness and occasionally saltiness and umami, and then form an overall judgement based on balance (a popular aesthetic attribute) and, often, persistence.

We wine writers are used to being laughed at by the general population because of our **language** and, sometimes, **behaviour**.

But from the point of view of those who study aesthetics, we are accused of being involved with something that is of a somehow **lower order** than the fine arts.

Why should this be? Let me first examine a few of the possible objections to wine's being considered an object of genuine aesthetic experience that Burnham and Martin raise in their book.

*Wine is alcoholic and therefore, because it annihilates judgement, can't be aesthetic*  
Roger Scruton has written well on this topic, defending mild inebriation as part of the experience of aesthetic judgement of a wine. BUT there are a number of **teetotal** wine experts. Alcoholic intake is not necessary for an aesthetic experience of wine. In fact it may well muddle things, and I'd say intoxication is a completely separate experience from wine appreciation. Indeed, inebriation may even be the enemy of aesthetic judgement (cf enjoyment) of wine. **Tasting and drinking** are two very different experiences.

*Wine and art are appreciated in very different ways*

But as Burnham and Martin point out, and you have all surely discussed many a time, something doesn't have to be art to inspire aesthetic judgements (just think of a tennis match, for instance).

But the big difference with wine, as opposed to other art forms, is that every act of judgement involves **destruction**. A unique bottle has to be opened and the wine tasted before any judgement can be made. And, even the biggest, most commercial brands, can be made only in finite quantity with, generally, just one vintage a year.

I'd argue that wine and art are appreciated very similarly by most people: letting it wash over you and noting a reaction = sensory reaction.

The expert response: the same process but informed by very much more experience, detail, comparison, etc. But how much knowledge is sufficient before someone is reckoned a competent judge? Presumably it increases gradually on a scale, as in other fields.

*Isn't wine appreciation entirely subjective?*

I think subjectivism is important; we all have different sensitivities and preferences. But to accept subjectivism as the whole story would be to deny wine **competence**. I can admire a wine without liking it. I might describe a wine by saying that it would appeal to those who liked a certain style more than I do.

*Isn't wine appreciation all about snobbery?*

This is a very outmoded view, I think. Wine may have been the drink of an elite once but now it's the social lubricant of choice in virtually every soap opera.

And nowadays the most admired producers are not first-growth owners but small-scale artisans. You don't need to possess a fortune to play the wine game any more.

And anyway there is the **democracy** of taste - anyone who is not anosmic for some reason can taste wine. (I talked at some length about the topics covered in [Take one nose](#).)

*If you accept that wine can be judged aesthetically, what about other drinks?*

Actually I wouldn't prioritise wine over top-quality examples of the likes of tea, single malts and olive oil, for instance, although because it has been around longer, and has (therefore?) stronger and more widespread religious connotations, wine has more spiritual connotations.

And what about tasting food? Scruton suggests that tasting food as opposed to wine is a different process altogether because you have to chew it - but what about soup? I think there is a strong argument that certain foods and meals can be the subject of aesthetic judgements.

Scruton also says a smell is quite different from the taste of wine because 'it makes no contact with the body at all' but I don't agree with him that what we experience via nose is inferior to what we taste in our mouths. There's a very similar physical interaction, even if with a vapour rather than a liquid.

*Isn't wine trivial compared to great works of art?*

Here we have to consider the depth of response. (And are our feelings about wine coloured by some guilt about intoxication?)

I can still remember and be moved by that Chambolle and the best 1947 Cheval Blanc I've been lucky enough to try. But wine has never made me cry, unlike music, literature, film (even though there is presumably more deliberate and intended manipulation of the emotions in these artistic endeavours).

I don't by any means think wine is trivial, but I certainly accept that it is not as intellectually and (intoxication aside) emotionally potent as a great performance or painting. I'd be interested to know from you philosophers to what extent you accept a hierarchy of fine arts? [They later said they did.]

However, I think in some respects wine does have some other sorts of superiority over more obvious works of art - certainly in dramatic contrast to how it was viewed 40 years ago. Today wine is hugely popular around the world and as an interest, with strong cultural overtones, enjoys remarkably high cultural status. If you can afford it, you start your wine collection, cheaper than a yacht...

And if price is anything to go by, wine price movements closely mirror fine-art indices.

But wine's great attribute in particular is the **elemental nature** of its production. (Viz all those

fortunes poured into vineyards, and not just in Napa Valley and Tuscany but in southern France, South America, South Africa, almost anywhere wine is now produced - the ultimate vanity project.)

Wine production is viewed as a way of getting in touch with the earth. As the late ex ad man John Dunkley of Riecine in Chianti Classico put it, wine production presents one person with the rare possibility of being responsible for a product right through from primary production and processing to selling and distribution.

And, most importantly, every bottle expresses the earth and that tiny point on it where it was grown, presenting us with a unique expression of that spot, and, what we all seek nowadays, traceability. Wine, with the exception of the most industrial examples, is geography in a bottle and, unlike most things we can buy, we can tell from a glance at the label precisely who made it, where and when.

Wine itself can be beautiful but there is also the beauty of geography - as I was forcibly struck by when pondering this lecture in the Douro Valley last weekend, for example. Here is a quite stunning landscape entirely devoted to wine and vine. The beauty of the surroundings is part of the beauty of a wine, if you have been there - and luckily for us the vine loves a mediterranean climate, and tends not to be grown in industrial estates or busy city centres.

**Terroir** is adduced as quintessential to wine aesthetics by Burnham and Martin for the reasons outlined above, but this may be a little bit of a red herring because blended wines can certainly inspire aesthetic judgements - Penfolds Grange, for example, which is not made with a specific grape source and geographical expression in mind. There is a certain different beauty in the craft of blending, of which the Australians are past masters. I then told the [Bernard Pivot Apostrophes story](#) when my fellow (French, male) guests on this TV show were so prejudiced against the Penfolds Grange I brought to the studio.

This leads us to the question of **judgements**.

We need to consider ritual v judgment - wine is heavy on ritual and wine snobs are probably the worst, yet (oddly) socially feared, sorts of snob.

Sensory v aesthetic judgement - is this a relevant distinction? Competence - how real is it and how might it be measured? Perhaps by the ability to blind taste, or to react 'correctly' to a wine, or to describe it well? I then described the [MW exam](#) and its various tests and rigours.

Could a novice appreciate the aesthetics of wine? They might well have Hume's 'delicacy of the imagination' and I would certainly argue they could form a sensory reaction, but they'd need more experience to be a competent judge.

Taste and memory - Proust's madeleines etc - are very closely conjoined and much of expert judgement of a wine consists of retrieving perhaps thousands of memories. We professional wine tasters eventually taste, a complex process, without a second thought, making myriad aesthetic judgements, but would have great difficulty describing the process.

Of course we are not tasting whole tranches of a wine, just individual bottles - which is an important consideration since fine wine evolves in cask/tank, bottle and glass. We are judging one particular example of one particular wine at one point in its life.

Describing wine may be very different from simply experiencing it.

What is an aesthetic judgement of wine? Not writing an MW tasting note, I would submit. That's a bit too formal and normative. Instead it's responding to a wine with all your being and experience.

Schmidhuber also distinguishes between beauty and **interest** of American writer John Cheever, who said in a TV interview in the late 1970s 'The first canon of aesthetics is interest.'

So what makes a wine interesting? Or rather, and perhaps more usefully, which wines do NOT involve aesthetics? I'd have to say that I find it difficult to reconcile aesthetics with many of the wines I taste at a supermarket tastings, so many of them are basically industrial, large-scale products without particularly specific geographical origins. To be judged aesthetically, I think a wine has to be capable of presenting the potential beauty of a place and its effects, or the skill of a sublime blend made with only quality considerations in mind before it can be an object of genuine aesthetic experience, but with that qualification I can see no conflict whatsoever between wine and aesthetics.

The fact that there are fashions in wine - just as in other artistic fields, which are presumably founded on aesthetic judgements - surely suggested strongly that wine inspires aesthetic judgements.

I must point out that throughout all these considerations I have been struck by so many parallels with music.

Alas I have run out of time and have not yet even touched on scoring, *Supertasters* and lots more, but I'd like to allow time for questions.

### **Question time**

The most interesting point for me was when one of the philosophers admitted that he had always discounted wine because it seemed to have no meaning but that I had almost convinced him that it had geographical meaning. Was this, he asked, what in other fields of art would be called the medium, through which the practitioner or artisan expressed themselves? I suggested yes but that there was considerable variation in how much the medium was favoured over the practitioner.

There was also a question about how the Marxist ideal could be applied to wine production, but most of all the philosophers seemed particularly unwilling to abandon the idea that inebriation was an essential element of wine appreciation.

I left the philosophers just before drinks time.