



Taste, Hearing, and Touch, by Jan Brueghel the Elder, with Hendrick van Balen and others (17th century)

CAN WINE BE BEAUTIFUL?

A philosophical tradition stretching from Plato through Aquinas and Kant to the present day relegates the senses of smell and taste. Christopher Grau and Douglas MacLean deny any hierarchy of the senses, affirming that along with art, literature, music, and nature, wine can indeed be beautiful

A robust philosophical tradition tells us that wine cannot be beautiful or a fit subject of aesthetic judgment. The reason for this is that our experience of wine comes primarily through the senses of taste and smell, and these “lower” senses do not allow for the kinds of complex cognitive content that are made possible in what we experience via the “higher” senses of hearing and sight. Cognitive content, this tradition tells us, is a necessary condition of beauty or aesthetic judgment. Even the finest wine offers only a different kind of pleasure.

Appealing only to the lower senses, wine does not represent or express much of anything; it certainly does not represent or express the most profound elements of the human condition as painting, literature, or music sometimes do. Wine cannot be beautiful. This traditional view finds support in the writing of many great philosophers, from Plato through Aquinas and Kant.

We find at least two problems with this view. First, no sensible theory of beauty can demand complexity, representation, or expression from all beautiful objects. A simple melody, such as one finds in a birdsong or a folk song, can be beautiful without being complex. The simplicity of a modernist sculpture—for example, a Brancusi—or the kind of decorative art one finds in architecture or in pottery and rugs, can be beautiful without being representational or very complex. We are also convinced by Frank Sibley’s patient attempt to demonstrate that taste and smell have the potential for a significant amount of complexity. Sibley, of course, mentions wine.¹

The argument against the lower senses might be based on the claim that the senses of taste and smell, whether simple or complex, cannot engage our cognitive capacities. The objects that we perceive through taste and smell are in this respect unlike beautiful objects that we perceive through sight and sound. We are not convinced that wine can be fully appreciated without engaging our cognitive capacities in some way. Memory is certainly required in the appreciation of wine, as may be some knowledge of where the wine is produced and the constraints imposed on production in different regions. But these are contentious claims, and we don’t mean to make much of them here. Rather, we wish to challenge the claim that engaging the cognitive capacities is a necessary condition of the beautiful. That condition would rule out quite a bit of music and painting, and perhaps much of what most people, including philosophers, find beautiful in nature. We have not said what counts as “cognitive” in experiencing beauty. Our point is that if the bar is set low

enough to include all music and painting that people tend to agree is beautiful, then wine will also qualify; and if it is set high enough to exclude wine, then it will rule out a lot of music and painting, too.

The second problem with the tradition that is skeptical of the possibility that taste and smell can give rise to beauty is that this view does not fit very well with what many people who love and understand wine say about it. Of course, this fact alone does not settle any issues about whether wine can be beautiful or an appropriate object of aesthetic judgment. It is human nature to exaggerate the importance of what we like. We recall, for example, Howard Cosell referring to an American football game as a “world-historical event.” Nor would we deny that wine enthusiasts may be prone to rhapsodize to the point of ridiculousness about their obsession. Nevertheless, many wine lovers are also intelligent and eloquent writers, and we should take seriously what they and their readers find natural ways to talk and think about something that has an undeniably special status among objects of appreciation throughout history and across many cultures.

A hierarchy of the senses?

Before considering the qualities or marks of the beautiful that do seem naturally to apply to wine, we want to comment further on the distinction between higher and lower senses. Aquinas most explicitly calls our attention to this supposed difference. “[T]hose senses chiefly regard the beautiful, which are the most cognitive, *viz* sight and hearing, as ministering to reason; for we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds. But in reference to the other objects of the other senses, we do not use the expression ‘beautiful,’ for we do not speak of beautiful tastes, and beautiful odors.” Aquinas infers from this that if good refers to what is pleasing to the appetite, then beauty “adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty,” thus making the beautiful “something pleasant to apprehend.”² Now this is a rather cryptic remark, and Aquinas does not explain the connection of beauty to the pleasure of apprehension.

Roger Scruton, perhaps the best-known contemporary defender of Aquinas’s view, is also specially keen to apply it to wine. Thus, Scruton insists that it is “important to keep hold of the difference that Aquinas points to, in distinguishing cognitive from non-cognitive senses,”³ though he acknowledges elsewhere that “it is difficult to describe the difference.”⁴ He nonetheless attempts to explain this distinction in a number of different ways, claiming, for example, that aesthetic pleasure must draw one’s attention to the object in the right way. “Vision and hearing, unlike taste and smell, may sometimes be forms of objective contemplation. In tasting and smelling I contemplate not the object but the experience derived from it.” This difference leads Scruton to claim that “although the connoisseur of wine may ‘attend to’ the qualities of what he drinks, his pleasure, when he does so, is not of a different kind from that of his ignorant

companion.” Thus, “gustatory pleasure does not demand an intellectual act,” and “if one man prefers claret to Burgundy (or, to be more specific, Mouton to Latour), there is no sense in which this disagreement can be resolved into some other, more basic one, without ceasing to be a disagreement about the gustatory qualities of the wines.”⁵ We find it rather amazing to hear these claims from a philosopher who not only professes to love wine but also believes that in drinking wine one is “actually tasting God.”⁶

We have both a specific and a more general response to this argument. First, the manifest lack of a complete objective ordering in terms of goodness or aesthetic quality does not imply that we are out of the realm of objective standards and are dealing instead with mere subjective differences of taste. That we cannot find objective standards for determining in the end that Mouton is better than Latour (or vice versa) is no different from our inability to resolve disputes about whether Puccini is better than Wagner, or Manet a greater painter than Vermeer. In wine, as in art, we can still distinguish clearly between the great and the second-rate, and we can explain the objective basis for making these distinctions, even though experts will continue to disagree about who is the greatest, and some people will continue to prefer the second-rate.

Our more general comment is this. Let us put to one side the representational aspects of literature or painting and the kinds of potential of poetry or painting or music for expressing emotions that reach to the most profound aspects of human life. Nobody wants to deny that these are among the most important features of art and are fundamental both to what we think is beautiful in these areas and to our aesthetic judgments. But we also find beauty in arts, crafts, and nature in ways that do not involve these representational aspects of art but that also demand attention and can inspire contemplation.

Consider, therefore, that the senses of sound and sight are both modes of experiencing the world. Each provides us with a distinctive kind of awareness of the world and of ourselves as creatures in it. Some things have the potential to call attention to these modes of experience as such in most agreeable ways. We are naturally struck with how utterly pleasing some visual or auditory experiences can be in ways that draw our appreciation to the objects that cause those experiences, and to the features of those objects that are particularly well suited to draw our attention and please us in these particular ways: the patterns and colors of a Persian rug, the sound of a bird or a simple melody, the colors of a sunset, or the sound and sight of waves crashing on a beach. These effects lead us to focus our attention on their objects, and they provoke contemplative thoughts about the nature of our experience and the kinds of creatures we are. In these areas, of course, there is always a difficulty of distinguishing the beautiful from the merely sentimental, and of distinguishing what we are drawn to only because we find the experience agreeable from what we are drawn to in ways that count as appreciating the objects themselves. But we

often regard as beautiful those objects that have a strong potential for focusing our attention in ways that inspire wonder or awe toward both the objects themselves and our modes of experiencing the world.

If objects that we see or hear can be beautiful in these nonrepresentational ways, then we see no reason why objects that we taste and smell cannot also be beautiful. Taste, along with smell, is a complex mode of experiencing the world. It establishes some of our most intimate connections to the world, and it provides another basis for reflecting on the kind of creature we are. We see no reason in principle why the objects we access through this mode of experience cannot make the same kinds of normative claims on us as other beautiful objects that we access through sight or sound.

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Scruton is not alone in insisting on a distinction between the higher and lower senses that also marks off the beautiful from the merely agreeable. One finds a version of this distinction in Kant, and it is echoed in contemporary writers such as Elaine Scarry.⁷ Our sympathies, however, are with Sibley, who, upon reviewing claims about the limitations of the lower senses, concludes: “If there is an argument of weight here, it eludes me.”⁸ In a recent article on wine, Scruton (replying to Sibley) claims that smells “cannot be organized as sounds are: Put them together and they mingle, losing their character. [...] They remain free-floating and unrelated, unable to generate expectation, tension, harmony, suspension, or release.”⁹ This strikes us as a rather desperate argument. Is it a flaw of painting that brushstrokes mingle and lose their individual character, or a flaw of a musical chord that the notes mingle and lose their individual character? If we consider smell and taste together, as we do in experiencing wine, then we find that harmony and structure can spread out over time to create the kind of complex experience that can lead us to an appreciation of taste as such. Perhaps this is why Alexandre Dumas called wine “the intellectual part of the meal.”¹⁰

Marks of the beautiful

If there is no distinction to be drawn between the higher and lower senses that would imply as a matter of principle that objects of taste cannot be beautiful, it remains to show that wine is such an object. To do this, we will examine what some philosophers who have written on beauty take to be marks of the beautiful, and we will compare their claims to what people who write about wine find natural to say. Now, this is a crude, inductive method, to be sure; and to repeat a point we made earlier, we know that wine lovers sometimes say things that are wild exaggerations at best, and utter nonsense at worst. We have tried to select passages from writers who wine enthusiasts generally respect—that is, writers who are widely regarded to possess whatever expertise the subject allows.

The marks or features of the beautiful must enable us to distinguish judgments of beauty from claims about experiences that we like or that are merely pleasing or agreeable. One such mark is that objects we find beautiful are those we tend to value for their own sakes or as ends, and not merely as means for gaining pleasure or satisfaction. Kant writes that a man who says that Canary wine is good makes only a subjective judgment. He means, “It is agreeable to me.” Kant goes on to insist that “the beautiful stands on quite a different footing.”¹¹ Paraphrasing Kant’s view, Richard Moran writes, “Our relation to the agreeable is determined by, in the service of, our character as needy human animals, whereas the pure judgment of taste, the experience of something as beautiful, is independent both of our more basic biological inclinations and of the rational interests to which they gave rise.”¹² Another way to put this point is to say that if we judge Canary wine to be good, we mean merely that we like it. We say it is good because we like it. With judgments of beauty, the fit is in the other direction. We like what we find beautiful at least in part because we judge the object to be valuable itself. Our liking is a response to the value we perceive in the object of beauty.

Nothing is more common among wine lovers than to claim that their affection is a response to the wine itself. Wine is collected and saved; it is to be appreciated under the right circumstances and not merely to be used to enhance a meal or, even more improbably, to quench a thirst. Matt Kramer insists that “the great appeal of wine, the thing that

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has sustained it as an object of unremitting attention from millions of people over hundreds of years is precisely that it offers us the opportunity to go beyond the bounds of I like it/I don’t like it.”¹³ A similar sentiment is expressed by Mike Steinberger, who concludes his description of a ’96 Coche Corton-Charlemagne with this comparison: “Think of your favorite painting, or favorite novel, or favorite piece of music—this was it in liquid form.”¹⁴

Closely related to the idea that beautiful objects are valued as ends or in their own right is the claim that the beautiful, in contrast to the merely agreeable, demands a certain response that we can call appreciation. This is in contrast to what we merely desire, consume, or use up. One of Scruton’s arguments is that taste and smell differ from the higher senses because our enjoyment of what we taste and smell typically involves consuming their objects. The suggestion here is that what we value or find agreeable is the sensation, not the object that causes it, so that the object serves only as a means to producing pleasant or agreeable experiences. The idea that beauty cannot require consumption of its object, however, threatens also to rule out kinds of music that essentially involve improvisation, because the performance of such music is singular and non-repeatable, thus non-enduring in the same way as the food or wine we consume. Or consider decisions, which may be made for aesthetic reasons, to leave fragile works of art like a fresco or a sculpture in their original settings, so that they might be appreciated more fully. These decisions may also imply that we will allow beautiful objects to decay or be consumed in order that they may be appreciated.

Perhaps the relevance of consumption to appreciation is better made in a different way. Objects we consume for enjoyment may fail to satisfy us, but beautiful objects make demands on us that we may fail to meet. They bring to light the possibility of our own inadequacies. Scarry writes that “the experience of ‘being in error’ so inevitably accompanies the perception of beauty that it begins to seem one of its abiding structural features.”¹⁵ Moran nicely puts the same point as follows: “For it is when we are prepared to call something beautiful that there is now logical room not simply for disappointment in one’s experience, as there might be with respect to any hoped-for source of pleasure, but for disappointment in oneself rather than in the object, for the various possibilities of failure of responsiveness.”¹⁶

The possibility for error is familiar also to wine lovers. They worry about failing a wine—for example, by drinking it too young or by failing to appreciate it properly. Clifton Fadiman writes as if he is demonstrating Moran’s point: “Generally speaking, we demand something from hard liquor: a punctual reaction. But we expect a wine of quality to demand something from *us*: a slightly intensified exercise of our senses, perhaps the endeavor of comparison, and finally the crystallization of judgment.”¹⁷

A third frequently mentioned mark of the beautiful is that it makes us think. Beauty provokes deliberation and reflection. In his argument relegating taste to the status of a

lower sense, suitable only for agreeable or pleasant experience, Scruton claims that “gustatory pleasure does not demand an intellectual act.” But other wine enthusiasts, impressed by the complexity and nature of great wine, simply disagree. Thus, Jancis Robinson MW says that “one sniff and sip” of a truly fine wine makes you realize “that wine is capable of reaching not just your throat and nose but your brain, your heart, and occasionally your soul too.”¹⁸ Fadiman insists that wine summons up “powers of discrimination [that] evince curiosity or a desire to learn. I know of no other liquid that, placed in the mouth, forces one to think.”¹⁹

These are quotes from wine lovers who speak authoritatively about wine and the experience of drinking it. These quotes are easy to find in the literature, and these ways of talking about wine, far from being pretentious, come naturally to those who are trying hard to say things that are true about it or, as we might say, “to get it right.” We could expand this list of comparisons. Scarry writes that the beautiful “prompts the mind to move chronologically back in search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation, to move conceptually over, to bring things into relation.”²⁰ Wine perfectly exemplifies this feature of aesthetic experience. Thus, Hugh Johnson writes, “Every bottle, every glass of wine connects with bottles and glasses that went before, leads back in memory, forward in anticipation and sideways in reverie. The wines that really speak to me are those that reverberate on more than just my tongue. Some wines simply have more to say than others.”²¹ Scarry writes that perceiving beauty in things “seemed to bring them to life or to make them lifelike.” She calls this feature a “mimesis of life. [...] the almost-aliveness of a beautiful object makes its abrasive handling seem unthinkable.”²² Nor has this feature of wine gone unnoticed. Fadiman says, “Wine has a personality. It is not dead matter.”²³ Julia Child describes wine as “a living liquid” that has a life cycle. “When not treated with reasonable respect it will sicken and die.”²⁴

Conclusion

When we think of the many things philosophers say in characterizing beauty, perhaps especially the demands that beauty can make on us as we try to appreciate it, we find that wine possesses many of these same traits. We have argued against claims that the objects we experience through taste and smell are incapable of being beautiful, and we have compared what philosophers say about conditions or features of the beautiful with what authorities and enthusiasts say about wine. We find the parallels striking, and we take them to confirm an obvious point. If we can experience beauty through taste and smell, then wine is an ideal object for realizing this experience. Wine may be not only an example of beauty but an exemplar of many of the marks of the beautiful. ■

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Notes

1. Frank Sibley, “Tastes, Smells, and Aesthetics” in *Approaches to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press; 2001), pp.207–55.
2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia 2ae 27, 1. “Reply to Objection 3: The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms the desire; while the notion of the beautiful is that which calms the desire, by being seen or known. Consequently those senses chiefly regard the beautiful, which are the most cognitive, viz sight and hearing, as ministering to reason; for we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds. But in reference to the other objects of the other senses, we do not use the expression ‘beautiful,’ for we do not speak of beautiful tastes, and beautiful odors. Thus it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty: so that ‘good’ means that which simply pleases the appetite; while the ‘beautiful’ is something pleasant to apprehend.”
3. Roger Scruton, “Wine and Intoxication,” in *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine*, ed. Barry C Smith (Oxford University Press; 2007), p.6.
4. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton University Press; 1979), p.114.
5. Scruton, *Aesthetics of Architecture*, pp.114–15.
6. Scruton, “Wine and Intoxication,” p.15.
7. cf. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S Pluhar, (Hackett; 1987); Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press; 2001). Scarry writes (pp.36–37): “A person desires a good meal and—as though by magic—the person’s desire for a good meal seems to end at just about the time the good meal ends. But our desire for beauty is likely to outlast its object because, as Kant once observed, unlike all other pleasures, the pleasure we take in beauty is inexhaustible.”
8. Sibley, “Tastes, Smells, and Aesthetics,” p.225.
9. Scruton, “Wine and Intoxication,” p.5.
10. Alexandre Dumas, *Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine*, 1873.
11. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Kessinger Publishing; 2004), p.37.
12. Richard Moran, “Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty” (2005, University of Illinois at Chicago Irving Thalberg Memorial Lecture, unpublished manuscript), p.9. Note that Moran is not necessarily endorsing this aspect of Kant’s position. His essay offers several penetrating criticisms of various elements of Kant’s conception of the beautiful (and suggests a provocative Proustian corrective).
13. Matt Kramer, *Making Sense of Wine* (Running Press, Philadelphia; 2003), p.24.
14. Mike Steinberger, “An Oenophile and His Money: Is Any Bottle of Wine Worth \$700?” in *Slate* (www.slate.com).
15. Scarry, *On Beauty*, p.28.
16. Richard Moran, “Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty,” p.19.
17. Clifton Fadiman, “Brief History of a Love Affair,” in Clifton Fadiman and Sam Aaron, *The Joys of Wine* (Galahad Books, New York City; 1981), p.34. We would like to thank Fred Corriher for suggesting this essay.
18. Jancis Robinson, *Tasting Pleasure: Confessions of a Wine Lover* (Penguin Books; 1997), pp.24–25.
19. Fadiman, “Brief History of a Love Affair,” p.31.
20. Scarry, *On Beauty*, p.28.
21. Hugh Johnson, *A Life Uncorked* (University of California Press; 2006), preface.
22. Scarry, *On Beauty*, p.68.
23. Fadiman, “Brief History of a Love Affair,” p.23.
24. Attributed to Julia Child.