

EXPLORING LITERARY JOURNALISM AND THE TRUTH IN WINE

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ABSTRACT – Writers of narrative literary journalism are not often aware of the reasons why they write the way they do, and they usually leave critical theory outside the door of their writing space. In this essay, a writer and scholar examines critical reasons why he made choices he did as author of the award-winning book *Seasons of a Finger Lakes Winery*. The essay has two parts. The first part explores how narrative literary journalism attempts to narrow the distance between the subjectivities of author, reader and protagonists when compared to more conventional models of “objective” journalism. The result is hopefully a heightened degree of psychological transport on the part of the reader because of an increased cognitive response to the perception that the account is about phenomenal actuality, and the influence of the mirror neuron in mimicking that actuality. The second part exams narrative efforts in *Seasons of a Finger Lakes Winery* to reveal the mystique behind wine, including its science, art, and what the author describes as mystification resulting from the metaphorical “bullshit” created by the wine snob.

Key words: Literary journalism. Wine. Cognitive response. Aesthetics of experience.

EXPLORANDO O JORNALISMO LITERÁRIO E A VERDADE NO VINHO

RESUMO – Os escritores do jornalismo literário narrativo nem sempre têm consciência das razões por que escolhem uma forma escrita, e geralmente deixam teorizações de fora de seu espaço de escrita. Neste ensaio, um escritor e acadêmico examina as razões críticas pelas quais fez escolhas como autor do livro premiado *Seasons of a Finger Lakes Winery*. O ensaio tem duas partes. A primeira explora como o jornalismo literário narrativo tenta estreitar a distância entre as subjetividades do autor, leitor e protagonistas quando comparado aos modelos mais convencionais de jornalismo “objetivo”. O resultado é – assim esperamos – um grau elevado de transporte psicológico por parte do leitor, devido a uma resposta cognitiva expandida à percepção de que o relato trata da realidade dos fenômenos e à influência do neurônio-espelho em mimetizar essa realidade. A segunda parte examina os esforços narrativos em *Seasons of the Finger Lakes Winery* para revelar a mística por trás do vinho, incluindo sua ciência, arte e aquilo que o autor descreve como uma mistificação resultante da “lorota” metafórica criada pelos “esnobes do vinho”.

Palavras chave: Jornalismo literário. Vinho. Resposta cognitiva. Estética da experiência.

EXPLORANDO EL PERIODISMO LITERARIO Y LA VERDAD EN EL VINO

RESUMEN – Los escritores de periodismo literario narrativo no suelen ser conscientes de las razones por las que eligen sus maneras de escribir, y en general dejan las teorías fuera de su espacio de escritura. En este ensayo, un escritor y investigador examina las razones críticas por las que tomó decisiones como autor del galardonado libro *Seasons of a Finger Lakes Winery*. El ensayo estructurase en dos partes. La primera explora cómo el periodismo literario narrativo intenta reducir la distancia entre las subjetividades del autor, el lector y los protagonistas en comparación con los modelos más convencionales del periodismo “objetivo”. El resultado – así lo esperamos – es un mayor grado de transporte psicológico por parte del lector debido a una mejor respuesta cognitiva a la percepción de que la historia describe la realidad de los fenómenos, bien como a la influencia de la neurona espejo para imitar esa realidad. La segunda parte examina los esfuerzos narrativos en *Seasons of a Finger Lakes Winery* para revelar la mística detrás del vino, incluida su ciencia, el arte y aquello que el autor describe como la mistificación resultante del “disparate” metafórico creado por el snob del vino.

Palabras clave: Periodismo literario. Vino. Respuesta cognitiva. Estética de la experiencia.

1. Part one

I once wrote a book about wine. And I attempted, as much as possible, to write it like a novel. Which doesn't mean I tried to write fiction.

So why try to write a book about wine that reads like fiction but is not fiction?

Because, among other reasons, I sensed that wine can be intimidating to many people – the correct etiquette, how to taste, how it is made, the role of tannins in red wines, and so on. And if you intimidate your reader, you have lost them. In trying to write the book like a novel (as much as possible) I sensed that many inexperienced wine drinkers were cowed by the “wine snobs” who mystify wine because they are among the converted to the “true” oeno-faith. I have often distrusted those who are converted to a “true” faith, oeno or otherwise.

I guess I did something right. The book was only intended for a regional audience in the Finger Lakes Wine region of Upstate New York where I live. But it received wide recognition. Maybe I am too modest. It was honored with a first-place Gourmand Award in Paris for wine writing. One reason cited to me was its “novelistic” qualities.

Writers aren't often very conscious of the critical reasons why they write the way they do; they leave critical theory outside the door of their writing space. They don't think, “What would this critic say?

What would that scholar think?” I know I didn’t. Only after I finished the book did I begin to better understand why I had made the choices I made (and not always for the better). Most important, why and how can a more “novelistic” approach appeal to a reader?

I think about what I was trying to do in the following:

Through the swirl of snow you could just make out in the distance the rows of leafless grapevines stitching across the hillside. Nearby, a snow devil twisted in a churning cloud amid a whiteout blanketing the neighboring farm field. Still farther, the dark outline of Cayuga Lake was a shadow lost in the snowstorm sweeping out of Canada. Hardly a promising day for making wine, I thought (Hartsock, 2011, p. 1).

So the book begins. For readers in my part of the world, such a winter scene is an experience many can relate to. Clearly I am trying to place the reader imaginatively in such a location. And under such “chilling” conditions one can only wonder how wine, which we so often associate with sunnier, more beneficent climes like those of France and Italy and southern Brazil, can come about? After all, wine has been described as “summer in a glass” with its rich bouquet of aromas.

Then, too, there is the winemaker, Gary Barletta, without whom of course the wine would not have happened. Humans humanize. Conventionally we call it “characterization” in our introduction to literature classes. One must of course picture the winemaker, since he is the one who nurtures the wine, a process that is arguably reciprocal. In this case he is checking for off odors in the wine:

Gary Barletta was oblivious to the storm as he leaned over and the fluorescent light flashed across his balding head before he poked it between rows of oak barrels reflecting a tawny color in the light. He withdrew a bung – a large cork – from a barrel, then put his nose up to the wine in the barrel, and drew in deeply, slowly, his gray luminescent eyes intently focused (Hartsock, 2011, p 1).

How many of you know or have known someone who has a balding brow? I think we can surmise the near unanimous answer: we can relate. But Gary Barletta was more than just bald (with gray luminous eyes). As Chekhov taught us, complex characterization requires some ambiguity if a character is not to be a marble saint or a plaster demon – is not, in effect, one-dimensional (Hartsock, 2000). It’s such multi-faceted ambiguity that makes a character (necessarily) human and believable, and gives characterization psychological resonance. There was an intuitive reason why I wrote the following passage in which I play on Gary’s Italian heritage while continuing to describe him:

(...) his roots remain firmly in the old Italian neighborhood on the north side of Syracuse [New York State] that can be more Midwest than East Coast because people still go to church and the barbershops close at 5 p.m. In a photo of Gary from when he was about eight years old, one taken in the old Italian neighborhood, he has the waifish look of an Italian shepherd boy from the hills of Bari in southern Italy, the region his winemaking grandfather left when he came to America during the first decade of the twentieth century. Now that Gary had reached middle age and the balding pate, he had embraced the family passion for making wine. With his firm nose and closely trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, his visage reminded me of a profile on an old Roman coin, perhaps Hadrian, gnarled and scruffy from the campaigns defending the borders of his empire. All Gary needed was a crown of laurel – or vine – leaves. Syracuse is where Gary picked up what could pass for street smarts; he's someone who's not afraid to be in your face – but then the Roman emperors were often street brawlers, too, before they dawned the imperial purple. That's when he repeats once more what has become a refrain: 'Yeah, I would say that is my only regret: I wish I had done this ten years earlier [started a winery]'. And as he spoke he looked up from a glass demijohn he was filling with Chardonnay and had the earnest look of someone who suddenly has insight into the profoundest of cosmic mysteries. That's when, despite the street smarts, you realize he is still capable of innocence (Hartsock, 2011, p. 5).

Hence, I hope, the complexity and ambiguity, the waifish look, the street brawling Roman emperor, yet one still capable of innocence. At least that is what I was trying to accomplish because as reader response theory has taught us, others may think otherwise. ("Well, why can't a scruffy Roman emperor also be an innocent, a victim of the ideologies of his era?")

But it is not only Gary who has character. The same can be said of wine. For example: "Those lighter-bodied French reds don't sock you in the mouth the way a full-bodied California Cabernet Sauvignon does – robust, voluptuous, like an oversexed Marilyn Monroe newly arrived in the Golden State who is very specific about what she leaves to the imagination" (HARTSOCK, 2011, p. 123).

And so we detect personification, another time-honored literary trope.

* * *

Now, in the interests of full disclosure, I would note that wine is only one area of research and writing for me. My more formal academic area of inquiry is "literary journalism", fundamentally narrative and descriptive in its modes. And I have always believed that theory is only as good as its practice. In writing my wine book I was trying to practice

what I preached from my lectern. So, it is here that I will take off the pig-tailed beret of the student of Bacchus, and put on the academic gown and the tasseled mortar board of the earnest professor trying to understand more critically what he was doing.

First, I think one has to understand the difference between conventional breaking hard-news journalism, which dominated North American journalism throughout much of the twentieth century, and a literary journalism that is fundamentally narrative. This is because of the epistemological gulf between the two.

At the least, what a journalism that attempts to use more traditional literary techniques attempts is to narrow the distance between different subjectivities (Hartsock, 2000). Specifically, we are talking about the subjectivities of the teller, the listener (or reader), and the protagonist(s) (Berger, 1982). Understood is that the reader's subjectivity will imaginatively become a vicarious participant. This contrasts with modern "objective" journalistic style that emerged in the United States in the early twentieth century in the form of breaking or hard news (Hartsock, 2000). "Objective" is a good adjective for a kind of writing that is not and never has been scientifically objective, but that does objectify its subjects into distant, alienated and remote objects. I could use a hypothetical example from wine: "Winemakers in the Finger Lakes wine region say they expect a promising grape crop this year." At which we might yawn because it is the kind of report one expects from the local government agricultural expert when they send out their newsletter. To take a subject with a little more inherent drama, I once wrote something like the following many years ago when I was a police reporter for a daily newspaper: "A county police officer shot and killed an armed holdup man during a convenience store robbery yesterday." Undoubtedly there is a dramatic element: Death. And it was the kind of story that "objective" police reporters love because of the old journalistic maxim, "If it bleeds, it leads". But note something: We have a faceless and generalized police officer (no "balding pate") indistinguishable from the rest, a faceless and dead "holdup man" or armed robber indistinguishable from all the rest (no gray, luminescent eyes), a convenience store indistinguishable from all the rest, and a "shooting and killing", which has long been a staple and even cliché of what might be described as the "shooting-and-killing" genre of police reporting.

But what if, I have often told my students, the story read something like this:

In the shadows, Jean Valjean stood in the cold rain. Thunder echoed in the distance. The rain trickled down his face. He could feel the weight of the .38 Smith & Wesson tugging at his coat pocket. Perhaps at the moment he was thinking of his starving sister and nephews as lightning briefly illuminated the sky. He stepped out from behind the shadow of the building and into the light of the parking lot, and began to walk unhurriedly to the front door.

So we have embarked on a story in the traditional sense of storytelling, one in which we have a mystery to be resolved in a climax, one that will end – not begin, I emphasize – with a “shooting and killing”. Yes, it will have a conclusion – a dead Jean Valjean (and no *Les Misérables* for Victor Hugo). It is a story that can be reconstructed from the available descriptive evidence, painting a picture by drawing on what I like to call the “common sense-appeal of the shared common senses” that most of us have in common (again, how many of us have known someone with a balding pate?) even as all of us may interpret such details slightly differently. It is not a story perceived by the abstracting nature of an “objective” journalism in which the purpose is to distill the pathos and empathy of humanity out of the account. It is one that attempts to help us understand Valjean’s subjectivity a little better when we discover he was trying to steal a loaf of bread to feed his starving sister and nephews, something we do not detect in the traditional objective hard-news report which has isolated him as alien object. Knowing that he was robbing the store to help others changes the emotional and moral tenor of the story. And like the fictional Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, he would pay for it – with death (unlike the fictional Jean Valjean who would spend nineteen years in penal servitude).

* * *

There are good reasons why a traditional story model, or traditional narrative model, is more attractive to readers than the hard-news report. I use here the most basic of definition of “narrative” as a “sequence of events” (Genette, 1982, p. 127; Scholes, 1981, p. 205). This is because more modern objectified news in the form of the hard-news story, at least in the United States, is structured in what we metaphorically describe as an “inverted pyramid.” In the inverted

pyramid information is presented in what the journalist and editor determine as a decreasing order of importance (Fedler, 1993). The lead sums up the major points of the report *at the end of the series of events*, which is why it is often called a “summary lead”: “Winemakers in the Finger Lakes wine region say they expect a promising grape crop this year.” The agricultural expert polls winemakers and arrives at his conclusion, which he makes his beginning. Or, “A county police officer shot and killed an armed holdup man during a convenience store robbery yesterday.” But much preceded this.

The problem with the hard news model is that the specificity and distinctiveness of description selected from discrete times and spaces descend in *growing* detail relegated to a *decreasing* order of importance and thus a *declining* claim to cognitive value. Fundamentally, the emphasis is on a generalizing prioritization in which the journalist asks (often as part of an unconscious act ingrained by professional experience and lore), “what is most important here according to conventional news values?” Thus it reflects a movement away from traditional narrative chronicity. But in doing so the rhetorical ambition of the hard news “objective” model emphasizes discontinuity when it digresses from the narrative modality that predominates in a fictional short story or novel, and in narrative literary journalism (Hartsock, 2016). The modal ambition of digression is to extract details from anywhere in the chronicity. In the digression, the inverted pyramid migrates or evolves toward exposition and away from chronicity.

One should not confuse such a migration with flashbacks or flash forwards in traditional story narratives, which we think of as starting at the beginning of the chronicity. This is because flashbacks and flash forwards are readily decipherable as an organic part of chronicity. See for example one of the most famous examples in modern literature, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s complex flash forward and flashback in the opening to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (Garcia Márquez, 1970, p. 1). That flash forward and flashback are readily reincorporated into the arc of the narrative chronicle.

To return to the inverted pyramid model, the digressive movement away from chronicity towards the expository results in a problem of comprehension identified in psychological research: “The results of these studies are compatible with the claim that narrative text is recalled approximately twice as well as expository text and is read ap-

proximately twice as fast” (Graesser, Olde & Klettke, 2002, p. 240). This is because of what cognitive psychology characterizes as an increased sense of psychological “transportation” into the story world of the more traditional narrative (Gerrig, 1993). Such a transportation is “defined as an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events” (Green, 2004, p. 248). Herein we have the confirmation of the imaginative participation of the subjectivity of the reader in a conventional storytelling narrative. Again, this was my ambition, whether for better or worse, in the description of the winter scene.

Brian Boyd sees what I would characterize as narrative-as-story-telling as located in an evolutionary response. He notes that storytelling developed as part of our survival skills because it is the human way of passing on social knowledge that includes knowledge about potential threats and self-protection. Not all of us can experience those dangers, but “with narrative we could, for the first time, share experience with others who could then pass on to still others what they had found most helpful for their own reasoning about future actions. We still have to act within our own time, but with narrative we can be partially freed from the limits of the present and the self”. To that can be added his observation: “We are not *taught* narrative. Rather, narrative reflects our mode of understanding events, which appears largely... to be a generally mammalian mode of understanding” (Boyd, 2009, pp. 131-181).

Telling stories in the conventional sense is, then, how we naturally inquire into the nature of our world.

A narrative literary journalism focuses and centers not on abstracted, objectified generalizations of life as conventional hard news journalism does, but rather on the aesthetics of everyday experience, or the individual evidence of events located to a specific time and space (or location in space). In defining “aesthetics” I do not mean “the beautiful” as is often associated with the term by refined aesthetes who have assumed the term for their own ends (that “truth is beauty and beauty truth”, altogether missing the irony of John Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”). In many ways such aesthetes are like the wine snobs. Instead, the aesthetics of everyday experience comes closer to the Greek original, referring to a phenomenal experience that prompts a sensory response, a viewpoint revived in the concept of the “aesthetics of the everyday” which makes aesthetes of us all in our reactions to experience. As cognitive psychologist Tom Leddy notes, when we engage in the everyday experience of life – such

as taking a walk – “all of the senses are involved”. The result is a “sensuous or imaginative apprehension... The properties appreciated in everyday aesthetics are neither wholly objective nor wholly subjective. They are properties of *experienced* things, not of physical objects abstracted from our *experienced* world” (Leddy, 2005, p. 7, emphasis added).

Hence my observations of the balding pate and gray, luminescent eyes (and I could not do justice to the eyes, they were indeed luminescent, as Gary’s wife confirmed because they seemed to glow; hence, a shortcoming on my part as a writer in my effort to capture a characteristic of Gary).

More conventionally such details are what we refer to as a material or phenomenal referential reality. Perceiving that something is “real”, that it was observed (insofar as all the senses “observe” or register a response to the aesthetics of everyday experience) as really happening in our phenomenal world, reveals part of the unique power of literary journalism over our imaginations. We know that readers (I use the term “readers” broadly here, in the sense of anyone who “reads” and interprets mediated messages) respond differently to what they perceive of as real as opposed to what is fictional. As neuroscience research suggests, the brain responds in a different way to animation of characters as opposed to film of real people because the neural response to real people is much more active than to a more clearly fictional animation (Mar et al., 2007). Furthermore, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer notes, “developmental psychology and comparative ethnology have shown that the distinction between representations having truth claims and ‘make-believe’ representations is crucial in the ontogenetic development of the cognitive structure of the infant psyche” (Schaeffer, 2012, p. 3). Another way of putting it is that the brain responds differently to the truth claims about the “factual” (or “real”) mediation than the fictional make believe. And traditional narrative in the form of storytelling does so especially, given that it is how humans inquire into the nature of the world naturally.

Such an understanding of the power and influence of traditional narrative-as-story-telling places a better perspective on the shortcomings of the hard news, inverted pyramid model of journalism. Indeed, and at the risk of offending stalwarts of the “objective” tradition, I would suggest that the traditional objectifying model of the hard news story is the more fictional when compared to a narrative literary journalism (which is not to suggest that I do not respect the hard news model,

one I appreciate as a former beat reporter; rather, I see it as one of different options because no one model of journalism is perfect for the task at hand, given the fundamentally specular nature of journalism). Of course, here I turn on its head a frequent complaint about the New Journalism of the 1960s in the United States, which many mainstream journalists and critics viewed as all-but if not outright fictional (Markel, 1972; Macdonald, 1974, Hellmann, 1981). Consider: In the distillation of information in the hard news model we detect generalization. The result is a more abstract discourse of, say, an abstract police officer, an abstract holdup man, an abstract convenience store, and an abstract shooting and killing. As Nietzsche observed, the human mind has a natural inclination to construct generalizations by erasing the “differentiating qualities” between distinctive experiences. Although each experience is distinctive, there will also be similarities to other experiences. In the construction of generalizations, the similarities are emphasized: police officer, holdup man, convenience store, shooting and killing. But then the distinctive differences of experience are lost in the emphasis on the similarities, resulting in generalizations (Nietzsche, 1873). The more abstract they are, the more fictional they become, rising in a sense to the level of abstract allegory. The abstract police officer is an allegory for all police officers. Or, one can reverse the order: all police officers are an allegory for that one distinctive police officer.

In contrast, a narrative literary journalism has set itself up in opposition to abstract allegory, and for that reason is a kind of discourse of resistance against generalization. Of course, in the hard news story greater detail will follow. But it must be emphasized again that those details have been distilled of their differences according to an over-arching idea of what is professionally newsworthy, and are only released piecemeal and in deprioritized order, resulting in the disjointed narrative that is no longer a narrative “sequence of events” that the brain more efficiently processes. The critical ambition in narrative literary journalism is to resist (and not always successfully) the abstracting or generalizing inclination by maintaining a claim to the integrity of the differentiating qualities located at the distinctive intersection of one time and space. Perhaps another way of looking at it is that the hard news model tends to be more deductive in orientation starting from the general premise or allegory of what constitutes “newsworthiness”, while a narrative literary journalism is more inductive, starting with the mystery of a distinctive time and space (or location in space) that inaugurates the story, which

then moves to gathering suggestively distinctive evidence to work towards a conclusion.

In literature such a movement and conclusion leaves you with ambiguities of interpretation. As Mary Poovey observes, in a discussion of the emergence of the concept of the “modern fact” during the late Renaissance as a result of the Baconian scientific method, “If one had to resist premature generalization, after all, and if one could produce systematic knowledge only by reasoning from the phenomena one observed, then it was imperative to know how one moved from the particulars one saw to knowledge that was sufficiently general *to explain things one had not seen*” (Poovey, 1998, p. 15, emphasis added). “Things one had not seen” is the hidden flaw in the Baconian formulation of the scientific method, she notes. It leaves out the unassimilated or excess of what we do not know. It was ironic that Bacon’s intent was to try to address the peculiar, the anomalous, the abnormal excesses that did not fit so comfortably into the Aristotelian commonplaces that constituted the “norm” at the time, whether it was a secular or theological norm – or habit of seeing, as I like to describe it¹ – in the hope that eventually the result would be general deductive laws. Thus the concept of the modern fact was born, Poovey suggests, but was inherently flawed and contradictory from the outset. Bacon never squared induction with deduction, or the “imperative to know how one moved from the particulars one saw to knowledge that was sufficiently general *to explain things one had not seen*” (Poovey, 1998, p. 15). On this, Poovey notes, he was vague.

The implications should be clear: A narrative literary journalism favors a more inductive approach better attuned to the distinctive carnivalesque that can challenge our deductive laws – or habits of seeing. Can we conclude that the excess or the unassimilated phenomenal can never be assimilated? No. Nor can we conclude that *all* differentiating qualities can be assimilated. What we have then is a recognition of the limitations of our perceptions. As Peter Dear has observed, “the singular experience could not be evident” or fully constituted in the mediation. He adds, however, an important qualifier: “but it could provide evidence”, in this case of what contributed to constituting the mediation (Dear, 1995, p. 25). His qualifier makes all the difference in understanding the nature of a narrative literary journalism’s referentiality.

There is another related reason for the advantages of a narrative literary journalism. Our response is also enhanced cognitively and viscerally when reading “real life stories” that engage

in that attempt to narrow the distance between subjectivities – a heightened degree of empathy, in short – because of what is described as the mirror neuron. The mirror neuron was discovered at the University of Parma in the 1990s. It permits the observer to feel a similar response when observing someone else who is confronting an existential threat (Ferrari & Rizzolatti, 2014). One example is Soren Kierkegaard's ice skater eliciting from his audience the visceral thrill of the dangerous when skating closer and closer to thin ice (1846/1971). In other words, we do have the capacity to see ourselves in the other person's existential predicament and have a similar neurological response. In the case of a narrative literary journalism it is cognitively "felt" through the array of more traditional (but not fictional) tropes such as description, scenic recreation, and characterization in what Thomas B. Connery has described as the "feel" of facts (Connery, 1990, p. 63). In effect, they stimulate our senses with the illusion of experience recreated. This feeds into the increased neurological response to what we perceive of as "real" in the phenomenal world, and ultimately the psychological transport of the traditional narrative model, which is the model by which our brains inherently inquire into the nature of that world.

This is why we draft techniques traditionally associated with literature – in this case associated with the fictional novel or short story. It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that somehow such techniques make the account fiction in the sense of "make believe". This is because, and as has been demonstrated, description drawing from our various senses has long been a part of our narrative nonfiction, or as I prefer "narrative documentary", accounts going back undoubtedly into prehistory because we can surmise they were there when the shaman recited the tribe's latest migration. Rather, fiction borrowed the techniques from earlier documentary efforts, with the exception of interior monologue, in order to make the accounts seem more *documentary* and therefore perceived of as more *real* (Hartsock, 2000). Undoubtedly the development of the realistic fictional novel helped to refine descriptive observation. But there is no reason to think that such description in journalism is or was no less real as phenomenon. For example, a reporter standing to the side of a stage may observe the president of his country turn around briefly, believing he is unobserved, at a public event he is to speak at, and quickly insert his pinky with a dirty finger nail into his right nostril to withdraw a blob of mucous, which he then deftly smears under the lapel of his Armani suit as he returns to face his audience. It is a political stratagem he has

long perfected until caught. This is an aesthetic moment (distasteful to be sure), or a moment in the aesthetics of everyday experience, which is at the heart of the kind of narrative literary journalism I am talking about (Hartsock, 2016; Hartsock, 2019, forthcoming). It is also an example of what the American literary journalist Tom Wolfe characterized as a “symbolic detail” that reveals in this case a person’s “status life”, using that term in the broad sense of “the entire pattern of behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be” (Wolfe, 1973, pp. 31-32). In the nose-picking hypothetical, descriptive detail reveals something about the character of one individual, perhaps in this case of someone who even though he has made it to the political apex of his career is nonetheless an uncouth and boorish lout.

2. Part two

As we know, the goal of any discourse is, ideally, to elucidate its subject. In my case I attempted to unravel the mystification of wine. To that end, I have long said that wine is one-third science. The second third is art. But for the final third, I have to remove for a moment the tasseled mortar board of the polite and earnest professor, and dawn again the pig-tailed beret of the profane and irreverent (if not reveling) student of Bacchus. Because the last third, I have always said, is bullshit. Now, putting my academic mortarboard back on, what we need to bear in mind is that wine is mystified by all of these: science, art and bullshit. A narrative literary journalism can be helpful for making accessible such a nature so often mystified by the wine snob who raises his pinky while holding the stem of his wine glass as if to make a profound public pronouncement.

Regarding science, Mateus Yuri Passos, Érica Masiero Nering, and Juliano Mauricio de Carvalho have made a useful observation that a narrative literary journalism, or a narra-descriptive journalism, provides an opportunity to open up the “black box” of science, or the impenetrability of science for the non-scientist such as myself (Passos, Nering & Carvalho, 2010). Here they borrow from the French sociologist of science Bruno Latour, who made the observation that “surprisingly few people have penetrated from the outside the inner workings of science and technology, and then got out of it to explain to the outsider how it all works”. (Latour, 1987, p. 15). The result is what Latour describes

metaphorically as an indecipherable “black box” for the layperson. He recommends, instead, showing the process of the creation of science as a way to explain its workings, inviting us to take the journey with the scientist, walking beside him or her imaginatively to arrive at the scientific results. In such a way, Passos, Nering, and Carvalho ably explain, we can “make science more accessible to the layperson. For that reason it should be encouraged. Indeed, the issue is urgent, given that we live in an ever-evolving world made more complex by science. If the worlds of science and the layperson are to understand one another, then literary journalism provides an exceptionally promising means for doing so” (Passos, Nering & Carvalho, 2010, p. 29).

This is what I attempted, whatever the shortcomings of which I am all too aware, to do in the wine book. In the case of the vineyard in spring, there is “hilling down”:

A little later Dan [the vineyard manager] made a sweeping pass through the vineyard row atop the old Case tractor Gary had bought secondhand. After months of working under gray winter skies, riding a tractor with the sun on your back was redemption: The whole sky opened up and you felt freed from the chill of winter. The tractor chattered as the blade of the plow dug into the long ridge of earth underneath the line of trellis wire. The effect was a slowly curling six-inch-high wave of dirt that rolled over and fell away from the base of the vine trunk (Hartssock, 2011, pp. 34-35).

From this we begin to learn why “hilling down” is so important in growing wine grapes. In the fall the vineyard is “hilled up”. This is done so that a protective layer of soil is pushed up by the plow against the bottom of the grape vine where the “graft union” is located that separates the American rootstock from the upper European grape vine which is called the scion. This permits further *entre* into learning about how phylloxera, a tiny aphid almost invisible to the eye, was accidentally imported with grape vines from the United States in the nineteenth century to France. It nearly wiped out France’s vineyards because it sucked out the nutrients of the European genus of vine known as *vitis vinifera*. Phylloxera then spread to much (though not all) of wine-producing Europe. After nearly destroying most of the French grape vines, the solution was found in grafting the upper European grape vine to the American root, which being American was immune to phylloxera. So France’s, Italy’s, and Spain’s grapevines, among others, survived because of grafting, and with them most wines vinted from European grapes – including the big names on the market today, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Malbec, Riesling, and Chardonnay. (At least in North America, the native grapes make *awful* still dry wines; some sparkling

wines historically achieved some recognition). Among the sophisticates of wine tasting, such a union did not appear to make a difference in taste. Of course, there is much irony here (another measure of the literary) in that if you drink a nice French or Italian wine today it was likely made possible by those two American imports, phylloxera and the grafting of the rootstock. (I remember once being in an Italian vineyard showing American students the graft union on a vine, saying, “And now the American contribution to European fine wines”, to which our Italian guide said with teasing but ironic understatement, “Oh, yes. The *American* contribution².”)

The purpose of “hilling up” is to place an insulating layer of earth against the graft union during winter, when the union is vulnerable to freezing temperatures and at a time when phylloxera is dormant. But come the warming temperatures of spring, the insulating layer of soil must be removed. If not, phylloxera, as it comes back to life, can invade through the earth *above* the graft union and into the territory of the vulnerable European grape vine. (Moreover, the two parts of the vine are very jealous of their identities; their union is more in the way of a forced marriage. The American rootstock will send up shoots to try to bypass the European scion because it wants to grow its own grapes; these shoots have to be pruned because if permitted to grow they rob nutrients from the European vine. Meanwhile, the European vine is attempting to do the same by sending out shoots seeking to root in the soil. They too have to be pruned because if they root the result will be inevitable infestation and death from phylloxera.)

Of course there is also the psychological element of sitting high up on a clunky old farm tractor (I know it was clunky because I drove it during harvest; it had no brakes and I almost rammed a trellis of vines with it) under the sunshine after a long, cold, snowy and gray winter.

This is only one example of how science can be opened up to scrutiny. There are others. For example there are reasons why wine experts smell different aromas such as vanilla, citrus, cherries, blackberry, saddle leather or tobacco in wine. This can be one of the most confusing mystiques for a layperson, when, for example, they hear a wine enthusiast say they detect blackberry with a hint of tobacco in a wine. Does this mean blackberry and tobacco have been added to the wine, as many neophytes have wondered and in fact which I wondered, too, when I was neophyte but was too intimidated by the mystique of wine to ask because of the impenetrable black box of oeno-science? No. The demystified reality of wines made from the European *vitis vinifera* is that they are something of a chameleon in that

different varieties of the genus naturally have chemical compounds (often several) providing the tastes we associate with blackberry and other aromas. This was demonstrated for me by a scientist at Cornell University, Gavin Sacks. I had described him in an earlier passage and then he showed me how they test for wine grape aromas:

'It begins with the nose, it ends with the nose,' he said. The test was simple and used a convection oven, he explained. First, you insert a needle-like syringe filled with your sample [of wine] into the tiny hole of an injector plug, then push down the plunger like you would inject a patient. Unseen, the sample from the wine flows into a column-like container in the oven. 'It's really just a very expensive convection oven you could cook a turkey or pizza in. A tasty one at that, although on the small side', Gavin said. After turning on the oven, and as the temperature rises, aroma compounds begin to emerge – and change. Usually the first is any trace amounts of hydrogen sulfide – the rotten egg smell – because it has a low boiling point. Others can include the smell of root beer, mushrooms, cherries, water melon, bubble gum, and vanilla. 'Vanilla is at the high end. Its boiling point is higher because it's relatively non-volatile compared to the others.' There are anywhere from fifty to a hundred chemical compounds that we can readily smell in wine because they are volatile, meaning they give their odors away. These compounds are among the ten thousand detectable by state-of-the-art equipment in what is called the head space just above the liquid surface of wine in a glass (Hartsock, 2011 p. 111).

And so those mysterious smells we read about in tasting notes at a winery are demystified for the hapless layperson, of which I know I was once one myself.

Then there is the art in wine. The reality, of course, is that you can never completely demystify art, given its tendency toward ambiguity of interpretation. But to examine it is to illuminate, and the old liberal artist in me wants to say illuminate “the human condition”.

For example, we can detect this in how a red wine ages. Gary Barletta, the innocent who is not afraid to be in your face like an imperious Caesar, demonstrated this to me when he decided to let a wine sit in oak barrels a year longer, absorbing tannins and softening more. He sensed a potential in the wine as a winemaker that would make for a good reserve wine:

'I want to show you something. I'll be right back'. He walked out of the winery into the tasting room and returned with a bottle of his 2007 Cabernet Franc and four wine glasses, which he placed on a table. 'Now come with me'. I followed as we walked down an aisle between the oak barrels stacked three high. Gary carried two of the empty wine glasses and a wine thief. Toward the back he turned into a smaller aisle, stuck his head between a bottom barrel and the one above, and withdrew the bung.

'This is the same vintage, but it's been in the barrel a year longer'. He withdrew some Cabernet Franc with the wine thief and filled both glasses. He placed the bung back in the barrel, and we returned to the folding table where he left the other two glasses and the same bottled vintage. Now he filled the remaining glasses a quarter full with the Cab Franc from the bottle. 'Try the bottled Cab Franc first'. I swirled, drew in deeply the aroma, and drank. 'Good', I said. 'Now drink the wine from the barrel'. I swirled, drew in the aroma. It was fuller, richer. I drank. The difference was startling. There was no doubt that the Cab Franc from the barrel was indeed fuller and had more body. The mouth responded to the greater fullness. And it stayed on the palate longer. 'It has more body, good mouthfeel, and length', Gary said, reading my thoughts (Hartssock, 2011, p. 51).

While science, in this case at least, would likely have an explanation, it was at this point art for Gary because it was a gamble to age some of the same vintage in a barrel longer. In fact, it is always a gamble with wine. This is because wine is not stable, it is not constant. It is a living creature that can turn into a monster, as I explore in the book (the ultimate outcome of wine is not wine, but vinegar – derived from an Old French word meaning “sour wine”) (Hartssock, 2011, p. 19). But instead of the winemaker declaring to the neophytes like myself from his high pulpit that the wine is a prestigious and more expensive *Reserve* wine, he walks you through the process of comparison to show what we mean by a richer, more complex reserve wine.

So Gary gambles, as all artists must in taking creative leaps.

Finally, we come to the bullshit. Again, we have all known wine snobs who hold the stem of the wine glass while raising their pinky as if to make a profound statement: “This is elegant, refined, delightfully refreshing”, and they smother us with the puffery of their superlatives (pinky upraised) like some American presidents do, although the latter are not always as elegantly eloquent.

But the bullshit nonetheless emerges (although out of politeness I only imply it at times). For example, professional wine tasters have to spit out their wines because if they don't they will quickly get drunk on multiple tastings. The problem is that when you spit, the taste buds at the far back of the tongue and mouth often do not get the full experience of the wine. Thus the world of fine wine is so often constructed on only a partial tasting of wines. Yes, most of the wine is tasted. But still something is left out when wine is not swallowed. I call that bullshit (but I confess I spit, too, during extended tastings).

Or, the winemaker may be forced to compromise his principles as Gary Barletta did. He is a confirmed dry red wine man. It's in his

Italian-American DNA. The problem is most wine drinkers, at least in the U.S., are sweet wine drinkers. So for marketing purposes (read \$) he had to create a sweet wine by dumping fifty pound bags of white sugar into a dry red wine, which is considered one of the worst sins among the elite of fine wine drinkers. To add insult to injury the first sweet wine he made in such a way won an award for the most perfectly balanced sweet red dessert wine. To serious wine drinkers it is a bullshit wine. But then the biggest selling wine from the region is called Red Cat, a sickly sweet wine derisively described as “Kool-Aid,” an obnoxious sweet sugary summer drink for American kids since at least the 1950s (I remember it well). At the winery that sells Red Cat, aside from selling Red Cat thongs, they have a chant that the tasting room rings with: “Red Cat, Red Cat, it’s an aphrodisiac. Red Cat, Red Cat, it’ll get you in the sack” (Hartsock, 2011, p. 56). Such is how literary journalism can elucidate a subject as complex and complicated as wine, including the bullshit. But then it also portrays another low-brow side to wine, the kind that wants to get down and dirty with cheap wine, thongs and all.

3. Conclusion

We can detect in these examples and others (but I will not claim I have always been successful) another aspect to the nature of a narrative literary journalism, which I will conclude with. As the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky observed, the purpose of literature is to make the familiar unfamiliar, or to leave us estranged from and disrupt the conventions of life – our habits of seeing – we take for granted (Shklovsky, 1965). In other words, it challenges, cognitively, our expectations and we see the world in a new way, whether it is an examination of science, art or metaphorical bullshit. Red Cat wine is one example because it challenges the idea of wine as an elegant, refined product. In the scientific testing for wine aromas, Gavin Sacks all but reduces the process to cooking a pizza. The royalty among the wine tasters, who can make or break the prospects for a vintage in published reviews, make judgments with incomplete information on their palates. Somehow we don’t think of Caesar as an innocent (well, I don’t). Finally, when we think of grapes and wine, we think of harvesting, we think of pruning vines, we think of tasting the vintage or “summer in a glass”, but we don’t think of “making” wine in a snow storm. Hence, my attempts (but largely unconscious at the time as a writer simply pursuing his craft) of trying to make the familiar unfamiliar.

I do not necessarily consider my wine book to be literary journalism. One reason is the implied pretentiousness in saying that “I am literary”. That’s like saying, “I am a wine snob” (pinky upraised as if to be profound). I certainly am no great writer, a Tolstoy, or a Hugo, or an Amado. Instead, I tend to think my book is only located on the margins. One reason is because wine, I discovered, is very much a technical subject. I found that I did have to engage in expository discussion which I wove throughout the narrative (in fact the draft of the book was nearly twice as long in manuscript and I decided that I had become too enamored of the technical aspects, which I cut significantly; I see this as part of my learning curve). This is why I say I wrote the book like a novel “as much as possible”. I return to something Passos, Nering and Carvalho said, when they advocated for “the use of narrative resources to describe research and development processes” (Passos, Nering & Carvalho, 2010, p. 28). This is why we use “narrative resources” to our best capabilities to try to fathom the seemingly impenetrable. Of course best efforts may not be good enough, and in such cases reflect as much the limitations of the author, myself included. For that I can only apologize.

Nor do I, and this may come as a surprise, consider myself a wine expert. I find wine too confounding. I am an enthusiast yes, but I have come to the conclusion that I will forever be just a student of wine. This is because like literature, wine forever teases us out of thought with the possibilities. But at the least, using “narrative resources” to explore the impenetrable and make it more accessible is what I had in mind.

And teasing us out of thought, to crib still again from the poet John Keats, is what I had in mind in the conclusion where I left Gary in his winery trying to fathom his wines. I had come to realize at some level that the winemaker attempts to create a degree of perfection not possible in a creature like wine which, again, is always evolving. In that last scene I have him testing wines once more (for the sake of continuity) in the attempt to estrange us from what we can take for granted. I am trying to make the safety of what is familiar unfamiliar,

‘It’s still young... It could be more complex’, he said. It was part of the old incantation, attempting to tease meaning from the vintage, some future promise. He moved over to the next barrel, grasped the bung, and removed it. He tasted and nodded silently. Then he inserted the stirring paddle again, and as I watched him row back and forth I had a glimpse of what it was really about: an earnest longing not unlike unrequited love. And as Gary stared into the distance with his gray, luminescent eyes, he looked as if he could be rowing to a land of a winemaker’s most earnest dreams and desires (Hartsock, 2011, p.183)

We have returned to the psychological complexity and ambiguity of the winemaker and his wine. This is what I meant when I said that despite his street smarts this winemaker was still something of an innocent. Let Caesar be the judge.

NOTES

- 1 I borrow from Ernst Jünger's *The Storm of Steel*, his account as a soldier on the Western Front during World War I. He sensed that under the severe circumstances of trench warfare, soldiers over time became indifferent to the horrific. As he said, "Seeing and recognizing are matters, really, of habit" (Jünger, 1929 – 1975, p. 23).
- 2 My understanding is that phylloxera does exist in Brazil. But to what extent it impacts European *vitis vinifera* vines used in making fine wines I do not know.

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