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‘The drink has called it into being’¹: a year in a wine column

Abstract:

For a year, between 2009 and 2010, I wrote a wine-review column in a free regional newspaper as a passionate amateur. I conceive of the wine reviews as creative nonfiction and of myself as a role model for my students who have the option of writing on food. Genre has its courtiers and jesters and, in itself, it is bound for change as any other cultural phenomena. I think of my wine-writing practice as destabilising that specific genre, attempting a transformation of it into an expanded field, via the efficacy of writing and wine as art. It is contentious to place winemaking in the realm of art. What I want to do is commend art, which includes creative writing and winemaking, for its efficacious capacity. This is also a contentious proposition. I think of my wine writing as public intellectual practice, linking wine as art to culture, politics and history, when, on the whole, wine columns stick solely to descriptions of the wine. Wine writing is about technical details, but it is also about what wine—its appearance (bottle label and wine colour), aroma and taste—sets the dreaming, remembering mind doing, and what links emerge to contemporary issues in the practice of the everyday.

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For a year, between 2009 and 2010, I wrote a wine-review column in a free Australian regional newspaper, the *Northern Rivers echo*. I still maintain a blog (Costello nd) where the column notes were first written.

I write about wine as quaffing, because I'm conscious of myself and an audience as lacking a high level of disposable income.

I write as a passionate, amateur wine-drinker, because I have no scientific knowledge of or formal training in wine. But I come from a drinking family. My father drank Resch's Pilsner and DA which he had with the Sunday roast. I used to sit with a lemonade outside a Drummoyne pub, on a Friday evening when all the Catholics, including us, had come to the nearby fish-and-chip shop for the evening meal. When the pub's bar-room doors swung open, I saw my father talking and joking with other men sitting on bar stools, holding onto their glasses of beer, the strong smell of yeast and hops drifting through the bar-room doors out into the street. We lived next door to a barmaid who worked at another Drummoyne pub. We drank Ben Ean Moselle and Porphyry Pearl, before the Australian wine industry and wine consumers became more broadly sophisticated. My mother drank sherry and always asked for a glass of chardonnay. At Christmas time she famously (within our family) made the luscious, sweet, creamy cocktails: Strawberry Blondes and Brandy Alexanders. As a young woman I took a tour of the Hunter Valley wineries. Much later I lived in South Australia for over twenty years and it's there I decided wine was an art form. The Barossa Valley, McLaren Vale, Adelaide Hills, Clare Valley and Coonawarra produce among the best Australian, and international, wine.

I conceive of the wine reviews as creative nonfiction. I am engaged in creative writing—both fiction and creative nonfiction—as an arts and pedagogical practice. I think of myself as a role model for my students who have the option of writing on food in their undergraduate unit Writing Genre.

I think of my wine-writing practice as destabilising that specific nonfiction genre; I play with the genre of wine writing, attempting a transformation of it into an expanded field, via the efficacy of writing and wine as art. As Gian-Paolo Biasin (1993: 24) notes, genre can be 'rigorously regulated' or expanded into 'diversified areas or lexical fields'. I think of my wine writing as public intellectual practice, linking wine as art to culture, politics and history, when, on the whole, wine columns stick solely to descriptions of the wine. Given genre's conventions, Lidia Curti (1998: 33) writes that repetition, '[t]he very ... essence of genre ... engenders variation, deformation ... and decomposition'. Novelist Brian Castro (1999: 32) comments that repetition and establishment are not synonymous with culture which is dynamic. Given change in historical circumstances, genre will inevitably need revitalisation as its regulated patterns become over-familiar or anachronistic. Michael Leunig's (2009) cartoon 'More drinking', with its final thrice-repeated refrain of 'Fruit driven!', is exactly about sinking the description of wine with what has become over-familiar and clichéd.

I think of my wine writing as a hybrid genre. Hybridity, says Brian Castro (1999: 115), 'is a powerfully transgressive property' because it destabilises boundaries. Further, James Ley (2005) says that literary works that cross genre boundaries 'are

essential to a literary culture because they explore the limits of expression and thus the boundaries of the self'. Because genre is associated with limits and norms, to think about destabilising genre through a disruptive practice is to knowingly risk 'impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity' (Derrida 1980: 56-57). A few readers of the column have noted, explicitly or implicitly, its play with the genre, one commenting that I had 'cultivated' a 'clever variation of the wine appreciation genre' (Jones 2010: 12). For example, this is my introduction to a 2005 Chalmers Mildura Vermentino:

I learnt from Paul Carter, spatial historian, that a coastal line is fractal and immeasurable rather than Euclidian and quantifiable. This is disturbing if you want linearity, predictability, measurability. Thankfully Australian wineries and wines are fractal, seemingly immeasurable in their infinite variety (Costello 2009a: 26).

Wine writing is about technical details, but it is also about what wine—its appearance (bottle label and wine colour), aroma and taste—sets the dreaming, remembering mind doing, and what links emerge to contemporary issues in the practice of the everyday. Donna Lee Brien (2008) has noted that food writing is aligned with de Certeau's "minor" practices, the "multifarious and silent reserve of procedures" that ... "organize" our lives'. 'Modes of attending to scenes and events spawn ... dream worlds', writes Kathleen Stewart (2007: 10, 12); '[t]he ordinary is a ... [mode] of attending to the possible ... it amasses resonance in things'. Moreover, 'everyday life is lived', writes Stewart, 'on the level of surging affects' (9). The following review is my remembering mind responding to a NSW Mid-North Coast wine, the 2008 Stone Circle Hastings River Chambourcin. The writing makes use of narrative and recalls a white-Australian cultural practice of the naming and placement of home, and acknowledges, within that homemaking, the role of affects such as surprise and nostalgia, and concepts such as difference and continuity:

This is a Port Macquarie wine. It was recommended by the redoubtable Robyn of the Station Hotel's Liquor Barn, an Alladin's Cave, in Lismore, for wine lovers. Okay, Chambourcin is an unusual variety. Tweed, Richmond, Clarence, Macleay, Hastings ... the NSW river list of primary school fame. On the nose it's chocolate, but with something spicy or bitter like a cinnamon myrtle perhaps? On the palate, light like a butterfly. Angelic perhaps? A really, really good red to be drunk chilled, grown in the area of the holidays of my youth. \$14.95 at the Station. An unbelievable price for the flight-bound and blissful (Costello 2009b).

Marcel Proust's (1981) narrator says in volume one of *Remembrance of things past* that the past is either dead or alive to us only by chance, and the pictures from the memory of the intellect 'preserve nothing' of the past. 'The past is hidden ... beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us)'. And so by chance, returning indoors from the cold of winter, the narrator is offered tea and 'one of those squat, plump little cakes called "petites madeleines"'. He 'raises to [his] lips a spoonful of the tea in which [he] had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner', he says:

had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with

no suggestion of its origin I sense that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed be of the same nature

It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself. The drink has called it into being

Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind.

The sight of the madeleine ‘had recalled nothing’, but the taste did bring an image to his consciousness.

when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time ... remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest ... bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection (48-50).

Alaine De Botton’s (1997: 156) commentary on Proust re-runs the idea that we ‘have a better chance of generating vivid images of our past when we are involuntarily jogged into remembering it’ by a taste, smell or touch, ‘than when we voluntarily and intellectually attempt to evoke it’, or, as Deleuze (2000: 11-12) similarly says, the sensuous quality of one object, and here we could say a glass of wine, and I would want to include its appearance, is ‘the sign of an *altogether different* object’ which we then have an imperative to interpret.

Just the aroma and appearance of wine can act as triggers; they’re doors that open onto our pasts. ‘[T]he ordinary is ... a sensory connection. A jump. And a world of affinities and impacts that takes place in the moves of intensity across things that seem solid’ (Stewart 2007: 127). For this is what I wrote of South Australian Kirrihill’s 2008 Sauvignon Blanc and here the writing attempts to acknowledge both the dis-ease with and celebration of flux and fragmentation:

Flow in the world means the enactment of disconnection and connection. I’m so immersed in NZ sav blanc as a standard that often when I drink an Australian savi there’s a disconnect between what the label says and what’s on my palate. I once bought a handcrafted glass ‘bonking’ plate for its beautiful green-and-black colouring, without noticing that the animals pictured thereon on were ... bonking! Though the KH smells of passionfruit, pine and a little cherry, its colour is chardonnay-like with ham and mustard on a spritzzy palate. Nevertheless, like the Bonking Plate, it’s intriguing ... (Costello 2010a: 23).

I agree with Castro (1999: 188) that creative writing teaching and learning is not about being a technician in a class about ‘how to present a character, inscribe an environment’. To write the wine column I try be in ‘a speculative and concrete attunement’; my thought ‘takes off with the potential trajectories in which it finds itself in the middle’ (Stewart 2007: 128), and it finds itself in the middle of a glass of wine. I attempt an attendance to things that gives ‘events their significance’, not

gesturing toward ‘the clarity of answers but toward the texture of knowing’ (Stewart 2007: 129).

Here is another sample from me: at the time I was writing the wine column, one of the contentious cultural issues facing Lismore (and the NSW Northern Rivers region generally) was whether to have the proposed Margaret Olley Arts Centre, considered costly, replace the cramped and condemned Lismore Regional Gallery building. In the column, I first discussed the qualities of a local wine from Tenterfield, about two hours drive from Lismore, a 2005 Wellington Vale Wooded Semillon, and I finished the review up with a reference to this issue:

Like the proposed Margaret Olley [Arts Centre] for Lismore, this is a world-class local product ... Not a frivolous wine, it would suit lively talk about positioning projects for success. And the [Arts Centre] could serve up this semillon as a nearby regional wine, along with similar food, music, poetry and performance (Costello 2009c: 24).

Further, here is part of my review of a Queensland 2007 Jimbour Station Verdelho, that makes an intervention into politics:

The Darling Downs’ Jimbour Station is owned by the Russell Pastoral Company. A friend, a Queensland girl, once told me that the wealthy Russells were critiqued in Andrew McGahan’s Gothic novel about Aboriginal–White race relations, *The White Earth* (Costello 2009d: 24).

Genre has its courtiers and jesters, and, as discussed above, in itself it is bound for change as any other cultural phenomena. Rosemary Neill (2010: 4-5) has written on the perceived loss of jobs, space and influence for full-time critics and reviewers in print, across food, film, theatre and more, partly explained by the rise of ‘online opinionistas’ in the ‘blogosphere’.

James Halliday, the highly regarded Australian wine writer of international repute, is a loyal courtier, adhering to the practice. In his column in the *Weekend Australian magazine* you sense his erudition or encyclopedic knowledge of winemaking and wines. The following sentence is possibly emblematic of his authoritative style in a display of knowledge: ‘It’s strange that the variety is so expressive in Alsace that it’s easy to tire of the olfactory assault. Yet it’s usually so vapid elsewhere in the world, Australia included’ (Halliday 2009: 33). But he is not averse to colloquialisms, for here he is on the wine’s label: ‘getting rid of its Timothy Leary bad-trip label design, allowing consumers to enjoy their wines without distraction or fear’ (33).

I interpret Matt Skinner’s (nd) ‘Uncorked’ *Sun Herald Sunday life* column to be more deliberately, self-consciously ‘cool’ in an informal and ‘funky’ way, but still noticeably very vigorously deliberate in its performative display of erudition. Here’s some phrasing that peppers one column, a combination of the technical and sensuous, which is underpinned with the consideration that wine is consumed like food: ‘textbook-mature Australian riesling’; ‘neoprene smells make way for a firm, steely mouthful’; ‘expect smells of ... oriental lilies’; ‘smells of juniper and green pepper make way for a plush, chewy and delicious mouthful’ (27).

Max Crus’ (nom de plume of Simon Hughes) column in *The weekender*, the magazine in the Saturday edition of the NSW Northern Rivers regional newspaper, *The*

Northern Star, is, to quote an acquaintance, ‘peculiar’. The column is not obviously straightforward about the characteristics of any wine reviewed. The wines reviewed are given a score, and they are most often, although not exclusively, expensive, at over \$30.00, and most often not available in any regional bottle shop I go to in the Northern Rivers region, and I have covered many of them. This is explained by the column’s syndication across the country (maxcrus.com, nd), so it has no sense of its locale: a particular place, city or region. Nor do most columns, although they are predominantly ‘urbane’. But my aim for my newspaper column was that it ‘belong’ to or be of the region. Here is a paradoxical extract from me dealing with the local/locale or region, as the wine was Italian:

As a second piece of regional clothing (I previously proposed a macadamia cardigan), I’ve thought of a Poinciana one: same hand-knitted lime green but embroidered with the elliptical, drooping yellow seedpods. Scuderi Sicillia Grecanico is obviously not locally generated; nevertheless it’s available locally: \$14.95 Station Hotel, Lismore. It’s light gold in colour, with pine in the perfume, and pretty extraordinary on the palate: light, like Poinciana’s feathered leaves, but firm, dry and sophisticated. A closer option is Politini Wines’ grecanico, King Valley, but they distribute only in Victoria (Costello 2010b: 23).

My acquaintance said that Crus was a man longing to be a novelist. Predominantly he plays with language, primarily alliteration based on the label wordage. For example, for a De Bortoli Vat 1 Durif he wrote: ‘1 vat down, how many to go on the de Bortoli farm I wonder? Better get cracking. 8/10’ (Crus 2009). But what is the wine like?, I ask. ‘Houghton CW Ferguson Cabernet Malbec’, he wrote, ‘[r]eminds me of Bonnie and Clyde, but has a much nicer finish’ (Crus 2009). Ferguson, it turned out, via my investigation through the Internet, was also the name of the judge who was important in the criminal capture or sentencing of Bonnie and Clyde. This is a very extruded connection to make. Crus’ wine descriptions are short and sharp cultural comments, with a scathing wit often close to cynicism. I can think only that his column is written to people with a high disposable income who also order much wine in. Perhaps it is a column about aspiration and desire, even fantasy.

These columns are demonstrative of what Ashley *et al* (2004: 165) call a masculine structure of feeling, associated with risk and action, and the separation of a profession, discipline, body of knowledge or skill from feminine domesticity. It’s a robust, or robust-bluffing, forthright, strong form of expression, even competitive, aggressive, if not simply assertive—or what Gay Bilson (2010: 23) described as ‘knife-toting, hard-drinking, swaggering’.

The following is sample phrasing from Jane Faulkner’s (2009) column ‘Full bottle’ in the Saturday *Sydney Morning Herald’s Spectrum*: ‘flooded with spicy, earthy notes’; ‘there are loads of wines in the d’Arenberg portfolio’; ‘this drop is beautifully complex ... there’s a hint of vanilla nougat’; ‘I’m loving this beautifully balanced ...’. There’s a tendency here not to write from a deliberate full-frontal stance; it’s more conversational, from a sitting position of give-and-take, to-and-fro, exchange and thinking through and questioning; and it’s more about celebrating pleasure than performing mastery. Like most wine writers, she employs alliteration, assonance,

consonance, onomatopoeia, metaphors or borrowings from other art forms such as music to reproduce the experience of tasting in words. Nevertheless erudition is never far from the agenda—for example, consider the following technically based phrasing: ‘it’s very Bandol-like’; ‘not surprising as it is made from mourvèdre’; ‘it has yeasty rich autolysis notes’.

Max Allen, writing in the *Weekend Australian Magazine*, Mark Smith writing for the Tasmanian *The Sunday Examiner Magazine*, Rob Ingram writing in the monthly Australian *Country style* magazine and Lindsay Saunders in the Saturday *Gold Coast Bulletin’s* magazine *Paradise* are slightly different cases. Max Allen’s writing is not gendered in an obvious way. All the writers share an engaging style that wants to communicate through conversation. Here’s Allen (2009: 25): ‘A blend ... from the wonderful Limci vineyard ... and a splash of Wedgetail’s own Yarra fruit, this is a gorgeously ethereal, spicy, sappy, medium-bodied pinot’. Concrete nouns, and concentrated syntax for the limited word count, along with evocative adverbs and adjectives make this column into a performance of the pleasure of drinking. Saunders’ column, unabashedly called ‘The plonk test’, features value-priced wine. Ingram (2009: 92) is capable of incorporating a reference to popular culture—for example, he described the growth of New South Wales Orange wines as ‘gathering momentum ... like Mel Gibson’s Highland raiders in *Braveheart*’—thereby positioning wine in a broader context of creative production.

Ben Canaider and Greg Duncan Powell (2003) write separately on wine in various media but together in an annual book *Drink Drank Drunk*. Their writing is lively, funny, accessible, colloquial and metaphor-driven while still being informative. Here they are on a Grant Burge Holy Trinity Grenache Shiraz Mourvèdre:

While on the one hand it has heaps of power, on the other it’s quite delicate ... Good fruit and fancy-pants oak help ... Like a heavily built bloke whose real tastes might lie with beer, this wine has been well educated (99).

However, Max Crus is possibly the most like me in enterprise, in that we strain at the boundary line of the genre, do not remain obedient or docile (Derrida 1980: 57). Indeed, Canaider and Duncan Powell (2003: 179) are not far away, since they cite Halliday as describing their wine writing as ‘at best, fanciful’.

It’s contentious to place winemaking in the realm of art. What I mean by art is skill, technique and knowledge applied according to aesthetic principles; the use of the imagination; production via design; having a transformative effect. But winemaking, like food making, is a scientific practice as well as an art.² There are instruments, but there are also touch and taste (Rolls 1997: 59). Steve Charters (2008: 202) concluded from an interview/focus group study that wine is ‘a quasi-aesthetic object’ or at the very least has an obvious symbolic context. But Eric Rolls (1997: 117), as a writer on wine, calls blending grape varieties to make wine ‘the great art’; he says that there ‘is no standard way of making wine’:

Apart from the differences imposed by variety, soil, position ... climate ... ripeness at picking, there are countless combinations available to a maker ... Even in one winery, how a wine is made varies year by year. Good winemakers acknowledge the grapes

coming in ... then set to work, allowing the grapes to express what they are; they do not make them conform to a pattern. (88)

Rolls (1997) notes that marvelous idiosyncrasies appear in winemaking that is not fully mechanised (97-8). He uses words like ‘superb’ (69), ‘richly complex’ (71), ‘wonderous’ (125), ‘subtle’ (109), and ‘delicate’ (117) to describe a good wine, words that I think are reminiscent of responding to other kinds of art works. Of champagne specifically, he says that it ‘lifts ... the imagination’ (118). An Australian sommelier, Ben Knight (nd), believes that ‘the right wines can have the most profound effect on you’. Halliday (2010: 31) has at least posed the question: is winemaking an art? His answer—‘most would say so’—is guarded but gratifying for those who think it is.

So my wine-writing practice is artwork responding to artwork, and is best conceptualised by Nikos Papastergiadis (2004) on art writing:

As a writer I am primarily concerned with the way art participates in a field of understanding and communicates with the world. I don’t confine my discussion to calculating either the aesthetic value or political objectives of art, but rather, I seek to grasp the sense of place that is created as art stimulates sensations and engages relations ... The task of the writer is not only to reflect on art, but also see how a representation is both transformative and constitutive of subjectivity. (159, 161)

Through writing about art, Papastergiadis (2004) wants to have a dialogue about the idea behind the artwork, to ‘develop parallel and complementary trajectories of thought’ (161). Art writing can take the form of an ‘imaginary collaboration’ (160). The process of ‘dissemination and contextualisation’, he says, constructs ‘a field of aesthetic experiences and social meanings’ (160). Writing is a reflexive process: the perception of the art and then the articulation of that perception in text combine in a system of transformation.

What I want to do is commend art, which includes creative writing and winemaking, for its efficacious capacity. This is also a contentious proposition. But while a ‘focus on human creativity ... doesn’t get us directly to mainstream political action’ argues Wendy Wheeler (2006: 137), ‘it gets us to the distal conditions (the emergent structure of feeling) under which the conditions might be formulated and enacted’—that is, action follows once ‘the creative work of the imagination’ has shown what is possible through a variety of worlds, experiences and subjectivities (Cosgrove 2009: 238). Paul Carter (2004: xii) argues that art enables us to develop an enriched imaginary for thinking about our human situation; art can work against ‘immaculate origins and unnegotiable destinies’ to create sustainable myths which depict how identities form through social and personal relations that are ‘actively invented’. Emily Potter (2005) argues that how we represent the world informs how we live in it. Veronica Brady (1999: 22) wrote of the arts as potentially crucial ‘for our survival as a people and a civil society’ because of their ability ‘to refigure reality’ specifically through metaphor which ‘is the language of discovery’.

‘For some time now, as a writer, I have thought, written and spoken of ... writing as the substantive part of my political activity, and of all writing as political’ (Costello 2005). Breaking open genre, playing with its possibilities, is not irrelevant to social transformation. Debra Malina (2002: 1) talked about a particular transgressive practice

in fiction—metalepsis or ‘the transgression of boundaries between narrative levels’—as enabling those who experience this specific textual strategy as readers to become transgressive themselves in a social context, able to shift across hierarchies, binaries and borders. Potter (2005) talks similarly of properties in literary fiction which have the potential to ‘foster social imaginaries that highlight flow and connectivity’, which is what we need amid the ‘jagged contradictions’ and ‘turbulent patterns’ (Papastergiadis 2004: 167) that characterise human history. Certainly a wine column, or blog, is a modest form of such engagement, but an engagement nevertheless.

Endnotes

1. Proust, Marcel 1981 ‘Volume one: Swann’s way and Within a budding grove’, *Remembrance of things past*, C K Scott Moncrieff and Tereence Kilmartin (trans), London: Chato and Windus, 48-50.
2. Arguments against and for wine being an art form are discussed by in Steven Charters 2008, ‘Listening to the wine consumer: the art of drinking’ in Fritz Allhoff (ed), *Wine and philosophy*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, and summarised here. Against: Immanuel Kant claimed that ‘the consumption of food and drink is not susceptible to aesthetic evaluation’. Roger Scruton’s argument is three-fold: 1) ‘since Thomas Aquinas, philosophers have distinguished the upper senses of sight and hearing, which may allow for “objective contemplation”, from touch, smell, and taste’ which ‘are primarily used for utilitarian purposes’; 2) taste consumes the object and desire for it, which is not true ‘of genuine aesthetic attention’; 3) ‘the concentrated focus required by aesthetic objects is of a different, more cognitive, nature’. For: Frank Sibley rebutted this: the difference between higher and lower sense is non-existent; we ‘consume’ all products; art objects have a limited life. Harold Osborne: the separation between cognitive and sensuous pleasures is false (pp 187-189).

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