

DINNER WITH THE CYCLOPS

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I had the funniest experience on the way here. Your dean told me that many of you were looking forward to a lecture that is somewhat different, that is not just another close reading of texts. I chuckled to myself. You know that I am now a winemaker, pretty far from this world. But I could not resist returning to texts. It is like a homecoming, to a place that I had not realized how much I had missed. So what have I prepared for you, full of excitement? A close reading of texts. I hope that you will forgive me, and chuckle with me. Oh well. I promise to talk about microbes too, and drinking.

Wine is always about stories. If you drink with me tonight, anytime that you drink my wine, you will recall our time together, but even more, you will not be able to resist telling the story. There. I have ruined something: the possibility of our spending time together, innocently; our conviviality is tarnished in advance. But I have said something true: you will not be able to pour my wine without telling that story.

This is my question this afternoon: why are wine and story-telling so inextricably tied together?

I will come back to this question after some long excursions that interest me very much. I will warn you: I do not have an answer to this question, or even much of a hypothesis to test. Instead, I have several introductory matters that require our attention, and then we will return to this question.

- I. THE CYCLOPS
- II. COOKING
- III. FERMENTATION
- IV. DRUNKENNESS

THE CYCLOPS

The Cyclops does not cook. But he possesses abundant wood. In the interim between Odysseus's arrival in the cave and the Cyclops' return home, Odysseus finds wood to build a fire and to sacrifice. We will return to this in a moment.

Odysseus recounts that when the Cyclops comes home, he brings with him a great load of wood, "for his dinner." The word I have translated "for his dinner" is odd; it occurs only 4 times in extant Greek, and only twice in Homer. Both times are in this passage, within a few lines of each other. The word is POTIDORPION, and we do not really know what it means. This is how I would translate it when it next occurs:

The Cyclops "drew off half of the white milk and having curdled it, put it into wicker baskets, and half he let stand in buckets, so that it would be there for drinking if he wanted it, and so that it would ready for dinner for him" [9.246 ff.]

It is entirely unclear what normally constitutes the Cyclops' dinner. If there were not humans there for him to eat, would he have slaughtered sheep or goats? It does not seem so-- they are never referred to as POTIDORPION-- ready or available for dinner. In fact, it is very odd that Odysseus and his men do not cook any animals. As if to emphasize this, Homer (perhaps I should say Odysseus) uses very odd language in describing the interlude before the Cyclops' arrival. He says that they built a fire and then sacrificed cheese. [9.231] The word for sacrifice [THUO] means explicitly to roast-- as far as I can tell, it is nowhere used in Homer of a simple

offering without burning. The idea of roasting cheese is odd; this is also nowhere seen in Homer. Why do Odysseus and his men not slaughter an animal? The sailors urge Odysseus to steal cheese and livestock; mere compunction could not be stopping them. Odysseus is silent about his thinking here, and the very silence, combined with the wood that is PÖTIDORPION is odd and suggestive at once. We are forced from the beginning to think about what one eats, and the "sacrifice" of the cheese forces us to think about meat-eating in particular.

Once the Cyclops gets home, he proceeds in a very orderly fashion, with what one would consider afternoon chores, and only acknowledges his cheese-eating guests once he has finished his milking and lit his fire. But what is the fire for? He finishes his chores without its light or heat. And when he cannibalizes Odysseus' men, he does not cook them first. Nor does he eat them whole:

He sprang up and reached for my companions, and grabbed two together, and knocked them against the ground, like killing puppies, and the brains ran all over and soaked the earth.

Then, having cut them up, limb from limb, he prepared his dinner; and he ate them, like a lion reared in the hills

The meat never touches the fire. The word for the cutting is interesting: TEMNO, which is sometimes used of the careful division of the parts of an animal for sacrifice, and even of a surgeon's work. It is never used for the simple rending of flesh. As in everything else he does, the Cyclops is careful. But he does not cook. He cuts carefully, but then eats like a lion, consuming everything. He cuts like a man, but eats like a beast.

Odysseus' narrative immediately raises more questions about eating. The Cyclops passes out after this meal-- as if he had consumed flesh and wine. But Odysseus makes startlingly clear that there is no wine-- yet:

When he had filled his huge stomach, having fed on human flesh, and drunk milk unmixed with water, he lay down to sleep [9.296 ff]

This is so odd-- "milk unmixed with water?" Milk is never cut with water. But wine is-- Odysseus has just mentioned his special wine of Maron, that was so powerful that it would be cut with twenty measures of water for every measure of wine that one poured out. [9.209] "Unmixed" sounds almost censorious in this passage, as if we should look down on the giant for drinking his milk uncut. What is going on here? We know that this wine is about to become very important, especially in its unmixed state. There is something about the Cyclops that despite his care in ordering, he does not understand the importance of mixing-- in the case of wine, dilution. It is not clear why unmixed milk is somehow cyclopean, but the mention of the word somehow reminds us in advance of his downfall.

Let me pause here for a moment and talk about wine. I had thought for a long time that the Cyclops succumbed to Odysseus's ruse because of his inexperience with alcohol. I had thought that there was a nexus between the Cyclops' raw vegetarianism and the absence of wine from the cave-- as if somehow the Cyclops understood the curdling of milk into the cheese, but not the fermentation of grapes into wine. But it is not simply ignorance: Odysseus makes clear that there are vines all over the land of the Cyclopes, and Polyphemus himself acknowledges that their land "yields large-clustered [sic] wine." He knows about wine-- but for some other reason, it is absent from his cave and probably absent from his diet. I think that it is not accidental that he does not cook and does not keep wine. In order to make further progress on this question, we must leave this text for a moment.

COOKING

I feel pretty sure that the Cyclops did not eat the meat of the animals that he raised. He is in this sense a prototypical vegetarian farmer. But I have to argue from silence to prove my point, and that is difficult and not convincing: all I can say is that Odysseus points to no signs in the Cyclops' orderly cave that he slaughters or consumes animals. I must be honest: I do not have a clue how one could be a vegetarian farmer and a cannibal-- what connects one way of living, which seems quite civilized, with this other possibility, out of all bounds of human living. But I am inclined to suggest on the basis of this episode that there is something equally out of bounds about both ways of living. I am serious about this, even if it seems inhospitable to vegetarians: it is as if Homer, or at least Odysseus, is suggesting that vegetarianism and cannibalism are somehow reflections of each other, or modes that are intimately close, not diametrically opposed. Let me put this another way: one might generalize to the highest degree from this little tableau, to universalize and say: the mode of eating that depends only on raw foods that are not cooked flesh, this is not simply a choice that a human being might make, akin to choosing a way of dressing or dancing. It is a choice that is fundamental, and that is tantamount to placing oneself outside of the civilized customs of human beings.

Here is another way of looking at the same question:

At the beginning of Genesis, on the sixth day, after god creates human beings, he speaks to them and says the following three things, all somehow tied together:

1. Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth [1.28]
2. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, and all the living things that crawl upon the earth[1.28]
3. Here, I give you all plants that bear seeds . . . And all tree in which there is fruit that bears seeds, they shall be for you for eating [1.29]

And then adds the following, "for all the living things of the earth:"

1. For all the living things of the earth, for all the fowl of the heavens, for all that crawls upon the earth, [I give you] all green plants for eating. [1.30]

This occurs in the "first creation story," and one must be careful about conflating this narrative with the one that starts with Adam and Eve. Will you allow me to do so here, with respect to this question: what is it that human beings eat? I would like to start with this pronouncement here, and then review how this question changes as human history unfolds in the post-Adam world.

At the beginning, there is a world full of everything that we live with now, but with a different demarcation of who may eat what. It seems to me that no animals are carnivorous (there is no specification about what the fish may eat; they may in fact be allowed to eat flesh-- but this too is an argument from silence). Everything that lives on or above the surface of the earth eats fruits, seeds, plants. There is no evidence of cooking; no mention of cheese-making or milk-drinking. The whole world seems to be universally vegan and raw food eating-- crudivore. There is no difference between what humans eat and what animals eat; there might even be no difference in the way that they eat. In other words, there might be no such thing as cuisine, vegan or not. This suggests the collapse of some other distinctions: there is no dining, perhaps not even eating: only feeding.

Once we move into the story of Adam and Eve and their progeny, it seems like men and animals still do not eat flesh; and the same remains true even after Adam and Eve leave Eden. The first sign that there are any other possible relations between humans and animals is in the story of Cain and Abel. Abel is a shepherd-- that suggests to me at least milking, in the way of the Cyclops. Perhaps the world is still vegan, and the flocks are kept only for wool-- but this seems somehow incredible. There is a sign that animals can understood as parallel or analogous to the food plants (and not simply as cotton on hooves) when Cain and Abel bring offerings to God.

When Cain brought "fruit of the soil" to Yahweh as an offering, Abel followed with the "firstborn of his flocks, from their fat parts." [4.4]

This seems like a remarkable and sudden innovation. It is surprising to me that the innovation is not rejected or condemned by God, but instead, "Yahweh had regard for Abel and his gift." We know what this leads to: the prototypical vegetarian farmer becomes the first homicide; and a shepherd who, without explicit dispensation from God, slaughters one of his flock-- he becomes the first victim of human violence.

I would like to point out that there is no evidence that Abel cooked his sacrifice for God; and none that he tasted of it, or cooked meat for himself on any other occasion. In fact, there is evidence later that neither of these things happened. This means that something strange and foreign to us took place in Abel's offering: like the Cyclops, he divided the slaughtered flesh, the meat, up carefully, and separated the fat parts for Yahweh-- but did not cook them. For us, the careful cutting of meat seems inseparable from cooking it. We are all now intimately familiar with sushi, but note how few us are eager to sample chicken or pork sashimi. The fish seem still to occupy a special realm; aside from them, the cutting of flesh seems to lead naturally to its cooking. For us, but not for the Cyclops; nor for Abel.

The first cooking does not occur until much later. God decides to cleanse the earth of all flesh, and decides to spare Noah and his family, and a pair of each of the animals that live on or above the surface of the earth. It is not clear what happens with plants (perhaps they have seeds that can withstand a flood) or with the fish-- though clearly their flesh, if they have any, will not be ruined by a flood. When the waters recede and Noah leaves the ark, the very first thing that he does is build a "slaughter-site." He does so unbidden; the same god who so precisely delineated the dimensions and construction of the ark makes no suggestion about this offering.

And yet Noah does something very strange, even more strange than Abel's unprecedented sacrifice: for the victims of his sacrifice come not from some herd that roams the earth, or from wild animals in a forest, but from the very animals that he just saved from the deluge.

And unlike Abel, he clearly roasts them. Yahweh notices this and reacts: "when he smelled the soothing savor, he said in his heart: 'I will never curse the soil again on humankind's account.'" And then he blessed Noah and his offspring, and then explicitly recast the structure of the relationship between humans and animals:

Fear of you shall be on all the wildlife of the earth . . . And the fish of the sea-- into your hands are they [all] given. All crawling things about that live, for you they shall be, for eating; as with the green plants, I now give you all. [9.1-3]

This amazing passage seems to refer directly back the first creation account, as if Yahweh were explicitly rewriting the edicts that he issued there-- in what otherwise seems like a separate story. The question of what human beings may eat is so important that it bridges both accounts.

I do not know why Noah made this immediate and remarkable sacrifice. I do not know why the aroma of roasting meat pleased Yahweh. And I do not know why he reacted in turn by instituting a new relationship between humans and all other living things; one based on fear and involving slaughter and consumption. But we can say this: the eating of flesh is somehow tied to its aroma. God does not make meat part of our lives so that we can eat chicken sashimi.

Aroma is the preeminent aspect of food that does not feed us. Let me put it this way: when we attend to aspects of food like aroma, and when we somehow take in these aspects, then our feeding becomes something more. It becomes eating, and then, dining. Aroma is the preeminent such aspect precisely because it is vaporous, intense but insubstantial at the same time. Sight can move us to eat; but the power of aroma to do so is more fascinating. Aroma points to something that is not there; whereas the vision of beautiful food points only to the food itself. We can smell and not see and still be moved to eat. Not to feed-- that comes in response to hunger. Aroma is what excites appetite, something beyond the realm of feeding and nutrition.

Let me also propose this: Yahweh does not make meat available as a choice. My sense is that this pronouncement, which accompanies the first covenant between God and humans, has a universal value: now, all humans are meat eaters. Put another way-- there is no reason to think that some individual may not make an individual decision and opt out, as it were, but from this moment on, human nature has been redefined: humans inspire fear in other animals because they slaughter, cook, and eat them. All three of these, inseparably.

The disembarkation from the ark, the sacrifice, the institution of meat, the covenant-- all of these happen in unbroken and immediate succession. Time passes very quickly in the aftermath of the flood. Nor does the narrative lose velocity after the pronouncement of the covenant. Without interruption, it proceeds:

Now Noah was the first man of the soil; he planted a vineyard. When he drank of the wine, he became drunk and exposed himself in the middle of his tent. [9.21]

This is sudden. Not only the planting of the vineyard, but the drunkenness that follows the planting without is narrative interruption. Vineyards take a while to mature; even mature vines take several months to produce harvestable fruit; once harvested, the fermentation of sugar into alcohol takes several days at the very least. Time passes so quickly here that a few years are lightly compressed into just a few words. It is as if nothing happens in the world between the pronouncement of the covenant and Noah's drunkenness. I wish I could say more about Noah's exposing himself. I do not understand it. It suggests to me, without surprising me, that there is a connection between drunkenness and the realm of the sexual. But why this connection should be highlighted here, I do not understand; and why the mode of sexuality should be what we call exhibitionism? At this I am mystified. I must leave this aside and turn to you for your help later. For now, this is all that I can say: in this narrative that takes so much care with the question of what humans can eat, the turn to the roasting and consumption of meat is followed without a break by the planting of a vineyard, and the drunkenness of the grape grower. This suggests to me that Noah found something very terrible in the flood, and something so terrible even in the post-covenant world of meat eating, that he could not wait to plant himself a vineyard and get drunk.

Wine is part of the human response to the advent of aroma, and the possibility for dining and cuisine that aroma brings with it; but the first instance of that response is drunkenness and exposure.

[aroma: the production of something that you cannot consume. It evanesces, it dissipates, it floats upwards. You share. With the gods.]

FERMENTATION

I am now about to leave great books aside for a while, and expatriate for a while on things that I have learned or thought about since I left St. John's.

What I mean by fermentation is the following: a microbe eats some form of sugar, or a close relative of sugar (call them "carbohydrates"), and gets nutrition from it, without requiring the presence of oxygen to feed itself in this way. The microbes that I am interested in are all single-celled; some are yeasts, some are bacteria. Some produce alcohol; some do not. I am not really more interested in alcoholic fermentation than in the other sorts-- at the moment. Later, we will return to the difference that alcohol makes; for now; I want to consider the many kinds of fermentation that we rely on for various things that we eat and drink. I have to warn you that I know very little about them:

1. Cheese: cheese is the result of many kinds of microbial actions on milk; some of which take place in the presence of oxygen; some not. There is no cheese without this microbial activity. Let us consider yogurt here too, and even kefir. The fundamental action is the consumption of a sugar particular to milk, lactose, by a bacterium that transforms it into lactic acid. This has many effects on the whole complex that is milk: it raises its acidity, making it less attractive to other microbes; it changes its affinity

for water, leading to concentration; it changes the structure of proteins, leading them to clump and form curds. And it takes an attractive food source off the table.

2. Pickles: pickles too depend on the action of microbes. You can have pickles without the use of salt or vinegar, but not without microbes. Vinegar too is simply the result of microbial activity; it arises more quickly in the presence of oxygen, but can be produced by fermentation. In this case, bacteria consume the various sugars found in fruits and vegetables, and, as if cheese, convert them into acids. Dehydration and protein transformation have almost no role here, but the production of acid is crucial.
3. Ham and Salami: the curing of meat seems distant from fermentation, but it differs from the other modes only in concentration and speed, not in any fundamental way. Here too bacteria eat sugars, produce acids, drive out water, and modify proteins. In a certain sense, the use of salt is not what preserves the meat directly: rather it is used to create an environment favorable to certain bacteria and molds, and not others. The cure itself can thus be understood simply as the culturing of certain organisms.

In each one of these, a microbe attacks what counts for us as a kind of fresh food, and, by consuming what it is interested in within this food, transforms the fresh food into a preserved food. In each case, the transformation is parallel to but different from a form of spoilage. What I mean can be imagined as a kind of race: imagine a field of microbes representing many different types. They are all present at the beginning of the race, and they all have one aim: to consume as much of the food available. All of them eat the same thing-- but here the resemblances stop. They differ from each other subtly, but substantially. Some run faster in warmer conditions, some in cooler; some need more water, some less. Some need oxygen; others are more perfect fermenters and can run without it. Some start fast but finish slowly; some just the opposite. If one type of microbe gets a lead that is too substantial, spoilage occurs. If a good microbe starts fast but cannot finish, spoilage occurs. The race is never decided until all of the food is consumed.

In this way, cheese is the result of a certain activity; a slightly different activity results in spoiled milk. Or maybe it is better to regard it historically: cheese is the result of one set of organism winning the race, rather than another. Salami depends on a certain activity, a certain history; but spoilage differs by only the slightest degree-- a different initial temperature, a different concentration of salt, a different level of moisture-- and suddenly the dominant population is one set of microbes and not another. In each of these cases, the difference between excellent salumi and disgusting meat that you have to throw out-- the difference between this set of microbes winning the race and not this one-- this is not a difference measured in percentages but in parts per thousand or even parts per million.

Let me posit on the basis of this brief survey that preservation in the face of spoilage is central to the understanding of fermentation. Let me add this: the preservation does not occur through the marshaling of some forces different and opposed to the forces of spoilage. Just the opposite: preservation is achieved through the husbandry and management of exactly the same microbial forces that would cause spoilage. Preservation is simply the flip-side of spoilage. I will speak more about this in the question period, but what is remarkable about being engaged in these activities-- winemaking, cheese-making, curing meats-- is that you spend your whole life hovering on the edge of disaster. Right now, at my winery, I have several absolutely crucial fermentations spoiling. And there is nothing that I can do. I have chosen not only a certain pathway, but a field, a whole field of endeavor, where one is at the mercy of the microbes. It takes a certain amount of courage to work with the microbes, and a certain amount of resignation, acquiescence, forbearance. One must step back.

Husbanding the microbes. One undertakes this slightly strange activity only because one is thinking about the future. There is food in front of you, more than you can eat at the moment-- or more than you want to eat. You want this food in front of you somehow to extend into the future, to subsist, not to rot. To some degree, one could be acting simply out of respect for the food itself, without regard to one's own future. But even this view means stepping outside of the simple present and looking ahead-- looking ahead in this case to a spoilage that one wants not to see.

For this reason, preservation always implies thinking about the future; in a certain sense, it means living for, if not in, the future. The red wine that I am making this year, I will not bottle for two more years-- and might need to wait another year or two really to enjoy it. Cheddars can take years to mature. To make red wine, to make cheese, is to look ahead.

It is interesting to consider this in relation to the Cyclops. He divides his milk between what he will consume that night and what he preserves for the future-- cheese. The lawless cannibal does not live merely in the moment; his cheese-making shows that he lives also in and for the future. The cave reveals not just a spatial order, but an ordering in time. But for this brute to make cheese, for him to succeed in the preservation of his milk into the future, he must demonstrate not only care, but also patience, forbearance and forethought.

[why patience, I mean to what end? He does not need to preserve milk. Why does he not simply cut down on the size of his herd?]

Greed. He is a collector, a hoarder. A hoarder of cheese. His racks of cheese are like a wine cellar.]

It is also important to turn these reflections back on the story of Noah. I hope that you will pardon me for scattering so many seeds, for introducing so many strands. I promise to tie them all together soon.

Roasting is not about preservation; it is all about the present. I do not mean that roasting will not allow you to keep your side of antelope around a little longer-- it will. But the central attention in this story on aroma suggests to me that what is essential about roasting is not its ability to preserve your meat for a few hours or a few days; it is the conversion of nutriment into a dish, of feeding into dining. Noah's roasting does not point into the future; it is rooted in the present delight in evanescent aroma. On the other hand, we can now see that his planting a vineyard and his involvement in fermentation is just the opposite: it is clearly and strongly staking a place in the future-- it is a devoting of himself to something in the future. There is something destructive about slaughtering and roasting; something preservative and forward-looking about planting a vineyard and fermenting.

We cannot stop here: notwithstanding our [phenomenological] analysis of the nature of winemaking, this story collapses all time and presents Noah's planting and winemaking as if it were the work of an instant, as if it all took place in a breadth-less present. This is because of an essential aspect of Noah's fermenting that we have all but ignored. He is not making cheese, he is making wine. And cheese cannot get you drunk.

DRUNKENNESS

I have omitted a really remarkable aspect of alcoholic fermentation. Imagine this: a vat of grapes, some damaged and leaking juice. The grapes have come in from the vineyard, they are covered with the wild microbes of their world. Another set of microbes live in the winery; they wait all year, encapsulated, protected against heat and aridity, waiting for harvest and the arrival of the grapes. While the grapes are whole, unbroken, there is no opportunity for infection, or spoilage. The grape skins will not support microbial life; the microbes need an entry way, they need juice to leak out. Harvesting the grapes and transporting them to winery are sufficient disturbances to open the necessary pathway. The race begins.

The first microbes to begin feasting are what are called wild yeasts; two or three different species. They like oxygen, they like sugar, they like moisture. They can live in pure juice, but they thrive in the middle realm of broken grape skins. They produce carbon dioxide as they eat, and alcohol. Every bit of each of these substances makes the environment more favorable to them, and less favorable to their competitors.

Their competitors are the bacteria, many of the same bacteria that make cheese, pickles, salami. What are beneficial in these foods count as spoilage organisms in wine. The reason for this is that each of them will eat sugar and make acid. And the difference between wine grapes and each of the other foods is the concentration of sugar. There is so much sugar in grapes that if all of it were converted to acid, the result would be a vinegar so strong that we could not even season with it, much less drink it. Yet the yeasts have an advantage in this environment. The high concentration of sugar in grape juice is hard on all microbes-- it has a tendency to overwhelm them. The wild yeast are less overwhelmed and so multiply more easily. And as they multiply and feed, they produce more and more carbon dioxide and alcohol. Each of these is a toxin, or, at least, an inhibitor to growth. The more alcohol the yeasts produce, the less friendly the environment is for bacteria. And the more CO₂, the more the environment favors the fermentative feeding of the yeast, and impedes the respirative feeding of the bacteria. Soon the yeast have reconfigured the original field so that it favors them more and more with each hour; the bacteria fail to reproduce and go dormant or perish.

The alcohol kills not only the bacteria, but the very yeast that produce it. The wild yeast can tolerate a concentration of only about 5-6%; the grapes that I work with in California will yield an alcoholic concentration of 14-16%. And here the population of the winery succeeds the population of the vineyard. I have yeast living all over the winery, in the barrels, on the walls, in the hoses, that thrive in high alcohol environments, without oxygen. These will rule the field and complete the fermentation's history. They too begin to perish as the alcohol gets higher and higher, but there are always some within them that will live up to 16%. These are my yeasts-- but from their perspective, my winery is their winery, my grapes their grapes.

Alcohol is a poison, a toxin. It is a toxin that the yeasts manufacture to their own advantage, poisoning their competitors, conquering the field. This poison is what distinguishes wine from cheese. Both are products of microbial action and at least in part of fermentation. Both are produced on the edge of disaster, in the nexus that embodies spoilage and preservation. Both work on raw foods to extend them into the future-- but only wine can get us drunk. Intoxicated.

I wish that I could say more about intoxication. It is a state that I am close to, familiar with. I do think about it, reflect on it. It is part of my business to engender it. What an odd thing!

I enjoy the state, in this sense: I rarely crave it, but when I am in it, I am happy; I feel some excitement, and I am almost always aware that I am intoxicated. It is a difficult thing to discuss, for many reasons. But I have this sense-- just a sense-- that my experience of intoxication is not universal; or at least what I have just pointed to does not get at the essence of intoxication. Let me lay down, axiomatically, a few aspects of what I take to be essential to intoxication:

1. Drunkenness always involves a kind of forgetting. It involves an oblivion in the present moment: matters that otherwise would be in one's mind disappear. And it involves a forgetting of the moments of drunkenness-- of at least of some of what does, what one experiences drunk. Not necessarily a total oblivion. Both are a matter of degree, but both always play some role.
2. Drunkenness is about the present. It does not point to future, and to some degree erases the future in the same way that it involves forgetting. But drunkenness does not exclude the past: even though it always involves forgetting, it also seems to encourage sentimentality. The sentimentality can be the intensification of the present, but it can also be the celebration (or damnation) of the past: drunkenness that veers into the maudlin, the nostalgic. I might go this far: a particular kind of remembering takes place in drunkenness,

but a remembering that does not take good account of the passage of time. Drunkenness can inspire two kinds of experiences of the present: one that is only about the present moment and that looks neither forward nor back; and one that allows the past to suffuse the present and that fails to some degree to distinguish the two. In any case, the future is inevitably forgotten: thus the remarkable inevitability of the hangover.

You might sense that I am finally closing in on my first question: what is the relation between wine and story-telling. In order to get even to the threshold of this question, I now need to rush a little. I hope that you will not mind.

Now both beer and whiskey can make you maudlin, make you forget your responsibilities, make you want to dance. From this perspective, alcohol is alcohol and it makes no difference how it originates, or how it gets into your body. This makes any claims about the special relation between wine and story-telling difficult to maintain. You might expect me now to make claims about the excellence of wine, about how nothing else tastes like it; or claims about its complexity; or that 14% alcohol is the optimum concentration for human intoxication, and that beer falls too low and whiskey too high. No. I have thought pretty hard about this, and I am pretty sure that alcohol is alcohol, and that, at bottom, the means of delivery do not affect us or determine our experience of intoxication.

Or let me put this another way-- because surely we all know that what I just said is not true, or true only in a very limited way. Nothing could make more difference than the following: are we drinking in the company of others? Is there fellowship? Are we drinking in celebration, or as part of a meal? These fundamentally affect, even determine, the nature of our intoxication.

What remains narrowly true is the following: If I feed you wine and withhold from you then nature of what I have just poured, the wine will have no different effect on you than vodka diluted to 14%. There is nothing in what we might call the chemical constitution of wine to make it unique or preeminent. Any effect that I can produce in a glass of my wine can be duplicated by the efforts of a brewmaster or a bartender.

What is special about wine is not subject to chemical analysis, it is precisely what we think and understand about it.

Wine comes from raw grapes, through the least intervention on our part. It could arise spontaneously. We treasure this immediacy, and this is one of the reasons that we celebrate and elevate wine. Wine is part of the realm of the raw, not the cooked. It is the one part of this realm that can get us drunk.

Beer requires cooking, whiskey distillation. They depend not only on what one might call technology; they are part of the world after the fall, after the flood-- the world of fear, of eating other living things. The alcohol they offer might provide some succor or relief from this world, but they are also part of this world. When Noah wanted to get drunk, he did not roast grains or boil mash, he waited years and weeks for grapes to ferment.

The very collapse of this period of waiting forces our attention back to it, and reveals another reason that we celebrate and elevate wine. The myth of vineyard is in some way the mirror image of the spontaneous nature of wine's fermentation. The vineyard-- not the grower-- is preeminent. The vineyard itself trumps the farmer. One reason for this is that the vineyard persists-- the vines are there year after year, harvest after harvest, winemaker after winemaker-- the vineyard has a history. Vineyards always conjure up history, whereas beer and whiskey are born from grain fields that could be planted to turnips next month. The history of the vineyard is the obverse and the pair of the immediacy of fermentation. We love both.

Both of these conspire always to make wine a sentimental beverage for us; when we drink wine, we drink it in knowledge and understanding of its claims to spontaneity, immediacy, innocence-- but also within its claims to a history, to being in time, to being of a time [the vintage]. This in turn means that the intoxication offered by wine is always sentimental, or on the

path of sentimentality, from the beginning. It is born in sentimentality. One might even say that is born within a certain kind of story-- a story about the fall, and about a time before the fall, about a time when fruit grew without cultivation, and alcohol arose spontaneously, without effort on our part. Wine is from the beginning always understood as part of a very particular narrative. We drink wine to remember and to forget at once.

Now we return to the cyclops. I cannot resist; this is my treat, the price that you must pay for my coming here to talk.

Polyphemus does not have what I would now call the natural relation to wine. He has no interest in stories. Nor, I think, does he have any interest in forgetting or remembering. His drunkenness is not Noachic oblivion, nor is it Odyssean nostalgia. What then is it? It is the mindless oblivion of the connoisseur. Listen to the Cyclops' reaction to the wine:

He took and drank it, and he was terribly delighted with the sweet wine when he drank it, and questioned me again, saying:

'be generous and give me more, and tell me your name straight away, so that I can give you a guest-gift and you will delight in it. The grain-giving land of the Cyclopes does indeed bring them large-clustered wine, and the rain of Zeus waters it for them-- but! This is some stream of ambrosia and nectar!'

Polyphemus calls for more wine (and finally becomes interested in Odysseus' name) because he has never had anything like this. The comedy of this moment overwhelms me: here, in the ninth book of the Odyssey, is the first punishment of a wine snob.