

# WINE AND LOSS

*A lecture given at 137 ESSEX ST  
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Here is my question: why is wine fundamentally related to loss? I am going to ask the same question in different words: why is wine by nature tragic? These are related to a question that is so bald that I have no interest in addressing it directly: why do we take wine so seriously? These are some preliminary inquiries to help us address that question in a way that is not merely sentimental or narcissistic.

This is my first time doing this. It is an experiment, a learning experience. So, it is true to everything that the Scholium Project does. Thank you for being part of it. Whatever goes well will be built into the next lectures. I am excited by the prospect that we are going to learn together. And drink together. I am very excited to have created an event that explicitly conjoins these two activities, and does not banish them to opposite corners of the room-- or hours of the day.

I am going to have to begin by lecturing in the least collaborative way. I want to lay out some definitions so that you know what I am talking about when I use certain words. I am glad that you signed up for this lecture, even though it is advertised as being part of a Metaphysical Lecture tour. But what the hell is "Metaphysics?" Insofar as it has any reputation at all, it has a bad one. The word conjures up crystal balls, or late adolescent males spouting Nietzsche. I do want to talk about Nietzsche tonight, but I don't want to spout. And I want to begin by telling you what I mean by "metaphysics."

## **1. METAPHYSICS.**

The word has an ancient history, but in the world of ancient greek philosophy, it is a relative newcomer. I am going to ask you to fix a timeline in your mind. Start with Homer, the poet of the Iliad and the Odyssey. He wrote in about 800 BC. Think of this as analogous to the beginning of our Renaissance, the emergence of Greek Fine Art, and, rather formal, articulated thinking, out of a crude dark age. Then think ahead to a time of great sophistication, or urban civilization, that looked back on Homer as the first germ and foundation in the history of this urban modernity. The urban modernity is Athens of 500 BC, the time of Socrates, Plato, Aeschylus, Sophocles, of the first historians, Herodotus and Thucydides. Aristotle is kind of like the Dwight Eisenhower of these philosophers. Solid, not flashy, concretely modern; he can look back on his predecessors, but treat them more like colleagues, peers-- not just historical figures. In spite of his being thoroughly modern (think of the cars of Eisenhower's day, preeminently "modern"), Aristotle has no distance from his predecessors, and so no irony or post-modern quotation or bracketing. He first makes metaphysics into a discipline, but still does not use the word. The word, even though it comes from ancient Greece, is younger, newer than Aristotle. It is from a period more like our own, that looks back to the past with reverence (for this, we use the word "classics"), or with hauteur and sentiment at once (postmodernism, hipster return to the basics). The word is attached to Aristotle and to one of his most important and difficult works-- but he never used the word; it was coined by scholars who already regarded him as a classic. He called what he was doing "first philosophy"-- the philosophy that is highest and fundamental to all other philosophy. "Meta-physics," on the other hand, means, in Ancient Greek, simply what comes after--  $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha$ -- physics. But is not a bad word and

catches clearly and succinctly what Aristotle thought that he was doing. The later critics called his first philosophy "metaphysics" because they quite correctly grasped that it was a discipline that one could engage in only after physics.

**[BEGIN POURING WINE #1.]**

Physics, for Aristotle, is no nothing like our physics. Nothing like the physics of Newton or Einstein or anyone in between-- nothing like the physics exemplified by the geometrical drawing of a projectile's path that adorns nearly every Scholium Project label. The meaning of that diagram for me is the subject of another lecture-- or one that we can broach in the question period. In Aristotle's physics, there are no diagrams-- though there are questions about bodies in motion. But the bodies are not preeminently rocks or cannonballs-- as they seem to be for Galileo, for instance. Rather they are cats and trees. The reason for this is that the Greek word from which we get our word "physics" is **φυσικ**-- the word for nature. The study that must precede and ground first philosophy for Aristotle is the study of nature. And it turns out that what he means by this is something simple, even if difficult: the study of things at work, being themselves. A typical question in Aristotelian physics is: what is the nature of a cat? The answer for Aristotle is: the nature of a cat is precisely a cat at work, being a cat. This is something that we can come to know through experience, but experience focused and honed through careful attention, study, and critical judgment.

It is now time for a drink. I have served a wine that is particularly metaphysical. I mean something merely metaphorical by this, almost only joking. The study of nature is the study of bodies in motion and is always rooted in the corporeal, and in some sense in flesh. Aristotle makes clear that rocks have a nature, but they do so in a sense that is attenuated compared to the nature of plants and animals. And our study of them always involves our flesh-- our senses-- as much as it involves our minds. But metaphysics is different-- it is by comparison cold and distant; the stuff of theorizing-- of pure mind, not the senses. It must leave bodies behind if it is to succeed.

We call some wines "cerebral." This is an already tired, but pardonable, metaphor; and by it, we merely mean that the wine makes us think. Sometimes, we also mean that it does not give us pleasure, but only makes us step back-- from our senses, or at least from the hedonistic side of our senses-- and reflect on the wine and its relation to other wines. You will pardon me for hopping around so much, but to characterize this wine, I need to leave Aristotle for a minute and jump to Dante. You know that he wrote a long poem called the Commedia, sometimes called by us, the "the divine comedy." You know that he separated the work into 3 long poems, each devoted to a different world-- to the 3 possible world that an immortal soul could experience after death: the Inferno, the realm of souls condemned to eternal punishment; the Purgatorio, the realm of souls which and can must perfect themselves before they can take their place in Heaven; and the Paradiso, the realm of eternal communion in the presence of God and all the saints. The Inferno is famously carnal, full of passion and bodies in motion; full of action. You can imagine a movie of the Inferno. The Paradiso is famously wordy-- the only things that happens there are contemplation and discussion-- Crystalline souls, that don't even really have faces, contemplating of the equally invisible divine essence. There is no motion-- no change of place, nor change of any other kind. Paradise is eternally self-same-- in fact, it is difficult for Dante to confront how Paradise can have a history-- how it is possible for a soul to "enter", that was not already there for all time. One cannot even easily use the word "conversation" for the talk-- in Paradise-- there are no conversions, no changes of opinion-- all of that has been worked out in advance. For this reason, some people regard the Paradiso as cold, ethereal-- cerebral. But beautiful.

This wine is an instance of such beauty to me. It is not even the prime or best example of such a good wine. In fact, one reason why I chose it is because I think that it does not compel you to agree with me. It is a good wine for conversation. As I move

into the next section of the lecture, I would like you to reflect on these aspects of this wine:

- I. Its structure. It has a beginning, middle, and an end. Like a story or an argument. They unfold in both time and space. And they are related to each other. You might find one stronger, more compelling than another-- as you might find the first act of a play more compelling than the last. Think about this.
- II. Its cleanliness. It is not fleshy. I don't mean clean as opposed to dirty, microbial-- more on this below. I mean clean like the Paradiso: a realm of light. Clean like a certain kind of interior design, like a museum space. Uncluttered and everything in reveal, nothing hidden, obscured.
- III. Its now somewhat paradoxical relation to pleasure. I would not call this wine "cerebral." I get a pleasure in my mouth, in my gut, from this wine-- not just a cerebral pleasure-- for instance, not the pleasure that could have come from admiring a chess move. I *feel* the pleasure. The wine is not only beautiful, but beautiful in a way that engages and depends on our senses, and that in a certain sense never leaves them behind.
- IV. Lastly, I would like you to consider this wine's youthfulness. It is not only in the bloom of youth, it is so preeminently youthful that it is hard for me to imagine it any other way. In this narrow sense, the wine is kind of timeless, outside of history.

I am going to posit this wine as the vinous representation of the Metaphysical.

And I am going to concede this from the beginning: if metaphysics comes after physics and depends on it, why is our *first* wine the metaphysical one? In a certain sense, should it not, like Dante's Paradiso, be the last, the *culmination* of our tasting? I leave this question open.

## **2. HEARTBREAK**

Some of you have been to wineries; all of you, I figure, have seen photos of them. Even those of you have never seen a photo of the inside of a winery-- I bet that you have an image in your mind. And that image will include tanks. What I mean by a tank is a vessel to some degree upright, made of wood or stainless steel or concrete, with an aperture at the bottom for emptying it, and an aperture the top, for venting it, and probably to allow a human being to enter to clean it. They can be of almost any size, and dressed up with all kinds of devices and articulation, but fundamentally this is what I mean. I want to distinguish them from a completely different kind of vessel-- not a barrel, but a bottle or a milk carton. Reflect on this: the bottle and the milk carton do not need two apertures precisely because we can pick them up and tip them over. Liquid can come out, and air go in, through one and the same opening. So let me offer this definition of a tank: a tank is what I mean by a vessel that cannot be emptied by tipping it over, and so requires two aperture for emptying [though not really for filling-- you could fill through the top without a second orifice, just one bigger than whatever you were using to introduce the liquid].

Some barrels are tanks: in Burgundy, and in some other places, it is traditional for a barrel to have a hole at the bottom, plugged when the barrel is full, that functions in exactly the same way that a bottom valve does on a tank. And if a barrel does not have another barrel sitting on top of it, it is essentially like a milk carton. I can tip it over to empty it.

We are now, by the way, discussing the physics of tanks and barrels.

Now I want you to think about equipment design. This too requires a drink.

[SERVE WINE 2.]

The wine that I have chosen for this moment does not represent equipment design. It looks ahead in the lecture. It is a wine that represents heartbreak. I will not speak much about this now, but I will say this: it is not heartbreaking because of what has happened to it. We have called certain bottles of corked wines "heartbreaking" because they are spoiled and we cannot enjoy them-- or simply cannot come to know them. I mean heartbreaking in a very different sense: I mean heartbreaking in the sense of what it promises. That you know there will be pain at the end. I say no more and return to equipment design.

Wine is a liquid with weight, many times heavier than the air around it. This is its physical nature, in the modern sense of the word. As a liquid, it flows, it does not hold its own shape; because it is heavy, it flows down. You have to work to stop it. It wants to sink into the earth and disappear-- this is the pagan Greek in me talking, but it is at worst a poetical characterization. Not totally inaccurate. But this is no less true of water than it is of wine. Yet I am now about to claim that it essential to wine to flow down, into the earth and disappear. It is essential to wine, natural, in Aristotle's sense, to end up on the ground. It is thus natural for wine to be stored in vessels that are liable to disaster; it is as if this is our unspoken, perhaps even unrecognized, concession to its nature. It is natural-- appropriate-- to store wine in vessels that keep it in proximity to disaster.

Let examine for a moment the tragedy of Case Basse, of the irreplaceable wines that were destroyed in Montalcino when a disgruntled employee opened the valves on a series of tanks, and allowed 6 vintages of wine to flow through the drains and into the earth. I had several thoughts about this horrible act (I can't even imagine suffering something similar with my own wines; and I thought about the similarly cruel loss of a whole vintage of one of Eben Sadie's wines in Priorat) from what one might call a technical or operational perspective. My first thought was-- why were there no locks on the valves? Valves are made these days with reinforced channels in or beneath the handles that allow you to padlock them, to prevent one from turning them without first unlocking the lock. It is also possible to put a locked cap on the orifice of the valve itself, so that even if you open the valve, nothing can flow past the cap until is unlocked and removed.

The first time that I saw either of these devices was at a relatively modest winery in Napa that had some outdoor tanks adjacent to the parking area of a restaurant on highway 29. I noticed one day outside of harvest, when there were not workers near the tanks every moment, that on every tank either the handle or the cap, or both, were locked. The next time I saw such measures was at a very fancy Napa winery, that makes \$100 cabernets, but that also admits a fair number of visitors, all on carefully escorted tours of course. I noticed that all of the tanks--right in the middle of the very well secured, opulent, winery-- all had locked caps-- no doubt to keep tourists from causing any loss, whether of an ounce or a whole vintage. To some degree, I thought that the locks were also for show-- to emphasize to the guests how valuable the wine was, to what degree care was exercised over it.

And so I thought, why did Gianfranco Soldera not have locks on these tanks?

I will tell you why-- and this is why the loss is fundamentally and precisely tragic: because he understood the nature of wine and wanted to make wine in concord with that nature, not against it-- even in face of danger and loss. He understood that wine is always on the way to disaster, that it always already on the way to loss and disappearance. This its nature, a nature that has nothing in common with the nature of water.

I don't know anything at all about this crime, and even less about Gianfranco Soldera himself. I make this claim because I have tasted this wine once or twice. I make this

claim not because I know the man, but because I have tasted the wine. We will return to this somewhat outrageous claim.

### **3. ROT**

May I begin this section with another definition? Fermentation. In fermentation, a very small living thing eats some form of sugar, or a close relative of sugar (call them "carbohydrates"), and gets nutrition from it, without requiring the presence of oxygen to feed itself in this way. The microbes that I am interested in are all single-celled; some are yeasts, some are bacteria. Some produce alcohol; some do not. I am not really more interested in alcoholic fermentation than in the other sorts-- at the moment. What I am interested in are the kinds of foods and beverages that we consume that depend on fermentation:

1. Cheese: cheese is the result of many kinds of microbial actions on milk; some of which take place in the presence of oxygen; some not. There is no cheese without this microbial activity. Let us consider yogurt here too, and even kefir. The fundamental action is the consumption of a sugar particular to milk, lactose, by a bacterium that transforms it into lactic acid. This has many effects on the the whole complex that is milk: it raises its acidity, making it less attractive to other microbes; it changes its affinity for water, leading to concentration; it changes the structure of proteins, leading them to clump and form curds. And it takes an attractive food source off the table.
2. Pickles: pickles too depend on the action of microbes. You can have pickles without the use of salt or vinegar, but not without microbes. Vinegar too is simply the result of microbial activity; it arises more quickly in the presence of oxygen, but can be produced by fermentation. In this case, bacteria consume the various sugars found in fruits and vegetables, and, as in cheese, convert them into acids. Dehydration and protein transformation have almost no role here, but the production of acid is crucial.
3. Ham and Salami: the curing of meat seems distant from fermentation, but it differs from the other modes only in concentration and speed, not in any fundamental way. Here too bacteria eat sugars, produce acids, drive out water, and modify proteins. In a certain sense, the use of salt is not what preserves the meat directly: rather it is used to create an environment favorable to certain bacteria and molds, and not others. The cure itself can thus be understood simply as the culturing of certain organisms.

In each one of these, a microbe attacks what counts for us as a kind of fresh food, and, by consuming what it is interested in within this food, it transforms the fresh food into a preserved food. In each case, the transformation is parallel to but different from a form of spoilage. What I mean can be imagined as a kind of race: imagine a field of microbes representing many different types. They are all present at the beginning of the race, and they all have one aim: to consume as much of the food available. All of them eat the same thing-- but here the resemblances stop. They differ from each other subtly, but substantially. Some run faster in warmer conditions, some in cooler; some need more water, some less. Some need oxygen; others are more perfect fermenters and can run without it. Some start fast but finish slowly; some just the opposite. If one type of microbe gets a lead that is too substantial, spoilage occurs. If a good microbe starts fast but cannot finish, spoilage occurs. The race is never decided until all of the food is consumed.

In this way, cheese is the result of a certain activity; a slightly different activity results in spoiled milk. Or maybe it is better to regard it historically: cheese is the result of one set of organisms winning the race, rather than another. Salami depends on a certain activity, a certain history; but spoilage differs by only the slightest degree-- a different initial temperature, a different concentration of salt, a different level of moisture-- and suddenly the dominant population is one set of microbes and not another. In each of these cases, the difference between excellent salumi and disgusting meat that you have to throw out-- the difference between this set of microbes winning the race and not this one-- this is not a difference measured in percentages but in parts per thousand or even parts per million.

Let me posit on the basis of this brief survey that preservation in the face of spoilage is central to the understanding of fermentation. Let me add this: the preservation does not occur through the marshaling of some forces different and opposed to the forces of spoilage. Just the opposite: preservation is achieved through the husbandry and management of exactly the same microbial forces that would cause spoilage. Preservation is simply the flip-side of spoilage. What is remarkable about being engaged in these activities-- winemaking, cheese-making, curing meats-- is that you spend your whole life hovering on the edge of disaster.

#### **[POUR WINE 3.]**

Now let me say a little bit about what you might call degrees of preservation. Most salamis cannot spoil-- the process of preservation is irreversible. They can dry out too much, or become stale or kind of oxidized-- but they will not rot. They are fixed. In a certain sense, they have no more history; they are eternally in a salami paradise. The same is true of certain hard cheeses; but not to exactly the same degree. Certain well-aged cheeses can still support new molds that will affect their flavor, and in changing them, we might say that they spoil them. But the cheeses are nearly invulnerable-- and though they do not have everlasting life, their period of preservation can seem like an eternity compared to the shelf-life of unfermented milk.

The reward for listening to another definition is more wine. We will pour this now; I will tell you later why I chose this wine now.

## **4. DECLINE AND DISSOLUTION**

Wine is very different from cheese and salami-- for many reasons. Let us consider first of all the extreme example of a successfully filtered wine, bottled under exceptionally sterile conditions. That wine cannot rot in bottle. But it can and will fall apart-- separate from the biology of wine, its chemistry is by nature fundamentally unstable. A new bottle will age better or worse for some period of time, and then will inevitably decline. We know this every time that we open a bottle-- that it even if our experience of the wine right now is not one of decline or dissolution-- that this dissolution inevitable. Here I introduce a beautiful bottle of a wine that I love and have loved.

#### **[INTRODUCE NAUCRATIS EX TEMPORE]**

I will say nothing about whether I think that it is in decline now or not; but this is what I ask myself: what pain will I feel when this wine is no longer a pleasure to drink? When I will no longer look forward to opening it? This too is heartbreak, the heartbreak that every wine brings with it, that is natural to wine.

Now what if the wine is made in a very different way? What if the microbial life of the wine is not suppressed in any way-- in a certain sense encouraged? What if the wine is bottled unfiltered? There are so many questions of technique, so many different decisions, and different kinds of decisions-- I do not want to delve into that omnibus now. But I will open the door to it, and will be happy to talk about the decisions and

techniques in the question period. For now, instead, I want to introduce another wine that exemplifies what I am talking about to the highest degree.

*[POUR WINE 4; Talk extempore about this wine.]*

This wine clearly hovers over the abyss of rot and spoilage. It is utterly alive-- almost like a fish tank, it is so full of swimming creatures, still living, eating, no doubt reproducing. It is an example of a type, of a type that is more and more common, more and well received, more and more understood because of one of our guests. I am amused to reflect that I used to make what I now call "alice Feiring reds" long before I had ever met, or even heard of Alice.

This wine for me has many virtues; chief among them today is that this wine makes palpable that all wine is about spoilage. If the Kellerberg was the metaphysical wine, this just the opposite. I don't just mean that this wine is biological-- that it is the embodiment of a theoretical attention to flesh. I mean that this wine is so carnal, so bound to the body and NOT metaphysical that what it embodies is flesh itself. The Kellerberg is somehow about gazing and purity; this is about flesh and SAUSAGE MAKING. The Kellerberg could make you forget how intrinsic rotting is to wine, how every wine hovers with fragility over an abyss. This wine lets you taste the abyss.

Lastly, the Kellerberg is a wine of eternal youth. It does not make you think ahead to the eventual dissolution of the wine; instead it proclaims an eternal present of unchanging vigor-- whereas the proserpina embodies its own past, and clearly forecasts its own decline. And in this sense, the Kellerberg is a kind of wine of oblivion. It allows us to forget its place in time, and even allows us temporarily to forget our own place in time, our own eventual dissolution and disappearance.

Yet this wine that reminds us of its-- and our own-- undoing, this wine is not tragic.

It is an extreme version of its type, and precisely because of its extremity, it cannot be tragic. I mean by this that is like a crazy man on the loose-- his wandering is sad, calls out for care or protection, but is not tragic. Only the downfall of a good person, says Aristotle, is tragic. I do not mean that the crazy person on the loose is bad-- I mean that his craziness takes them out of the realm of moral responsibility, and in this sense, he cannot be good. Whereas tragedy-- and I think that we all sense this whether we agree with Aristotle or not-- is what occurs to someone acting with some kind of intelligence, strength, and success in the moral realm-- and in spite of that intelligence, strength, success-- they fail, and fail catastrophically. Tragedy is the fall of the good.

And this wine, as much as we might be interested in it, or pleased by it, or simply fond of it-- it just outside of the realm of good and bad-- or so close to the edge-- I grant that this is a matter of opinion-- so far from the center of the world of wine, that its inevitable downfall-- it might spoil in your glasses here and now, before I finish this sentence-- that this would have none of the heartbreak of the inevitable decline of the Naucratis. Even though it helps us feel the abyss, it is outside the realm of the tragic.

## **5. TRIUMPH AND TRANSCENDENCE**

At this point, I want to speak hardly at all.

*[POUR WINE 5; Talk extempore about this wine.]*

This wine is a triumph. Yet it is tragic, more so than any wine we have yet tasted. This wine is grand. Like the other scholium wines, it proclaims its microbial nature, it shows its place over the abyss. Yet it is stronger than any of the others; whole, not just well-balanced, but beautifully balanced, noble. And at the same time, it is like the Naucratis, and utterly unlike the Kellerberg-- it is already close enough to its eventual downfall that even as we revel in the wine, we see ahead to a time, perhaps not so far from now,

when the wine will fail-- when its greatest virtue might be only to remind us of its noble past. This for me is the tragedy that is embodied in the nature of wine-- that precisely at its peak, the great wine proclaims its own decline.

Nietzsche calls this a kind of knowing, the tragic wisdom of the Greeks. It is too much to ascribe wisdom to wine itself, but this, I think, is in the very back of our minds when we call a wine "noble." We mean that the wine is not only excellent in a series of non-metaphysical ways, but also that it neither tries to hide its own origins in the realm of rot, its place over the abyss-- that it has not been so polished, cleaned up, sterilized that it reminds us more of Coca-Cola than it does of a farm or a vineyard-- nor that it tries to hide its impermanence, its fragility, its pointing toward death. This in turn is the one of the foundations of our interest in wine. We crave not merely the simple and delightful. We crave the complex, the contradictory, the paradoxical-- but even more, we crave the doomed.

This is the tragedy of Case Basse: Soldera could have put locks on the tanks, but by that small act, he would have begun making a very different kind of wine.