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In Praise of Wine*

PHILIP SHERRARD

Wine is not like other drinks. First of all, its ancestry is as old as our civilization. It is celebrated in our earliest poetry, a libation to the gods of Homer, a symbol of beauty in the Song of Songs:

Thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine,
and the roof of thy mouth like the best wine.

Dionysos, the Greek god of wine, led his devotees in Bacchic dance and revelry, and Christ, at the Last Supper among his disciples, gave them wine to drink in the place of his own blood. This fact is enough to explain why wine acquired such a privileged position in the Christian world and why, as this world expanded throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, so the cultivation of the vine thrived, spreading along the valleys and mountain slopes of Italy, Spain, France, Germany, England, wherever the forms of civilization penetrated. Nor is it any accident that during the Middle Ages monasteries owned, as they still own to a lesser extent today, some of the finest vineyards, and that wine took pride of place in bishop's palace and royal court—became, in other words, the classic drink of Europe.

It is a status it still keeps. No occasion, whether civic banquet or private gathering graced by the intimacies of good talk and the warmth of friendship is complete without wine. Not swilled, but sipped, deliberately, slowly, lovingly, every drop savoured, its smell tantalizing the nostrils, its colour the eyes, gradually, as glass succeeds glass, it produces the inner transformation that allows thought to flow more freely, the heart to burgeon, the tones and harmonies of life to grow more rich and beautiful. Those who have mastered the art of drinking wine know that they belong to an exalted company, share secrets of which others are ignorant, have entered a world of mystery where

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they are released from the frustrations and fears, the drabness and triviality that so bedevil ordinary human existence. And they know too, that to reach this state, to experience this inspiration they must go beyond that point at which others, still trapped by some lack of generosity, may stop; know that they must uncork, for the miracle to happen, yet another bottle. For being of the circle of initiates they cannot but recall the words of one of their own poets, that 'where there is no longer any wine there is no love and no other delight for man'.

Katounia, July 1979

