



## Nicola Perullo, "Epistenology: Wine as Experience"

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**Nicola Perullo.** *Epistenology: Wine as Experience.* Columbia University Press 2020. 216 pp. \$95.00 (Hardcover ISBN 9780231197502); \$26.00 (Paperback ISBN 9780231197519).

*Epistenology* sketches an innovative new approach to the aesthetics of wine. The word ‘epistenology’ is a neologism intended to convey two things about this approach. One is that it blends epistemology and oenology, ‘the theory of knowledge and the knowledge of wine’ (x). The other is that it combines ‘epistemology with ontology, where the *n* of ontology has replaced the *m* of epistemology’ (x), suggesting that ‘we cannot separate ontology—*onto* or being—from epistemology—*episteme*, knowledge’ (89). *Epistenology* presents a ‘radically relational’ (x) approach to wine. It urges us not to treat wine as an object whose properties must be represented accurately. Instead, Perullo writes, ‘I try to approach wine as an encounter, a continuous correspondence of doing and undergoing’ (x). In this encounter, what a wine is, and what I make of it in particular contexts, cannot be easily disentangled.

*Epistenology* is divided into two parts, which were originally published in Italian as separate books. The first, ‘Wine and the Creativity of Touch,’ consists of five chapters which sketch the fundamentals of Perullo’s approach. These include reflections on the nature of taste and its relation to the imagination, as well as questions about how to communicate about, and ‘with’ (69), wine. The second part, ‘Taste as a Task,’ contains nine slimmer chapters on more narrowly focused topics, such as expertise, evaluation, and terroir. Both parts of the book criticize an approach to wine that Perullo claims is widespread among critics and professional oenologists—though it’s not clear how widespread he thinks it is among philosophical aestheticians who reflect on wine. The approach that he criticizes attaches great importance to objectivity and precision. To properly appreciate a wine, the story goes, one must be able to identify and speak in detail about its varied aromas and flavours. Rating bottles and vintages, preferably with numbers, is *de rigueur*, as is the ability to explain how a given wine expresses the terroir that produced it. Perullo credits influential oenologist Émile Peynaud with popularizing this approach to wine (26), though Robert Parker, whose newsletter *The Wine Advocate* spread the practice of rating wines on a 100-point scale, also comes in for criticism (133). The attempt to treat wine objectively reaches its apotheosis in so-called blind tasting, in which critics, hoping to put their biases out of action, sample and rate large numbers of wines—often dozens or hundreds at a time—without knowing what they are.

Perullo rejects all these practices, arguing that they originate in a flawed ontology and epistemology. Once we rid ourselves of these errors, we will see that wine ‘*is not a knowledge to be objectified but an encounter to be experienced*’ (21). According to this view, it is unhelpful to ask which flavours and aromas a given wine ‘really’ has, or to ask whether this bottle or that harvest ‘really’ deserves a 90 or a 95. Such questions aim to ‘neutralize, removing fluid differences, living characters and singularity from consideration’ in order to ‘create ... a universe of static generalizations’ (20). To Perullo, encountering a wine is more like encountering another person, in that we ought to value what is singular and irreplaceable about it, and these are features that reveal themselves only through highly specific interactions. ‘A relationship,’ Perullo writes, ‘can be real or not real, banal or profound, complicated or superficial, but it definitely cannot be objective’ (19). What is interesting about a wine might be the way it interacts and evolves with us over a certain sort of meal with a certain group of friends—not through ‘tasting ten or twenty different wines in order to analyze, compare, and evaluate them as objects’ (17). Such a view will already be familiar to some wine lovers, having long been advanced by critics such as Eric Asimov of the *New York Times* and Andrew Jefford of *Decanter*. What is original about *Epistenology* is the attempt to tie this approach

to larger ontological and epistemological questions. For Perullo, we misunderstand the nature of wine because we misunderstand the nature of *things*; we misunderstand what it is to know a wine because we misunderstand what it is to know *anything*.

To flesh out his own approach to wine, Perullo develops an original set of conceptual tools. One is the concept of *haptic taste*. Opposed to ‘optic taste’ (4), it refers to ‘perception that is not object-oriented but rather process-oriented. Haptic perception engages with the fluidity of the materials of life and acknowledges the relational nature of knowledge’ (4). When we understand taste in optic terms, the thing we taste—in this case, a wine—is ‘solidified’ into ‘a stable object consisting of aromas, acidities, alcohol, and defined and fixed places of origin’ (5). Haptic taste, by contrast, ‘has no power to control. It is entirely exposed inward without any manipulation or grasping’ (55). The concept of experience also plays a crucial role in *Epistenology*. Perullo’s understanding of this concept is heavily influenced by John Dewey’s treatment of it in works such as *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*. Dewey describes experience as an interaction between a living thing and its environment, in which each modifies the other to such an extent that it is difficult to say where one stops and the other starts. Similarly, for Perullo, an encounter with a wine involves ‘knots’ that are ‘perceived when various elements combine ... or, in other words, perceived and therefore created’ (22). Dewey was careful to argue that his theory of experience did not entail relativism or irrationalism. A metaphysics of interaction, he argued, might not have room for the notion of *the* real object, but it has plenty of room for the notion of *a* real object. Perullo seems to go quite a bit further than Dewey, insisting that ‘wine is neither an object nor a topic. It is nothing, it doesn’t even exist, without the encounters it experiences’ (90).

There’s plenty to like in *Epistenology*. Wine lovers who have grown weary of point scores and flavour wheels will welcome its more holistic, less objectifying approach to the topic. But while it’s reasonably clear what epistenology is not, it’s far less clear what it *is*. Some of its claims are already widely accepted by wine critics—for example, the idea that ‘terroir is not a stable piece of space; terroir is *made*’ (163). Other claims are so florid that they skirt unintelligibility—for instance, that wine ‘is a text’ (27), that terroir ‘is not only horizontal but also vertical’ (165), and that ‘where wine is imaginative strength on contact, sake is the symbolic domestication of closeness’ (74). Above all, Perullo’s characterizations of epistenology are almost entirely negative. Wine *isn’t* an object independent of us. It should be described ‘without using pre-established forms or lexicons, without learned grammars, without guides’ (77). Our reflections on wine should be ‘without a theme’ (95) and ‘without method’ (106). All well and good—but then how *should* we think about wine and its enjoyment? Perullo’s recommendation seems to be to focus solely on particular encounters with particular wines, ‘concrete happenings and events,’ since ‘there is no essence of wine but only the existence of wines’ (23). It’s one thing to argue that knowledge of wine shouldn’t aspire to the kind of generality prized by certain philosophers, or even certain wine critics. But if there truly is *nothing* general to say about wine, if it really has *no* essence and reflecting on it involves *no* theme and *no* method, then in what sense can we theorize about wine at all? And if we can’t, then just what is a book like this one doing? Perullo tries to sidestep such questions by calling *Epistenology* ‘an exploration *with* wine, not *about* wine’ (89). This is fair enough, if it means that ‘wine does not exist in the way a fixed and objectified ontology may suppose’ (89). But an exploration *with* wine is still an exploration *with wine*. Wine must have some fixity and some sort of existence in order for an exploration with it to be possible. A similar point could be made about the status of Perullo’s own claims in this book. He says that he is not proposing ‘the real, new truth *about* wine,’ since doing so ‘would contradict the radically relational model here proposed’ (9). Instead, he claims to be proposing ‘an egalitarian and disseminated polyglossia: the languages of wine, all of them, may have

space and legitimacy' (9). This cannot, however, mean that all the languages of wine have *equal* space and legitimacy, lest the optic, object-centred approach that Perullo criticizes be just as valid as the haptic, relational approach he defends. To be fair, Perullo says that he is 'well aware of the performative paradoxes of this project' (91). However, as far as I can tell, he does not provide responses to them.

*Epistenology* is an impassioned and provocative critique of objectivism in the world of wine. But as Richard Bernstein memorably put it in the title of one of his books, there is a space between objectivism and relativism. It would be interesting to see Perullo explore that space.

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