

Speculations: Wine

William Morris

I

Christ was perfect. Christ turned water to wine at the wedding at Cana. Did Christ create the perfect wine?

Yes. Perfection is possible in mortality. The wine was not perfect in the sense that it achieved some Platonic ideal. But it was perfect—complete, finished. The most the wine itself could be. The best. The grapes grown with the perfect amount of water and sun, drawing the right amount of minerals from the soils of Galilee, and each individually plucked at the peak of ripeness. Aged to maturity. The sugars and the tannins perfectly balanced. The bouquet fruity and floral. The mouth-feel exactly right. A bloom of esters. An explosion of perfect flavor. A perfect wine for the occasion.

No. How could it possibly be perfect? No person has the same taste buds or palate or memories—nor were any of the guests at the same point in their drinking—hence the comment on saving the best wine for last. A perfect wine would have to adjust for those variables from person to person and from sip to sip. It was not a magic wine that always presented perfection to each person with each taste. It was just wine. Created from water. A good version based on the wines Jesus had drunk in his life. No more, no less.

II

The two of them drank the wine. What were they supposed to do? The little boy was dying from AIDS. The family was poor as dirt. The wine was all they had to offer.

They drank the wine. They had explained and explained again. But the father said that it had been mulling for hours, reducing down in a small, cast-iron kettle on the brazier outside. The uncle said the level of alcohol was close to nil.

They drank the wine. They drank it from small cups of thick, brown, textured plastic that had clearly been washed a thousand times. They sat hunched forward, their white-clad arms on their wool-trousered knees. They sat and nestled the cups in both hands, like a baby bird or a hymnbook, or an offering. Their sips were slow, tentative. Like new kisses.

They drank the wine. It was thick and sour and warm. Mulled but not spiced. It was molten grape skins. It was syrup. It was sin. It was heated grape juice concentrate. It was just-mixed Jell-O ready for the fridge.

They drank the wine. And contemplated the blood. Yes, His blood. But also his blood. The boy who played on the thick carpet rug with a Transformer some foreign aid worker had given him months ago. The boy who was pale and thin and dying. The boy whose blood was wine turned to vinegar.

They drank the wine. And thought it might give them courage to again offer a blessing. Anoint the boy with oil. But the courage didn't come. The parents clearly didn't want it. Or rather, they couldn't muster the hope to even begin to want it. They were beyond hope because their only hope was the unrealistic hope of raising enough money for a trip to Istanbul where some vague miracle cure awaited.

They drank the wine. But one poured half of his cup into the other's and that one, after a second's outrage, dutifully finished it because he was afraid to hand back an ungrateful, unempty cup.

They drank the wine. And afterwards smelled each other's breath and discovered that they didn't smell at like all the men on the streetcars in winter. And they walked crisply in a line. And the alphabet easily rolled backward off their tongues. They felt no buzz, no loss of social inhibitions, no loosening of anxiety. They were clearly not in an altered state. No chemistry was at work—only the bitter alchemy of their visit, the thick sorrow and sour despair trailing from them as they trudged the dirt road to the highway to catch the van back to the metro stop, back to sector 2, back to Bucharest.

III

Part of me wants to laugh along at this stuff—“Two Buck Chuck! Repent and snob no more!”—but going from “dying child in Bucharest” to the Jeff Foxworthy-esque “you might be a Mormon” section (and then on to the fashion puns later) is a tonal shift worthy of Dramamine. I find I don’t laugh along even when I want to, I become resentful of this seemingly mercurial author whipping my neck around, etc. Maybe there is some hard and fast logic behind this sequencing, but I can’t make it out.

If you refuse to eat beef Burgundy because of the wine, you might be a Mormon.

If you refuse to eat beef Burgundy because of the beef, you might be a Mormon.

If you don’t make beef Burgundy at home or order it in a restaurant but will eat it if served to you at a luncheon or in a friend’s home, you might be a Mormon.

If you make beef Burgundy at home with a non-alcoholic red wine, you might be a Mormon.

If you make your beef Burgundy with Two Buck Chuck and bring it to a rolling boil for a good twenty minutes, you might be a Mormon.

If you make your beef Burgundy with a California Burgundy and let it gently simmer for five minutes, you might be a Mormon.

If you make your beef Burgundy with a French Burgundy and take a quick sip before pouring the wine in, you might be a Mormon.

If you have a glass of wine along with your beef Burgundy, you might be a Mormon. But only as long as you either (1) feel as if you’re doing something totally transgressive, or (2) feel guilty about it afterward. Or both.

If you make beef bourguignon instead of beef Burgundy, then you might be a Mormon. But you definitely are a food snob. Repent and snob no more!

If you make bœuf bourguignon instead of beef Burgundy, then you served a mission to France. We’re so sorry. Now get over yourself and call it beef Burgundy like the rest of us.

IV

Spring fashion took an abrupt turn to the macabre this week-

end as the runways proliferated with looks inspired by recent world events. Although a few designers tried the subtle approach, others went straight to crimson-stained robes—Armanis so freshly pulled from the wine-vat they dripped down the catwalk. Givenchy playfully titled its collection “Trampling Out the Vintage” while Dior (in a clever twist on new wine, old bottles) simply trotted out last year’s looks in a myriad of sanguine shades. The market for haute couture has, naturally, seen a huge drop-off of late, but the major fashion houses seem committed to soldiering on come hell or high water. Whether the *Grapes of Wrath* look will also dominate the fall collections is anyone’s guess; but insiders say that, based on recent orders, the major houses seem to have split into two camps: one focused on ash- and dun-colored mohairs, the other on radiant white woolens.

Speculations: Oil

I

The rustic town of Zarapeth brings us this small batch, extra virgin, cold-pressed oil which first presents itself with a very clean but brassy aroma. It smacks the palate with an overwhelming burst of bitter green mixed with chicory and pepper but quickly mellows into hints of clay, grass, and rain. It is not terribly dissimilar from that found in the homes of certain Aaronites, but without the smoky after notes. The only complaint is that it lacks that certain robust culmination that one expects from a fine oil, instead finishing with a feeling almost of acacia honey or dew on the tongue.

Source: Widow Estates; Score: 38/50.

II

My lamp has burned too long. The nozzle is rimmed with soot and veined with delicate cracks, the wick black and barely flickering. The mouth is yellowed and rancid. The base is sweating oil. My eyes are bloodshot, my fingers stained terra cotta, my robes ripe with sweat and smoke. I am faint with prolonged, ever-heightening anticipation.

And yet the bridegroom tarries. The feast remains uneaten, the wine long since turned to vinegar. The foolish virgins have returned from purchasing oil and, tired of waiting, have left again for the bazaar to browse costlier items: silks, spices, perfumes.

I had been told that he would come in my lifetime. But the wait has been so long that my hope has evaporated. I still have faith that he will come. My conviction remains undimmed. But I no longer believe what I was told. There must have been some mistake in the prophecy. Some minor miscalculation. What's more, the longer I have waited for the joyous hour, the more it has receded. Where once I experienced it as the near present, it now is a distant future.

Once, when my hope began to fade, I saw death as a release. But now I am not so sure. Every wick replaced, every careful refilling with oil is a witness, a tally of fidelity, and as the hours pass, I fear a sudden cry in the night. I came prepared, but I am no longer ready.

III

A hierarchy of oils for consecration as determined by the teachers' quorum of the Glenwood Ward of the Richfield Utah Stake in case no extra virgin olive oil is available.

Tier 1:

Non-extra virgin olive oil

Tier 2:

Vegetable oil

Canola oil

Safflower oil

Sunflower oil*

Tier 3:**

Peanut oil

Sesame oil

* There was some dispute over whether safflower oil and sunflower oil were the same thing.

**One young man argued for the inclusion of coconut oil; but since he had never seen it and so couldn't verify color, odor, taste, etc., coconut oil was not included in the hierarchy.

All other nut oils***

Tier 4:

Motor oil****

IV

One day as my grandfather was preparing vials of consecrated oil to give out to the members of the high priests' group, he spilled one, right as he was about to recite the prayer of consecration. His response: "Aw, shiii-ooooot!"

V

In its container of glass, metal, or plastic, it sits dormant, latent. Holy but not static: on its way to rancid. On the crown of the head, it quickly anoints itself into the scalp and the shafts of the hair, its presence soon displaced by the weight of hands, the warmth radiating from suited bodies, the deliberate words that fill the hopeful silence. But in between, there is that moment when it is perched on the forefinger, held there by its viscosity and purpose, golden, catching the light, almost forming a drop, barely emitting a hint of its fruity aroma. There in that moment, it is itself and more than itself: consecrated and pure; organic yet refined; the material presence of its chemistry and immaterial symbol of light and healing and royalty: ineluctably yet rather simply, plainly yet supernally oil.

***Walnut oil, in particular, is of concern because of the potential for allergic reactions. The tragedy of brownies baked with walnuts in them was also discussed as was whether it was a greater crime to bring dry Rice Krispies treats or brownies with walnuts to a fireside.

****The general consensus, however, was that motor oil was the coolest substitute and the one most likely to happen—a point backed up by at least two verifiable (happened to a relative or a friend of a relative) and one apocryphal (somebody just heard it somewhere) stories about auto accidents/sudden illnesses happening on lonely stretches of the interstate in Nevada, Idaho, and Arizona.