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# Passion for Wine and the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC)

A passion for wine is spreading like wildfire through the world, like a quest for something to give life greater sense and joy. Wine-lovers compare the idiosyncratic tastes of grapes growing in different locations of the globe. With something bordering on apprehension they relish the brand and trade name implacably imposed on a grower despite an increasingly disrupted climate. They leave the bottle open to 're-taste' it the next day and the day after that. They deliberate, calculate, wonder, question and get carried away with their particular enthusiasms. This is indeed a growing passion which touches all professions and social classes, which sharpens each person's senses, impressions and emotions. Though some degree of knowledge develops from this passion, it never quite hardens into certainty. It remains, instead, something against which to continually test one's faculties and one's desire to apprehend the realities of another, fluctuating and intangible, world – that of aromas, tastes, balances and harmonies. A fragile world, for which those of an artistic sensibility always feel a certain nostalgia, which expresses itself subtly, discretely and almost shyly

through matter. We desire to understand how an equilibrium sometimes so delicate is achieved; how these bright and dark moods, these sorrows and joys of the vine can ultimately become tastes, scents or harmonies of an almost musical nature.

Basically all this underlies, and justifies, the profound concept of the 'appellations contrôlées' or 'regulated wine of origin'.* Back in the 1930s when France, followed swiftly by many other countries, created the AOC standards, what was its aim? It simply wished to protect a sum of knowledge, an accumulation of experience, a finger-tip feeling several centuries old that had led people to plant wine in certain 'good' locations. What did a 'good location' mean in that less abstract era? Quite simply a place where 'Lady Vine' felt at ease, could give full 'voice' to her happiness and sing forth without hindrance. We will find that this song is not always as joyous as we think. For the moment it is enough to understand that, when a vine is situated where it can unfold its full potency as a highly atypical and self-willed vegetative being, it will imbue its fruit with a taste endowed by the place in which it grows. Simple enough? It weds the soil via its roots, uniting with it intimately, and receiving through its leaves all the climatic conditions specific to that area. These

* 'Appellation Contrôlée' is a guarantee that a wine has been produced in a specific location (appellation), by a particular method, with approved grape varieties and in controlled quantities. The system is legally defined and regulated in France.

are composed of the different qualities of heat which arise at different moments, of variations of light intensity, of winds full of gentleness or revolt, of modest or abundant rains, of morning mists or brief twilights: all these aspects of weather combine to become first vegetative matter and ultimately fruit. But how does this actually happen?

Take a look at a field of vines, in spring first of all, then in the autumn: you have to realize that all these branches, these leaves, and several tonnes of grapes per hectare – which were mere buds 6 months before – are barely composed of the substance of the soil, as people too often assume. On the contrary, the major part of their substance comes from photosynthesis, a wretched word shorn of beauty which does not come close to expressing a still unexplained mystery that the scientific world observes without being able to reproduce. Photosynthesis refers to the conversion of heat, light and air – a world, therefore, of almost intangible forces like the tastes and aromas we mentioned above – into real matter composed of carbohydrate, starch, sugars etc. If one excludes water from these substances – thus remaining with 'dry matter' as science terms it – over 92 percent derives from photosynthesis, and thus only a very small amount can be attributed to the soil itself. From spring to autumn, too often without realizing it, we witness the plant world 'materializing' an almost invisible world, a process in which the agency of climate plays an important part. Into matter and substance descend subtleties of taste, colour and scent so prized by

wine-lovers: truffle, olive oil, coffee, cigar, tea etc. Each plant accomplishes this task in its 'own' manner, with its unique nuances which give us such pleasure if we know how to recognize them, and can distinguish them from the artificial flavours that technology secretly infiltrates into our food and drink.

With something akin to hypersensitivity the vine excels in its capacity to create nuances of taste. It is therefore interesting to try to understand in detail the deep nature of our friend the vine or, let us say, to enter into its secret gestures so as to approach the very nature of wine.

What place does the vine occupy in the plant kingdom? What is its character, its conduct, its unique nature? Like all living beings, none of whom are merely driven by blind cause and effect, this question takes us in an important direction. To answer it we need to return to the botanists of the Middle Ages and their rich store of knowledge, so little understood by our modern era. They had a very different view of plants from us. Matter itself, which we are so interested in nowadays, right down to its tiniest atoms, was for them merely something that served to fill a form, like the dough in a bread tin. What medieval scholars were interested in was the mould or form itself, in other words the various forces which 'sculpt' the vegetable world differently in each instance, and which give it a particular aspect and mode of behaviour. This was nothing to do with genes – which of course they had never heard of. But if one had talked to them about genes they

would probably have replied: 'Why concern yourself with the obedient labourers who merely carry out orders? Instead study the architects who arrange and organize these genes.' Thus they would direct us to the whole system of energies which physicists are just beginning to comprehend today through magnetic resonance imaging, something which biodynamics makes full use of. Reading Hildegard von Bingen,* Culpeper† and many other famous authors of this period, an era so poorly understood by modern science, we find that all of them approach the plant world through what Plato calls the 'four states of matter' (see Plate 1). Thanks to this formidable body of knowledge one can develop a quite different perspective on the vine and wine.

This ancient wisdom can be briefly and simply, though very imperfectly, summed up as follows. The earth is subject to a force – gravity – that holds sway over every living being and thus also ourselves. It is gravity, this omnipresent force, which makes a stone fall when we throw it, which makes rain fall to earth, and which leaves us feeling so heavy after a day spent working hard. It is by virtue of this force that atoms coalesce, that matter forms and can attain a state of solidity. Without it the physical world, the earth's physical substance, would not exist.

* Blessed Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), a German teacher, monastic leader, mystic, author, and composer of music.
† Nicholas Culpeper (1616–1654), an English botanist, herbalist, physician, and astrologer.

Most fortunately, though, this force is counterbalanced by another, an opposite polarity. In the West we refer to this as 'solar attraction', and in the East it is often described as the force of levitation. Acting in opposition to gravity this leads towards a state of weightlessness. In physical terms heat embodies this force most clearly, which is thus one of rising or lifting from the earth. Just observe how every flame emits an ascending shimmer of heat. Heat dispels and disperses matter. Heated up, a heavy piece of metal turns to liquid, and then soon enters a gaseous state, delivered of its weight. This reveals the impermanence of matter and the physical world, which oscillates between the visible and the invisible – a theme we will return to later. The human being is also subject to this force, and it is this which indirectly – a subject in itself – enables him to wake up in the morning feeling light and renewed. It is this, likewise, which lends us wings to soar above the day's vicissitudes when we hear a piece of good news, and which plays such an important part in feelings of enthusiasm.

The great sages of the past stated that there were two intermediary states between these two forces. Descending from above, from a more rarefied condition, the first of these is air and light. This is the first condition with a slightly terrestrial or physical quality. Air and light are closely connected, the latter becoming visible to us by means of the former. Without air the sky would not appear blue to us. Passing beyond the layers of atmosphere we find the sky is

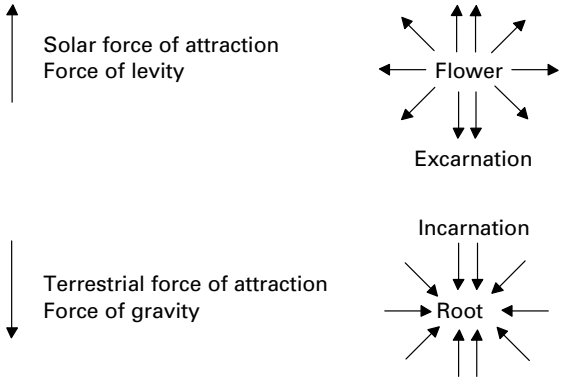
dark, opaque. The air has little weight but it is still, nevertheless, subject to gravity, a fact which, fortunately for us, keeps it closely wrapped around and enfolding the globe. When compressed (excessive gravity) the air actually grows more dense. These examples allow us to grasp the true nature of air and light as a first state of matter subject to density.

Next comes the liquid state. This condition, whose archetype is water, can be seen as occupying an intermediary position between the solar, ascending laws, and those of the earth. Water is more subject to gravity than air, and thus heavier and more earthly in nature. It is poised midway between the earth's gravitational attraction and the rising solar forces. It grows hard as a stone in cold conditions, clearly subject to gravity in a mineral-like fashion. Heat, on the other hand, releases it from earthly laws, enabling it to escape upwards as mist and fog. Archimedes tells us that water relieves us of some of our weight. Some of the pleasure of swimming is in being partly cushioned from the tug of gravity. We ourselves are composed of more than 90 percent water, which also helps explain the effect of various water treatments and therapies. In all this the important thing to note is that air and liquid are intermediary states in a progressive descent towards our earth's solid mineral substance. No life is possible on earth without passing initially through a liquid state – and the same applies of course to plants.

But why this long preamble in a book about wine? Well, so as to develop some understanding of the way in which plants

relate to these four terrestrial conditions, and thus discover the profoundly atypical nature of the vine.

One can say, in general, that each plant reveals its relationship to earthly forces of gravity in its roots, to the watery state in its leaves, to the light in its capacity to bloom, and to warmth and heat in its power to fruit (see diagram below). It should be added that these four aspects also interpenetrate each other in the plant.




All this could be described in length and detail, and should be understood in very specific, tangible terms. But where it becomes still more interesting is in the discovery that certain plants establish such relationships with *extreme originality*. Let's take a few simple examples to start with: a plant whose archetypal nature is to develop a strong affinity with the light will absorb it better, and can express or manifest this particular quality in a ravishing blossom. The lily is an example of this, a flower that adorned the flag of the French royalty. If the

lily did not have this strong connection with light its power to bloom would be considerably less.

A different plant, closely connected with water such as rhubarb, will be able to produce big and abundant leaves. One intimately related to warmth and heat will receive from it a powerful fruit or seed-forming force. We can see this in grains and cereals where each grain sown multiplies a hundredfold.

All this becomes more complex when mother nature departs from her habitual schemas and plays with these four states of matter with such ingenuity and inventiveness that the result is sometimes very difficult to decipher. One example is the carrot which uses its floral capacity to colour and perfume its root, thus rendering the flower itself a poor and unattractive specimen. The pine tree pours its strong connection with the forces of warmth not into fruit but into its inflammable resin, thus endowing itself with the capacity to resist a greater degree of cold than most other plants. The willow is strongly connected not just to water but also to light. Because of this it does not form big leaves but manages to exhale this water through its leaves, and to evaporate it at the same time as attaining a honeyed state in its delicate flowers, of which the bees are so fond. It can also colour its wood a vivid yellow. The nettle (see Plate 2) does not put its connection with warmth into its seeds but into its leaves. Used as an infusion sprayed on vines, this gives them the capacity to maintain their sap circulation even at times of drought. Citronella takes the strength of taste destined for the fruit it does not form and puts it into its leaves.

In the cinnamon, taste descends right into the bark! The toughness of wood can ascend somewhat into the leaf of the magnolia … And so on, and so forth.

Thus there is a secret language sometimes very subtle and difficult to decode. We can admire the ancient scholars who first deciphered this script and then linked it on occasion to very specific planetary or stellar forces whose effect they identified in matter. They also used this knowledge in very precise ways to create powerful remedies. This ability to observe life directly can still be found amongst peoples said to be 'primitive', who know of remarkable properties in the vegetable and animal world that surrounds them. The ancients did not have the same type of intelligence as we understand the word today, nor sophisticated instruments which our modern researchers depend on for their narrowly focused and strictly physical understanding of the world. They had other faculties instead which enabled them to tap into the deep messages of their senses. One can see this in very simple things such as the way people of the past knew how to cut a plant or tree at the right moment, in accordance with its native characteristics, or, let us say, its originating force. This optimized its effects somewhat like a musical note which uses its surroundings to resonate effectively. In olden times, for example, without any calendar of planetary movements, people knew an oak tree should be felled when Mars was in the descendant.

Each plant is an enigma to be solved, a labyrinth of com-

plexity we need to approach with care. Goethe drew our attention to this in his book on plants, speaking of a kind of primordial or archetypal plant whose template, as it were, could be rediscovered amongst the innumerable differences of form and behaviour that plants develop in response to earthly conditions and diversity. Rediscovering this secret language leads us to a different understanding of medicinal plants and those used to make biodynamic preparations. Biodynamic agriculture is spreading fast in the realm of viticulture because – when properly applied, and when the plants cultivated by this means are fully understood – it has powerful effects on the quality and taste of wine.

Medicinal plants, including the vine, are ones which heal due to their very diverse, atypical characteristics. Sometimes such a plant will activate in its roots, stalk, flowers or fruit one or several processes 'normally' situated elsewhere. The beetroot, for instance, directs the abundant sugars synthesized by its leaves not into fruit but into its root! The maple directs these sugars into its sap or syrup. A medicinal plant heals, ultimately, by virtue of being atypical. And to understand why these medicinal plants heal we need to understand that human beings also contain these four states of matter. We can rediscover them in our four temperaments,*

* An ancient doctrine applied to medicine by Hippocrates (*c.* 460–*c.* 370 BC). The temperaments – choleric, sanguine, melancholic, phlegmatic – refer to distinct personality types. See further in Gilbert Childs, *Understand Your Temperament!* (Sophia Books, 1995).

of which one is always predominant. No one will dispute that choleric people, through their stronger connection with heat, often seem to be on the brink of exploding (though they actually explode less frequently than one might think!). The sanguine person, always in movement, is as though borne on breezes and wafts of air. The phlegmatic benefits from his particular relationship to water and fluid through the inertia which enables him to navigate life's obstacles with good humour. Nothing suits him better than floating along contentedly in the swim of things! The melancholic rarely succeeds in overcoming the underlying note of sadness which his somewhat excessive connection with the earth, and the weight of matter, imposes on him. (Paradoxically, though, a good means of making him laugh is to tell him how sad life is!) All these things are elaborated by Hippocrates, who says that an illness often begins due to a disharmony between these four states in a specific part of the body. In trying to observe – ah, such a difficult thing, and something a microscope could never manage – where a process is out of balance, herbal medicine aims to offer a remedy by prescribing a plant or animal organ which innately embodies this specific connection or aspect. In this context a plant is no longer viewed as merely the bearer of substances or molecules, but as a gesture or potential link to the dynamic process it derives from its species. This is also how we can understand anthro-

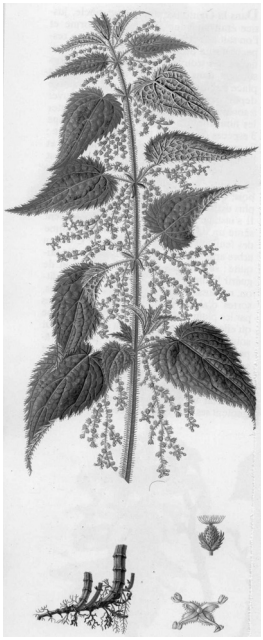
posophic medicine*, which is still in its infancy, and, in a certain way, biodynamics too.

Let us take the example of the nettle to illustrate this in very brief outline, and to bring us a little closer to this whole approach. Though it may seem far-fetched, the nettle can help us, firstly, to better understand wine and its medicinal properties; and secondly to understand the vine and the choice of plants which help it accomplish its task in the face of an increasingly disrupted climate.

A quick glance at the nettle can show us that, like a sensitive and experienced diplomat, it seems to focus its activities more at its centre than its extremities: its roots remain close to the surface and decline to go very deep into the soil; its flowers which are spread the length of its stalk, rather than just emerging from the top, are both discrete and rather unattractive. As for its fruit it remains a minuscule, poorly developed, green grain. (See illustration over, also Plate 2.)

The nettle shows us, therefore, that it concentrates on its leaves: their transparent shimmer, almost floral in nature, and their burning sting, are qualities which ought not to be there in the normal run of things. We know that the leaf is the plant's mediating organ between its roots at one extremity and its fruits at the other. So it is easy to understand that the

* A holistic and salutogenetic approach to health that focuses on ensuring that the conditions for health are present in a person; combating illness is often necessary but is insufficient alone. The approach was founded in the 1920s by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).



nettle is a plant which directs towards its centre what many other plants express at their extremities. It is this fact of resembling something centred in its middle region, or, if you like, of balancing two extremes, which makes the nettle so beneficial for the human heart. This too is a central organ which continually tries to reconcile or balance what we load upon ourselves in our everyday lives, and mediate the often quite chaotic influx from our metabolic system on the one hand and our nervous system on the other. Rudolf Steiner* said of the nettle that it is an almost irreplaceable and indispensable plant. The vine receives it as infusion with particular gratitude at times of dryness or drought. It can also be used as a liquid manure, just to improve soils, as long as its smell is not too strong: the soil dislikes a stench.

This is a very brief glimpse of the immense knowledge of plants which people once possessed, which Goethe first, and then Rudolf Steiner, founder of biodynamic agriculture, took

* Austrian-born philosopher and scientist who developed 'anthroposophy', a system of knowledge that offers holistic and innovative approaches to education, agriculture, medicine, economics, the arts, and many other fields.

up again so ably and developed further. Ultimately we are interested not only in plants' physical aspects but in their whole mode of life and the energies and gestures that inform them. This botanical body of knowledge has now culminated in the wonderful books by Pelikan* and Grohman† which give us very tangible and living insight into the profound and healing reality of plants without referring merely to their molecules. One can see each plant as a melody, and their totality as an orchestral ensemble and continually changing consonance. It is this 'globality' which can heal more than each individual note of the harmony, of which our modern, scientific world is often all too ignorant through lack of knowledge. The younger generation, hopefully, will engage more fully with these new ways of perceiving, which can sustain us and bring to life our dry and abstract view of nature.

We have now learned a little more fluency in the language which allows us insight into the profound nature of our friend the vine. Of course, like every plant it is pulled in two directions: by gravity towards the centre of the earth, and by warmth and light towards the sun. The Greeks formulated this by saying that the vine is Dionysian in contrast to more Apollonian plants, and we can now grasp what they meant. An Apollonian type of plant is one which loves nothing better

* Wilhelm Pelikan, *Healing Plants* (Mercury Press, 1997).
† Herbert Grohmann, *The Plant* (SteinerBooks, 1996).

than to climb heavenwards with an uprightness that nothing can deflect, as if to rejoin the sun. Cypress trees, so fine and delicate, which climb to 10 or 20 metres, give us a perfect image of the Apollonian plant. (See Plate 3.)

The Christian religion chose wheat as the Apollonian plant par excellence. No one can really explain how a stalk as slender as that of wheat can climb so high and defy the wind. This is, indeed, only possible where a healthy agriculture allows silica to play its full role. Let me mention in passing that our modern types of wheat have, alas, degenerated due to the range of treatment they receive – including the dreadful height-limiting herbicides which stunt their growth to 60 centimetres. They are then no longer able to provide the human being with all the qualities which this plant originally embodied. It is now even accused of causing allergies, whereas in fact we ourselves have created them!

The opposite of the Apollonian type of plant is the Dionysian, which shows us a powerful predilection for earthly forces of gravity. Such a plant gathers in its roots a great strength for penetrating the hardest and poorest soils, and for making itself at home there! A stalk of wheat could never manage this. And yes, you have no doubt guessed it, the archetypal representative of the Dionysian plant is the vine (see Plate 5). In fact one cannot fully understand a vine without understanding its opposite. The forces which cypress or wheat direct into their branches or stems to defy gravity and elevate themselves ever higher and higher towards the

sun, are directed in the vine to its roots, enabling it to delve ever deeper and penetrate even the most obdurate and stony soil. This strength also enables it to be quite thrifty in its need for nutrients. One can find vine roots sometimes as far as 30 or 40 metres away from the plant, or even more. Even if the soil is largely rocky the vine will take advantage of the slightest crack to insert its roots. This extreme connection with earthly forces means that the vine is almost incapable of accomplishing any heavenward ascent unaided. I do not say, however, that the vine resembles a liana – something often stated, but really quite inappropriate since the vine is much more than just this. As soon as its branches lift a little way above the soil, unless they have something to attach themselves to, they are recaptured by the forces of the earth. They therefore have to be propped and trellised, helped by means of wires or posts or dead trees – as people do in Portugal sometimes – to find the support which will allow them to climb upwards: something of which they actually have great need. When, towards the end of spring, one observes the almost desperate motions which the vine makes to hurl itself into the air, one could aptly call this a nostalgia for the sun. Each branch which falls is on the search for any aid, however slight, which will allow it to make yet another attempt to climb upwards again.

One has to understand that the vine is the earth's prisoner, imprisoned by the gravity which holds sway over it. This is described in the Greek myth in which Persephone, the

daughter of Demeter, is kidnapped by Pluto – the subterranean god of the underworld who symbolizes gravity itself (and willpower). It is thus that Persephone becomes a prisoner of the harsh laws of the earth, like her son Dionysus who is subsequently torn to pieces by the Titans. They too symbolize the forces of the earth. Gravity is the force which imprisons what surfaces in the earthly domain, clothing itself in matter and isolating and thus separating itself from an overall context of energies. It individualizes in the physical realm, giving birth to the human being's sense of a separate self, of 'I', that little word which, for better or worse, distinguishes us from each other. And this lost globality which we have to try to recover as human beings is, you can say, the second or reborn Dinoysus whose heart is redeemed and entrusted to Zeus.

The vine is thus the archetypal plant of the earth, which joins in deepest union with it, accepting all its forces of gravity. Just look at its flowers, almost concealed in its bosom and turned earthwards. Plants generally flower at the top, above the leaves. The vine is too drawn towards the earth to do this. To find the flowers almost hidden at its heart one has to move back its stems and leaves. But despite their smallness and discreteness we should not misjudge them: they generate a perfume one can detect from several metres away, thus showing that they retain a strong connection to the solar realm even if the earth condition dominates. Being a prisoner of the earth does not mean we

lose all links to the solar realm of generating forces. On the contrary, it is this isolation which gives rise to a *greater longing for the solar realm,* as though by reaction. *The vine draws its capacity to create a product as noble and complex as wine from the fact that it is so radically atypical.*

And this allows us to raise an important question never tackled by our schools of viticulture, which are generally too far removed, unfortunately, from such qualitative considerations. As winegrowers is it our task, perhaps, to help the vine escape the earth a little, that is to give it some means to emerge from its terrestrial 'prison'? Do we need to help raise it up and become somewhat more Apollonian, with fencing or pruning that enables it to climb; or perhaps just to do this more subtly by spraying a Cypress infusion on its leaves? Or should we rather accept or reinforce this connection with gravity by, for example, cutting it back down each year when pruning, in order to force it to remain close to the ground? This, in other words, would mean stimulating and reinforcing its predominating temperament which nature gave it to enable it to survive in such difficult conditions. Couldn't such an action give the wine still more verve or vitality? A comparable approach can be found in education: to what extent should we indulge or oppose a child to help him achieve the best intrinsic harmony? How far can one go? In the same way the viticulturist needs to consider the age of his vines, the generosity of the soil, the latitude of the location, the direc-

tion of the slopes, the prevailing winds, hydrometric considerations etc., before taking a decision which will imbue his grape harvest with abundance, resilience or atypicity – unless he resorts to deceitful technology! Weighing up all these aspects each viticulturist will choose his own path, drawing on his *own creative response,* so as to better harmonize his vines with their archetypal forces.

Shouldn't such things form an intrinsic part of agricultural courses? Should we not give students creativity and liberty by offering a much broader and profounder kind of knowledge than they will gain from fixed formulae or a mechanistic approach that is incapable of grasping the real nature of plants, and which instead focuses almost exclusively on economics and the market? In a location that is well-suited for winegrowing a wise agriculture allows the vines to fully unfold and express the profound life within them. Where a viticulturist can put his personal stamp on his vines through carefully chosen methods of cultivation, such creativity will certainly find its way into his wine. We will return to this theme in Chapter 5.

Only an agriculture that takes full account of the laws of nature and its underlying forces, so widely ignored nowadays, can help generate the authentic diversity of expression implicit in each AOC. To think that this work should be undertaken at the cellar is, as we will see, a lack of understanding generally subscribed to by winegrowers who have had to transform their cellars into factories in order to try –

imperfectly – to correct the agricultural errors of which they are hardly aware.

In general, giving the vine too easy and comfortable a time – that is, through too much manure, or excessively clean soils without competition from other plants, or planting too widely per hectare – i.e. always giving the soil too much strength – will nurture the vine's leaves excessively, giving rise to a rather feeble and unspirited wine. The vine will not have needed to resort to its full, powerful temperament, to its archetypal force, and so its harvest will not have received the stamp and imprint of its true nature.

These reflections, perhaps almost a little too detailed for amateurs, aim merely to explain why increasing numbers of viticulturists speak more of their fields than of their cellars, as if to underline the grave errors of a past which still very much haunt winegrowing today. Here we tap in to some profound questions: will our agriculture and our knowledge at last begin to ask of the plant – but not impose – a certain degree of effort? It is this human/plant synergy, and not an abstract and solely material body of knowledge, that enables us to participate in the genesis of a great wine.

I beg agricultural colleges to become aware of the arid intellectual state which they too often invoke in their students, the great degree to which they limit these students' creativity, the extent to which they distance them from themselves and their own human qualities. When, one wonders, will they start to teach students to observe life itself,

or, for example, the way a vine leaf behaves, pointing earthwards from the moment it appears – quite opposite to, say, a laurel leaf which always points upwards. (See Plates 4 and 5.) We need to grasp that this gesture reveals the leaf's own profound nature.

Surely the time has come to teach students about the personality of each plant, thus enabling them to fully express themselves in a healthy agriculture and to produce foods full of living forces to nourish humanity.

For lovers of wine the important thing to understand is, first of all, the Dionysian nature of the vine, and secondly the need to respect this so that it can connect as well as possible with subtleties of soil and climate – so that, in other words, it can best marry its innate authenticity with the quality of the place where it grows.

A passionate viticulturist will be seeking for something hidden, for knowledge of the underlying forces which invigorate the vine and enable it to imbue its grape with as much force and elegance as possible.

Now that we have staked out the ground we must turn next to a subject fraught with trouble, and ask: What have we done to the vine over the past few decades?