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Dirty but Pure

Remarks on the Grammar of Natural Wine

Martin Gustafsson

1.

In *A Philosophy of Dirt*, Olli Lagerspetz compellingly argues that the uses of anthropological and historical data in academic discussions about dirt often show more about ourselves than about those foreign or past people that the discussions ostensibly deal with. According to Lagerspetz, such discussions tend to reproduce our own viewpoints, self-conceptions and anxieties, rather than provide a fair account of how the significance of dirt and cleanliness vary between cultures and over time: “A major function of our representations of the ‘pre-moderns’ is to serve as building-blocks of *contemporary* self-understanding” (Lagerspetz 2018, 155; original italics).

Lagerspetz is not saying that our contemporary self-understanding, thus articulated, constitutes one monolithic conception. On the contrary, he shows that this self-understanding itself contains tensions, which come to the surface in the historical and anthropological debates. Thus, whereas there is widespread agreement that pre-modern people had and have much lower hygienic standards than modern Westerners (an assumption that itself is far from clear, since, as Lagerspetz observes, there is not *one* neutral way of measuring levels of hygiene), there is an ambivalence in our own attitude towards this alleged difference between ourselves and the pre-moderns. Before the Second World War, the dominating attitude among both academics and social reformers was that the presumed increase in hygiene, and the fostering of self-discipline that allegedly came with it, constituted definite improvement and

progress. This attitude lives on in much contemporary public discourse, but during the last five or six decades a wish to question the idea of such univocal progress has grown stronger. Wasn't something important lost in this "civilizing process"? Didn't modern hygiene and self-discipline mean that people were deprived of a more intimate, uncomplicated and spontaneous relation to their own bodies, their fellow human beings, and the natural, living environment on which we all depend for our biological survival? Wasn't an instinctive but deep sense of such dependency replaced by a misdirected and ultimately vain wish for mastery and control, paired with a conception of the material world as "external" to our isolated, individual egos?

My aim in this paper is not to discuss to what extent Lagerspetz is right in his criticism of the contemporary use of historical and anthropological data to bolster such notions. Again, I find his objections largely compelling. My purpose is more modest. I will look at one example of how questions of the sort just formulated can resonate with *us*, Westerners living in the 21st century. The discussion I will investigate is not particularly "academic" (even if it sometimes makes use of academic work), and it is often polemically heated at the expense of clarity and charity. However, its relatively unguarded character is useful for my purposes, since it lays bare, in illuminating and often amusing ways, pictures and habits of thoughts which, if Lagerspetz is right, underlie also more sophisticated controversies.

The discussion I will investigate is the extensive debate during the last two or three decades over so-called "natural" wines and wine-production. This is a very sprawling and in many ways frustrating discussion, and my investigation will necessarily be partial and tentative. My aim is just to add some material to consider for readers who are interested in the sort of topics that Lagerspetz discusses in his book on dirt. I will leave it to the reader to draw conclusions from this material. Treat what follows as food (or drink) for further thought.

2.

The term “natural wine” has no precise, officially established definition. This is sometimes seen as a good thing: “No rules please. If the bureaucrats define natural, we can be sure that the movement will be co-opted” (Lynch 2013, 238). However, many proponents of natural wine would like to have an established definition, since the lack of any official legal accreditation “leaves the term open to abuse and thus to criticism” (Legeron 2014, 18). In any case, there has gradually developed a fairly robust list of conditions on which most producers agree. For a wine to be natural, the vineyard must be cultivated according to organic or biodynamic principles; the grapes must be harvested by hand; the fermentation must be spontaneous, which means that one relies only on wild yeasts that are naturally present at the skin of the grapes, and not on added cultured yeasts; there must be no or minimal filtration and fining; there must be no chaptalization (addition of sugar to the fermenting grape juice to increase the alcohol content), and no other additives except a minimal dose of sulfur (some producers do without sulfur altogether, and this is seen by many as the ideal). Fulfilling these conditions involves a lot of manual work in the vineyard, without any use of pesticides, fungicides, insecticides, herbicides, artificial fertilizers, and so on – and then minimal intervention in the post-harvest wine-making process. In that process, the producer is supposed to “just let nature take its course” (Legeron 2014, 61).

To understand why the natural wine movement has gained such force during the last couple of decades, a bit of background history is needed. In the 1970’s and 80’s, wine production went through a revolution. Farming became thoroughly mechanized, and the use of additives increased enormously. Today, the EU allows around 60 additives in wine, and no list of ingredients needs to be given on the bottle or the box. In many non-EU countries even more additives are legal. In the 1980’s, the wine world saw another new phenomenon: the power of the wine critic. I use the definite singular intentionally, since there was indeed one critic who was the dominating voice: Robert Parker, whose reviews in his own journal

The Wine Advocate had enormous effect on the market. Parker was a very talented and knowledgeable wine connoisseur, but his dominance was still unhealthy in several ways. He invented the now common 50–100 scale for quantitatively ranking the quality of wines, and even if he himself warned against taking the scale too seriously, wines were and are still often sold with a reviewer's numerical value given on the shelf. If Parker graded a wine in the top-90's, that would multiply the price many times. So it was not surprising that wine producers tried to manipulate their wines in order to achieve such high scores. And even if Parker was in fact quite a nuanced and sensitive critic, many producers did their best to make their products satisfy what they took to be his taste for relatively full-bodied varieties of classical French and Californian wines. At the same time, more and more money flowed into the wine business, and this led to an almost surreal increase in the price of the most prestigious wines. Today, it is difficult to find a bottle of 2015 Petrus for less than 4000 euros, and, according to wine-searcher.com, the average price of one bottle of 2015 Romanée-Conti La Tâche Grand Cru Monopole is 9167 euro.

Parker himself hated industrially produced wines, but one effect of the developments just described was that the wine market became divided into two segments: one of mass-produced, manipulated and relatively cheap wines with a lot of additives, and one luxury segment of very good or great wines that only rich people could afford. What threatened to disappear were traditionally made but modestly priced local products from less prestigious vineyards and districts – the sort of everyday but well-made wine that used to give wine-producing countries there enormous plurality of different, locally characteristic flavors.

Thus, traveling in Beaujolais in the 1980's, the writer and wine importer Kermit Lynch sadly noted:

Here in Beaujolais one sees that the nightmare can happen. A recipe, a formula, can take over an entire region. [...] When I see the wine writers taking the current formula Beaujolais seriously, treating it like wine, awarding points and stars, discussing the “banana” aroma, for example, I want to scream, *THESE ARE NOT LIVING WINES*. These

are wine robots rolling off the assembly line, millions and millions of them. (Lynch 2013, 186)

According to Lynch, the true spirit of Beaujolais – at that time kept alive only by a couple of very old wine makers – was the exact opposite of such predictable mass production:

Start by accepting Beaujolais as a gift of nature, with all that implies, including the cliché: *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth*. Value what nature gives, quirks and all. If you ever find a real Beaujolais, glory in its virtues, its immediacy, its spirit, instead of swirling and sniffing and seeking size and grandeur. Americans, comparative newcomers to wine, seem to look for a Great Experience every time they uncork a bottle. (Lynch 2013, 187)

Lynch, himself an American, was an important early proponent of wine as “what nature gives”, and the just quoted passages exemplify an attitude and a sort of rhetoric that has become very typical of proponents of natural wine. I will now look at bit closer at what this attitude and rhetoric involve.

3.

Let me begin, however, with one of wine's traditional companions: cheese. In the early 1990's, an EU attempt to prohibit non-pasteurized cheese met with widespread protests. Among the protesters were King Charles III (at the time, Prince Charles of Wales), who argued that the proposal “should strike terror into the hearts of any trueborn Frenchman [...] and all other people [...] who find that life is not worth living unless you have a choice of all the gloriously unhygienic things which mankind – especially the French portion of it – has lovingly created”. Isabelle Legeron, one of the most important natural wine advocates today and the author of what has become a standard introduction to the topic, *Natural Wine*, quotes King Charles approvingly, and says that we should try to think of wine in similar terms (Legeron 2014, 73). So, what does “unhygienic” mean when it comes to natural wine?

Natural wines are sometimes described by their champions as “dirty” (there is even a natural wine store in Australia called “Dirty wine shop”). Why? Perhaps the most direct reason is their unfiltered character: natural wines are often cloudy and contain a fair amount of sediment. However, similarly to how King Charles uses the term “unhygienic” in contrast to “pasteurized”, the dirtiness of natural wine should be understood more broadly in terms of a tolerance and, indeed, a welcoming of high levels of bacteria and other microorganisms. Even if all wine contains microorganisms (since they are all fermented), the levels are *much* higher in natural wines than in industrially produced ones.

Natural wine enthusiasts often describe this as a celebration of *life*. As Legeron puts it, “life is key”, since this flora of microorganisms “protects, defends, conquers, grows, reproduces, sleeps, ages, and dies. This is fundamental to what makes wine wine, rather than a simple, sterile, manufactured alcoholic drink” (2014, 49–50). Indeed, according to Legeron, such celebration of life permeates the natural wine farmer’s whole self-conception and world-view:

For these growers, what they do goes well beyond the wine itself. Instead, they promote a philosophy, a way of life, which undoubtedly contributes to the profound appeal of their wines to people across the globe. In a disconnected world that worships the Money King, these are people who chose otherwise and who did so well before it became popular. They chose this route out of conviction, of love of the land, and a desire to nurture the most fundamental force of all – life. Be it human, animal, plant, or other life forms, natural growers are primarily, as Jean-François Chêne, a natural producer in the Loire, puts it, about “respecting the living above all else.” (Legeron 2014, 95)

It is important to see that this “respect of the living” goes well beyond the use of environment-friendly farming methods, even if such methods are of course essential to the natural wine movement. Particularly interesting for my purposes is a contrast that is made everywhere in the natural wine literature, on the webpages of natural wine producers and so on, namely, the contrast between the monotonous predictability of industrial products and the *capricious*

character of life. Lynch’s celebration of “what nature gives, quirks and all”, and his complaint about the Beaujolais wines of the 80’s as “wine robots” rather than “living wines” invokes precisely this contrast. Similarly, Legeron writes about how natural wine growers are “working with unpredictable wildlife” (Legeron 2014, 58). Such unpredictability means that natural wine-making is *risky*. However, as the champions of natural wines never tire of telling us, such risk-taking is required if one wants to achieve something of real, human significance. As Legeron puts it, “Natural growers don’t make wine to a formula or for a market. Instead, what they share is the pursuit of excellence, based on a love of land and life, in its most complete and wondrous sense. It is like walking a tightrope without a safety net”. She goes on to quote Bernard Noblet at the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti: “It is only when you stand at the edge of the precipice that you have the most beautiful view. It’s here, as you risk falling into the void, that you see the extraordinary – overhead, underneath – and it’s here that greatness is possible” (Legeron 2014, 105).

Indeed, it is a crucial part of the self-image of the movement that it takes *courage* to make natural wine. The character of this courage is quite interesting, however. For it is not the courage to be active and to dominate, but, on the contrary, the courage to be *passive* – to *not* control the processes of nature. The natural wine grower must learn to accept that these natural processes involve “an incredibly intricate web of inputs that is infinitely more complex than anything that man can create. Nature, in all her profound subtleties, can always do it better” (Legeron 2014, 42–43). The Champagne producer Anselme Selosse explains how he came to understand the need for such passive courage:

As a young winemaker, it was out of the question that I be subservient to nature. I was determined to be the boss. I dominated the vines and wines entirely. And, although I was making wine exactly as I had wanted to, none of the results captured my interest. That is, until I realized that my way of being was totally uncondusive to the creation of great art, since the originality, or singularity, of a place, which I so

fervently sought, was in fact entirely dependent on my giving it the freedom to express itself. (Quoted in Legeron 2014, 40)

4.

In the summer of 2020, the Hollywood star Cameron Diaz branded what she called “Clean wine”, and this label has started to spread. The descriptions of Clean wines may sound quite similar to the descriptions of natural wines: “no unwanted additives”, “no added sugar”, “100% Organic grapes”, and so on. My sense, however, is that natural wine growers despise Clean wines. This should not be surprising, given the grammatical landscape I have just mapped, in which natural wines are described as dirty and unhygienic, and in which this dirtiness is connected to life, unpredictability, risk, and passive courage. A quick look at the webpage of Diaz’s brand (drinkavaline.com) suffices to realize the difference. Clean wine is not only filtrated (“transparent”, as its sellers like to say), but is all about control and predictability. Its primary selling-point is that wine consumption should in no way interfere with the presumed wish of successful women to stay slim, young, healthy and good-looking. It is true that natural wine producers often claim that their own products are healthier than industrially produced wines, and, also, that they give less of a hangover. But the spirit of the natural wine movement is nonetheless very different from that of Clean wine.

However, I don’t want to give the impression that the natural wine movement is without internal tensions or conflicts. In fact, it is possible to identify two quite different and potentially conflicting attitudes among natural wine enthusiasts. These two different attitudes sometimes clash overtly in debates about what should be the overall aims of natural wine production, but they can also be present in one and the same person, which results in apparent inconsistencies in what that person says or writes about natural wines. As we shall see, Isabelle Legeron is an important example of someone who tries to harbor both these attitudes, and this makes her passionate

arguments for natural wine production somewhat obscure at certain important points.

The first attitude can be described as one of free experimentation and creativity. There are plenty of natural wine producers who feel imprisoned by and therefore transgress the detailed and strict appellation rules that have for a long time governed wine production in many countries, including France and Italy – rules about which sorts of grapes, fermentation processes, and so on, are allowed in which places. The experimental attitude of such producers is one of playful anarchism, in contravention of what is seen as stale and off-puttingly restrictive legal frameworks. If you enter a natural wine shop in Berlin or Paris or London, you will find yourself surrounded by these playfully anarchistic experiments, bottled in artsy bottles. Not all are great, but they are often a pleasure to consume: juicy, very drinkable, and relatively low in alcohol.

The second attitude is a more traditionalist one, where one aims at returning to how wine was made and how it tasted prior to the “nightmare” of mechanization, additives and commercialization. Here, the emphasis is on the hard-to-define concept of *terroir* – what Legeron characterizes as “a sense of place’, a unique, irreproducible combination of factors (plant, animal, climate, geology, soil, and topography, etc.) in a particular year” (Legeron 2014, 40). These traditionalists do not see established appellation rules as boringly restrictive laws, but as rules that crystallize the experience and wisdom of generations of wine growers who have noticed how some grapes, fermentation processes, methods of farming, barrels, and so on, are in harmony with the particular place at which they are working. The aim of traditionalists is to produce a wine that reflects the place in having flavors that are not possible anywhere else. Hence the necessity of the sort of passive courage that I talked about above: only by daring to be subservient to nature can one produce wines that genuinely express their place of origin. It is no coincidence that Nicolas Joly, the grand old man of natural wine production in the Loire Valley, is also the founder of the growers’ association *La Renaissance des Appellations*, and calls *terroir* “a glorious concept”.

Even if they don't like the epithet "clean", a favorite characterization of natural wine among both experimentalists and traditionalists is *pure* (Legeron uses this term over and over again in her book). For the experimentalists, natural wine is "pure" primarily in the sense that it contains no additives. But the traditionalists also talk about a "purity of expression", and by this they mean precisely that the flavor of the wine constitutes an undistorted expression of the place and time at which the grapes have grown. Being a wine connoisseur has always been taken to involve a capacity to identify origins and years of different wines, and, according to the traditionalists, this is not a matter of mere braggadocio, but manifests a real understanding of what wine is about.

In sum, the grammar of natural wine builds an arc from dirtiness to purity, via the notions of life, unpredictability, risk, courage, passivity and terroir. However, this grammar is not a matter of unanimous agreement, but allows for tensions and potential conflicts among natural wine enthusiasts. Let me end this paper by saying a little more about what such conflicts can look like.

5.

In 2013, Kermit Lynch published a 25th anniversary edition of his celebrated collection of travel reports from different wine regions in France, *Adventures on the Wine Route*, from which I have already quoted above (the book was originally published in 1988). The new edition contains an added epilogue, "Twenty-Five Years Later", in which Lynch, among other things, reflects on the natural wine movement. He is proud to have been one important early promoter, and has mostly good things to say about it. However, he also has certain reservations and worries, largely due to the fact that, as Calvin Trillin has put it, purity has a price – namely, purists. According to Lynch,

the natural wine movement is showing some self-destructive tendencies, and it is the fault of the true believers who in their zeal leave their palates behind. It is a faith-based religion:

"Hey, wait! This wine is spritzzy and oxidized."

“Well, you don’t have faith. If you had faith, you’d overlook those problems and drink the wine because it’s natural.” (Lynch 2013, 238–239)

Lynch ridicules such “true believers” – often urban hipster sommeliers – who refuse to admit that natural wine production *is* really risky because natural wines do collapse into undrinkable vinegar more often than wine with additives. The so-called “bottle variation” common among natural wines is not only a sign of life, but a real problem for wine sellers, restaurants and ordinary consumers. Natural wine can taste really bad – why else would the production of it involve courage? It is no coincidence that people who want reliable products have used sulfur and other additives. Non-natural wines may be a bit dull, but for a restaurant owner who wants to remain in business they can be a blessing.

Lynch insists that good natural wine is good because it tastes well; it does not taste well because it is natural. The palate is the final arbiter, and letting the fact that a wine is natural adjust one’s criteria of what is good and bad is to put the cart before the horse. This puts him squarely among the traditionalists within the natural wine movement: the point of natural wine-making is that it can make wine taste as good as it used to do. The idea of naturalness should not fundamentally alter our conception of what constitutes a good wine.

By contrast, Isabelle Legeron argues that “the best way to enjoy natural wines is to try to forget everything you know about wine, and start afresh” (Legeron 2014, 73). She compares it to the first time you taste kombucha (a fermented tea drink): “The first time you try it, it is surprising. You know it started off as sweet tea, but now it has a distinctly sour flavor profile and is slightly fizzy. But since you know these traits are meant to be there, you let go and begin enjoy what you’re tasting. This is because the unknown is scary” (ibid.).

This sounds like a pretty radical form of experimentalism, according to which the natural wine movement should aim not only at changed practices of wine production, but to a paradigm shift in

our very notions of what constitutes a good wine. It also sounds dangerously close to something that the hipster sommelier in the Lynch quote above would want to agree with – namely, the idea that failing to appreciate a natural wine means failing to let one’s taste undergo the sort of conversion that natural wines call for.

Interestingly, however, there are many passages in Legeron’s book where she sounds much more like a traditionalist. For example, she is obviously very happy to make the reader aware that the Domaine Romanée-Conti – perhaps *the* most prestigious wine producer in the world – has always produced wine in a “natural” fashion (Legeron 2014, 105). So, is she contradicting herself? Perhaps. However, it might be arguable that when she tells us to forget everything we know about wine, she has in mind readers who have had their sense of what a wine should taste like completely shaped by industrialized wines. If so, “starting afresh” would not mean throwing traditional conceptions of wine quality overboard, but to begin understanding such traditional conceptions for the first time.

Whether or not Legeron’s seemingly contradictory statements can be reconciled in this fashion, I think it is undeniable that the two attitudes that I have identified above are characteristic of the natural wine movement as it exists today. They sometimes co-exist peacefully, but it also happens that their hard-liners run into sharp conflict with one another. Not that such tensions and conflicts are necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps they should instead be seen as expressions of the life of this movement itself.

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