

Acid tests.

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where the analogy with Bonaparte breaks down, even though his relationship with Cécilia was very much akin to Napoleon's with Joséphine – except that the Emperor divorced her, whereas Cécilia left her husband. Reza's fly-on-the-wall political diary is captivating because of its impressionistic style, which superbly filters out the ambient political noise. But she is uncertain about what sense to make of the residue. Despite

the remarkable access she is given (she attends all the meetings of his inner sanctum), and Sarkozy's commitment to play the game of transparency, he remains elusively opaque. The book thus moves from its original quest for political meaning to become a contemplation of a man struggling with the evanescence of time. This is the campaign trail as we have never seen it before: we catch glimpses of Sarkozy being abused – "putain de ta mère" – by

a woman in Marseille, being lectured on Palestinian rights by the Algerian President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika; cursing at his entourage for failing to meet his expectations (he really does swear a lot); describing, without any apparent sense of irony, his enthusiasm for the film *The Silence of the Lambs*; musing idly about love; listening in a childlike trance to a piece of jazz; making jokes in the poorest of taste about Jacques Chirac's hearing difficul-

ties; and, all the while avidly, relentlessly, obsessively craving Reza's approval. She is struck by his smugness: "si je n'existais pas il faudrait m'inventer". But behind the bluster, she also senses a real fragility, a "sentiment d'insuffisance" which drives him forward, ever seeking to reach the mountain summit. And what lies behind it? The promised land, perhaps – but also the possibility of a vast, unending, ineffable emptiness.

In 1995, a German oenophile and dealer in fine wine called Hardy Rodenstock hosted a magnificent tasting of rare wines in Munich. It was one of a series of sumptuous events he has organized over the past few decades; at another, similarly opulent occasion, held in 1998 at the Hotel Königshof in Munich, he arranged a vertical tasting of 125 years of the legendary dessert wine Château d'Yquem; earlier, in 1989, he had prepared a horizontal tasting of a wide variety of wines from 1929, including a large-format bottle from Château Ausone in Saint-Émilion, which all other collectors in the world had forsaken as drunk and disappeared.

Although the luminaries of the wine trade frequented these feasts, the often maligned American wine critic Robert Parker tended to avoid them. Parker, who is disparaged by competitor critics for his market-dominating, 100-point wine-rating scale, and reviled by status-conscious vintners whenever he scores their offerings below the commercially magic ninety-point threshold, saw little point in attending, since the wines served, however magnificent, were completely inaccessible to his primary readership. Still, he did find his way to the 1995 Munich tasting, a three-day extravaganza he later described as "the wine event of my lifetime". There he tasted wines that most of us may read about but will never experience, wines where the pursuit of perfection asymptotically approaches its limit. Just as well for us, perhaps, since it may be a sin to drink them, akin to taking pleasure in the exquisite taste of a species of fowl we make extinct by eating its last known member. Then again, such musings are of little import: these wines, if they are to be found at all, are in any case far too expensive for most of us.

They were not too expensive for Rodenstock, who has made a handsome living procuring and selling the world's rarest wines; and to his guests, who were also his clients, he was lavish beyond measure. His largesse was perhaps understandable in that his trade depended on his reputation for parveying the finest of the fine. Still, that commercial concern, however legitimate, hardly exhausted his motives on that fabled weekend. Rodenstock did not shy away from presenting himself as a connoisseur of the first rank, a man generous and eager to share his riches with others of comparable discernment, those best placed to extract the fullest and most articulate pleasure from their drinking, those with palates attuned to nuance and subtlety, those with the conceptual repertoire needed to verbalize the affective richness of their experience. Even then, however, in the case of Rodenstock's 1921 Pétus, the adjective-rich Parker was reduced to gushing, "Out of this universe!" So that would be over 100? When Parker is derided by competitor critics for his 100-point scale, it is often with a tinge of disdain for the grotesqueness, the characteristically American

crassness, of the very idea that wine, the child of the subjective, could be quantified. So the illustrious British critic Hugh Johnston scoffs, calling Parker's system "pernicious and silly", and frets proprietorially that something so facile and jejune "can only do harm to wine in the end".

What harm is that? Well, perhaps next we shall have guides weighing up the collection of the Louvre on a similar scale, so that we can slide quickly by Hans Holbein the Younger's "Portrait of a Young Girl Smiling", a meagre if respectable sixty-seven, in favour of Raphael's "La Belle Jardinière", which scores a handsome ninety-two. Or is it a ninety-three? How, after all, are such judgements made? Are they not, among other things, absurdly fine-grained? These worries bring to the fore a point too easily overlooked in oenological circles, that difficult questions about quantifiability and quality are not peculiar to the wine world.

Rather, they arise from a more fundamental worry about taste: is not taste merely subjective? Many suppose so, embracing the contention as self-evident or, if pressed, mousing, for its credence value, the Latin tag "de gustibus non disputandum". If they are right, what is the "merely" in their "merely subjective"? If the "merely" is to mean that there is no fact of the matter as to what makes one wine better or worse than another, that a wine is only as good as it tastes to the subject currently quaffing it, then questions of criticism appear largely idle. However much Parker and his detractors squabble, in the end there is only pleasure and its enjoyment at a particular moment by a particular subject: just as "push-pin is as good as poetry", in the words of Jeremy Bentham, as long as the pleasure of the subject remains constant, so plonk is as good as Pommard.

Enter, then, the philosophers; and note, straight away, that Bentham's often partially quoted dictum places him on the side of the quantifiers, at least as Mill represents him in his essay "Bentham", writing that Bentham "says, somewhere in his works, that, 'quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry'". These philosophers see, then, a false contrast between the unquantifiable subjective and the quantifiable objective. Plainly, for ill or good, and as nearly any wine retailer will attest, consumers tend to

agree: they rely almost slavishly on expert scoring systems. Even as they espouse subjectivist sentiments about taste, that is, consumers by their actions defer to the wine-scorers as experts in the field.

Perhaps there is nothing amiss in their doing so. Consider Hume, himself an unrepentant subjectivist, in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste", as he reflects on the connoisseurship and good taste of the true critic: "Strong sense united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty". In the realm of wine, evidently, Hume himself improved mainly by practice with claret.

The authors collected in *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine*, all like Hume great champions of self-improvement, address themselves to questions of subjectivity and taste, quantifiability and pleasure, perception and its objects, the role of knowledge and judgement in perceptual discernment, and the possibility of expertise in the arena of fine wine. They are mainly philosophers, but also winemakers and critics, linguists and biochemists, all participants in a conference called "Philosophy and Wine: From science to subjectivity", held at the Institute of Philosophy in London. One contributor, Roger Scruton, gamely departs from the analytical orientation of the volume in favour of an oenological matter he rightly regards as unduly neglected by philosophical drinkers: the nature of intoxication and its role in the cultivated life. Scruton brings welcome passion to his inquiry, and while the reader cannot be certain that he was gathering data on his subject matter even as he composed his chapter, we do hear him waxing increasingly lyrical towards its end: "And what we taste in the wine is not just the fruit and its ferment, but also the peculiar flavour of a landscape to which the gods have been invited and where they have found a home". Nothing else we eat or drink, he reckons, "comes to us with such a halo of significance, and cursed be the villains who refuse to drink it".

While his fellow contributors are surely anything but villainous, they mainly engage sober topics soberly, and regularly to good effect. They prove themselves well up to the task of situating wine-centred questions within a larger framework of questions about taste and perception, subjectivity and objectivity, and aesthetic appraisal more generally. Several authors display a welcome conceptual control and reflective sophistication about these topics; and the book earns its keep if only because these are traits badly lacking

in even expert wine criticism. Wine critics, including Parker, Johnson and the ever delightful Jancis Robinson, who recommends the volume warmly in a brief foreword, all retreat to subjectivist cover when pressed on the worth of their recommendations.

Need they be so shy? The wine world wants its experts; some inevitably come forward to claim the mantle; and then expert and amateur demur, apologizing for the hierarchy of authority on the grounds that no one can really say that one wine is superior to another. One chapter in this book, "Wine Epistemology", dissects these tendencies in an illuminating way. Its author, Gloria Origgi, a member of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique and the Institut Jean Nicod in Paris, concerns herself with the social epistemology of wine, by regarding the ascendancy of connoisseurs in the wine world "as an interesting example of a more general process of epistemic appraisal that underlies our acquisition of expertise in so many different fields of knowledge and practice". Along the way, she notes that whatever his strengths of palate – and no one should doubt that they are formidable – Parker earns his legitimacy at least in part by being an unimpeachable champion of the proletariat drinker, a poor pleb who knows himself too often beaten into submission by the grand tradition and price of wine, but who is also keenly aware of his own limitations in that vast world. Parker's wine credentials turn out, Origgi urges, to be no less moral than oenological.

From her perspective, then, as in other domains, expertise in the wine world proves to be more than craft knowledge alone; it is also socially sorted and externally validated. It is primarily for this reason, left unassayed by Origgi, that the trappings of authority make more than connoisseurship possible: they simultaneously open a door to all manner of chicanery. This helps explain why connoisseurs like Hardy Rodenstock tend to hold themselves aloof from careful scrutiny of the provenance of their portfolios of fine wine for sale. Rodenstock, or Meinhard Görke as he was called at birth, is not only an intrepid procurer of improbably illustrious and wildly expensive bottles – ranging from the forgotten stash of Thomas Jefferson to the lost hoard of the Tsar – but an expert wine blender of the highest order. When challenged to certify the authenticity of his offerings, Rodenstock grows by turns incoherent and vague. Undoubtedly possessed of a fine palate, such a man deflates the pretensions of taste by asking those who wish to possess it – including especially those who wish to be seen to possess it – to pay handsomely for the privilege. Better, perhaps, to study the several instructive and engaging essays in *Questions of Taste*, even while pondering its editor's opening assurance that "Philosophy and wine have many connections and some similarities".

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