On Wine Bullshit: Some New Software?*

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The inspiration for the exegesis that follows comes directly from Harry G. Frankfurt, distinguished emeritus professor of philosophy at Princeton University, who recently published an enormously successful essay on the subject of bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005). In the author's view,

> "One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern. We have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves." (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 1)

A fine philosophical insight into bullshit is provided by Bernie Laplante, played by Dustin Hoffman in the movie "Hero." Laplante is a thief and con artist and explains to his son his take on life as follows:[1]

> "You remember when I said how I was gonna explain about life, buddy? Well, the thing about life is, it gets weird. People are always talking ya about truth. Everybody always knows what the truth is, like it was toilet paper or somethin', and they got a supply in the closet. But what you learn, as you get older, is there ain't no truth. All there is is bullshit, pardon my vulgarity here. Layers of it. One layer of bullshit on top of another. And what you do in life when you get older is, you pick the layer of bullshit that you prefer and that's your bullshit, so to speak."

Much of the bullshit encountered in daily life is unfocused and unspecific, and its genesis is episodic and compelled by the exigencies of the moment. When Ken Lay claimed that Enron was in fine shape, we know that his asseveration was bullshit; but the claim was not intrinsic to Enron, being only a phony excuse for getting caught with his hands in the cookie jar. Having uttered this piece of bullshit might not have predisposed him to do likewise on other subjects (although in his particular case the quantity of verbal excrement spread upon the countryside had been so copious that we might infer the presence of a systemic trait.)

[1]I am indebted to Frank Vannerson for this gem.

This immediately gives us a clue to the two principal sources of bullshit. First, there are some subjects that tend to induce an unusually large amount of bullshit, and Enron may well have been in that category. Equally importantly, there are some people who engage in bullshit with greater frequency than the average; they have a special propensity to bullshit, perhaps habitually or compulsively or just for the fun of it. We may speculate on whether it is nature or nurture that causes them to be what Frankfurt (2005, p. 53) and common parlance aptly call bullshit artists; but we all know and instantly recognize the type.

In some instances, there is an unhappy marriage between a subject that especially lends itself to bullshit and bullshit artists who are impelled to comment on it. I fear that wine is one of those instances where this unholy union is in effect. Lots of commentators describe wines; either because they want to sell wines (e.g., wine stores) or because they are professional wine writers whose business is to evaluate wines.[2] Of course, neither group can do its job properly without imbibing substantial quantities of wine, which may perhaps explain in part the purple prose that flows from their pens. (Note that "purple" is good in wines but not so good in prose.) We, the wine-drinking public, are happy to read their evaluations, because we are largely ignorant of the quality of wines. While we can always take refuge in consulting vintage charts that give an average numerical rating to a particular vintage in a specific region, we cannot possibly know whether this or that specific wine has aged better than average if old or matured more satisfactorily if young. So we implicitly invite wine writers to bombard us with evaluations in magazines, books, e-mailings, sales brochures and the like and we avidly peruse these gems of prose, hoping to be informed, edified and eager to part with our money.

Two things have to be true before wine ratings can become useful for the average wine drinker. Since there are many wine writers, and there is a substantial overlap in the wines they write about (particularly Bordeaux wines), it is important that there be substantial agreement among them. And secondly, what they write must actually convey information; that is to say, it must be free of bullshit. Regrettably, wine evaluations fail on both counts.

We will be entirely impressionistic in discussing the lack of agreement among wine writers because the purpose of this essay is to discuss the bullshit factor in what they put down on paper. But the numerical scores that all wine writers nowadays employ, the so-called Parker scores, vary among each other, and sometimes vary by quite a bit more than one would like for forming a reliable judgment. And this is well underscored by the experience of the Liquid Assets Wine Group: a stable group of eight persons who have been doing regular, blind wine tastings for about ten years. They are all experienced wine drinkers and yet in many cases (not in the majority of cases but in a sizeable minority) the disagreements are substantial. The relatively ideal conditions of this group do not hold for wine writers who, with rare exceptions, do not taste the wines that they write about blind, nor do they taste the same set of wines together on the same occasion, and hence their views are, at best, compromised.

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[2] It turns out that their activities are quite important in selling wines. See Roberts and Reagans (2007).

My sources are e-mails from only three organizations: K&L Wine Merchants, the Flemington (NJ) Central Liquor Store and the Chicago Wine Company. They, in turn, rely on their own analyses as well as on written opinions by the *Wine Advocate*, the *Wine Spectator*, Robert Parker and the *Wine Enthusiast*. The bullshit-o-metric analysis that I have undertaken has covered a total of 24 evaluations of wines, including Rhône wines, Sauternes, red Bordeaux wines, Burgundies, American reds and Spanish wines. Obviously, the sample is small and I make no pretense of having sampled randomly, nor systematically; I can therefore not answer questions such as "Is there more or less bullshit in writing about Burgundies than, say, Santa Barbara Syrahs?"

We will start out by assembling the vocabulary of wine descriptors, which can be adjectives or adjectival phrases. In compiling this list we omit adjectives that are broadly understood by all to have a common meaning: thus we do not include in the list colors (deep red, purple, golden yellow, etc.), duration of finish (long-lasting) or certain taste descriptions (e.g., acidic). Yes, we agree that there can be disagreement even among these categories (your purple is not the same as my purple, what is fairly acidic to you may only be mildly acidic to me) but on the whole, these are bullshit-free categories. But on to the vocabulary of bullshit! The terms we have encountered are in Table 1. The first thing to do is to go down the list to see what catches our eye.

The first thing that makes me perk up is the word "bass." Without any further clues, this term is confusing. Does it mean the fish? Or does it refer to Bass Ale, invented by William Bass in his brewery in 1777 in Burton-on-Trent, England?[3] Or does it refer to the musical instrument? I certainly do not want my wine to smell of the fish, nor of the ale (which reminds me of the old German saying, "Wein nach Bier das rat ich dir, Bier nach Wein das trinkt ein Schwein"). And I have never chewed on a bass viol, nor a viola da gamba, nor any other such instrument, so I do not know what they taste like. Next, I might take exception to bacon fat in my wine; but if it is thought by some to be a desirable attribute in wine, then why not olive oil (virgin only!), canola oil, suet, and for the connoisseur who does not have enough of this attribute in his wine, how about Pam cooking spray, which comes in handy dispensers: just a quick spritz on your Richebourg can really enhance the experience! Just think how that new use would enrich the webpage that advertises,[4]

"At PAM4YOU.com, there's something for everyone. Explore our entire site for recipes and tips on other ways to use PAM® in the kitchen and elsewhere. So bookmark this page and check back often for updates."

"Olive-tinged black currant?" No, I don't want my black currant tinged with olives, either in color or in flavor. But perhaps when you tinge black currants with olives, you get something entirely different, like when you mix blue and yellow paint, which yields green! It is an experiment that I have yet to perform: I think I need to put black currants and olives in a cuisinart and see what happens. I will skip over another lacuna in my education, namely

[3]http://www.bass.com.
[4]http://www.pam4you.com/pages/index_flash.jsp.

that I have never tasted toasted cocoa, but that, too, is subject to an experiment that should not be too hard to carry out. But I really draw the line at scorched earth and spicy earth. First, I have never eaten earth (although I have smelled earth after a good summer rain) and I have never been near scorched earth, perhaps because Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan were a bit before my time. And how do you know what spicy earth tastes or smells like? I could go into my back yard and sprinkle some cumin, cardamom, turmeric and fenugreek; but how would I know that those are the right choices, rather than coriander, chili powder, caraway seeds and cayenne? Does meaty fruit suggest a pineapple that tastes or smells of sirloin, or does it merely mean that it is tough to chew? Is new saddle leather different from any other new leather? Now, I do know what licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) tastes like, but I have never tasted its root as such. But I do know that it is 50 times as sweet as sugar,[5] which makes it an inauspicious ingredient in Chateauneuf du Pape, in the description of which I encountered the term. But perhaps the emphasis here is on its earthy odor. ("The root has a peculiar earthy odor and a strong, characteristic, sweet taste."[6]) And a final confession about licorice: I have never tried to melt it and do not know what happens when you do.

I am not sure how zesty minerals differ from just minerals, but I do not make a habit of chewing on feldspar or quartz. Espresso is also a very ambiguous term: Small World Café differs from Starbucks like day and night: some espressos I love and others I positively hate. Black olives is a meaningless term: pitted Moroccans, Niçoise and Kalamata could not be more different. And then we come to petrol: the writer who employed the term must obviously be of the British persuasion, but enough is enough! Crushed rocks may be a delight, but I have not tasted or smelled them since I was on the chain gang and I do not really want to remember that time. Much better tasting would be a raspberry ganache; but a ganache is already a complex set of flavors: a ganache is a "smooth mixture of chopped chocolate and heavy cream."[7] To this we now have to add raspberries in some fashion, for a truly complex taste experience, which is all right, unless our wine has many more attributes, which may make our gustatory task truly difficult — but more of that later.

There are many more words in Table 1 that we could talk about, but I want to expatiate on only one more, namely the word tannin. As one can see from the Table, tannins can be chewy, dusty, fine-grained, lush, silky, ultrasilky and velvety. All of these qualifiers of tannins need more precise definition, but I am particularly interested in the difference between silky, ultrasilky and velvety. Silky is pretty smooth, and ultrasilky is even more so; how would I know whether the tannin I am tasting is really ultrasilky or just plain silky? And then there is velvet, which tends to be soft (or even ultrasoft?); how would I know whether the tannin is silky or velvety? If I am given a choice between two wines that are described by identical attributes except for their textile quality, should I choose the one with silky tannins or velvety tannins? It is a problem to drive a person crazy.

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[5]http://www.licorice.org/.
[6]Ibid.
[7]http://www.joyofbaking.com/ganache.html.

Table 1
Wine Vocabulary

angular*	floral pastille	plum
animal	flowers, spring	plum sauce
Anise	fruit, brown sugared	precocious*
apple, green	fruit, meaty	prickle
apricot, dried	fruit, refined	prune
austere*	fruit, smoky	quince
backward*	fruit, sweaty	raisin
bacon fat	fruits, black	raspberry
barnyard	graphite	raspberry ganache
bass	green flavors	rocks, crushed
berry, wild	hay	roses
black currant, olive-tinged	hazelnut	sage
blackberry	herb, dried	seaweed
bouillon	honey	seeds
boysenberry	incense	sex appeal
brawny*	inky	silky
bread	jam	skin
briar	kirsch liqueur	smoked game
cassis	lanolin	smoky
cassis, creme de	lavender	soy
cedar	leather	spice box
cherry liqueur	leather, new saddle	spices, Asian
cherry, black	licorice, melted	spiny
cherry, sour	licorice, root	stone, ferrous
chewy*	mandarin	stone, hot
chocolate	meat, roasted	structure
cinnamon	meat, smoked	tannins, chewy
citric	meaty	tannins, dusty
cocoa, toasty	mineral, zesty	tannins, fine-grained
creamy	minerality, fine	tannins, lush
currant, black	minerals	tannins, silky
decadent*	mocha	tannins, ultrasilky
dumb*	nutmeg	tannins, velvety
earth	nuts	tar
earth, scorched	oak, toasty	texture, silky
earth, spicy	oily	tobacco
equilibrium	olive, black	truffle
espresso	orange	unctuous*
fig paste	pain grille	underbrush
fig, hot	pepper	vegetable
fireplace	petrol	violets

*Taken from Parker, R. (2007).

Look at three *actual* descriptions of wines; exact quotes follow, but without attribution, in order to protect the guilty.

"**1959 A. Ligeret Santenay Gravières, Tasteduvin bottling**. Now we are talking. Perhaps it was just the randomness of selection, but the older we went, the fresher the wines seemed to be. The Santenay had a seductive nose of meaty, sweaty and sweet Pinot fruit. There was rich, black, smoky fruit with pinches of prune, animal and bread. The wine was delicious and 'right thurrr' – who says Santenay can't age? Rich, chewy and creamy, the wine had the hot fig flavors of the '59 vintage, that deliciously brown sugared fruit, complemented by earth, spice, seeds and skins. It gained in the glass in a citric and oaty way. **(92+)**."

"**1995 d'Yquem, Sauternes**. Another fabulous value. One of their best wines of the 90s. Yquem can hardly contain their enthusiasm for the 1995 vintage. Clear, brilliant, golden-yellow color with a bouquet that is still a bit closed up at the moment. However, there are hints of honey, raisins, and jam due to the 1995 vintage's superb concentration. The bouquet also reveals subtle aromas of quince, fig, and hazelnut. Shows a great deal of character on the palate – round and full-bodied, with considerable strength. Orange and mandarin flavors fill the mouth, and the finish is much longer than typical of Yquem. This vintage will easily survive the first century of the new millennium, and will no doubt provide us with much more pleasure in future decades."

"**2003 Châteauneuf du Pape Clos du Mont Olivet 'Cuvée des Papes**.' Packed and tight, with sage, licorice root, black currant, plum and tobacco aromas and flavors supported by ferrous and hot stone notes. Yes despite its power it has remarkably lush tannins running through the lengthy finish. This has a great expression of 'terroir.' Best from 2007 through 2025. 350 cases imported. Soy, dried herbs, roasted meat, sweet cherries, and some blacker fruits make an appearance in the dark ruby 2003 Châteauneuf du Papes Cuvee du Papet [sic]. Full-bodied, dense with low acidity, velvety tannin, and an opulent, full-bodied personality, it should be drunk over the next 12–15 years."

What do these descriptions tell us? Not counting color, and not being two fussy about how we count the attributes, the first description has 20, the second 8 and the last 15 taste attributes. Consider the Yquem. The eight flavors are honey, raisin, jam, quince, fig, hazelnut, orange and mandarin. The last two of these "fill the mouth;" hence they are likely to provide powerful taste sensations. We have only a hint of honey, raisin and jam and the quince, fig and hazelnut have only subtly aromas. Are we being told that these six subtle aromas that are only hinted at are not drowned out by the powerful orange and mandarin flavors? This is bullshit of the first order. For the Santenay Gravières we have to juggle 20 different flavors, from sweaty Pinot fruit to smoky fruit, from pinches of prune, animal (what kind? Lions smell very different from dogs), bread, plus earth, spice, skin, seeds, citrus and oat. The pretense that we shall be able to discern all those tastes and aromas is pure bullshit and only a bullshit artist can claim to be able to do that.

We did one other thing. We arranged all the attributes in alphabetical order, and then used a random number generator to select (without replacement) either 10 or 15 attributes from among them and then replicated this experiment a number of times. Here are the results for one particular replication of the experiment for truly hypothetical wines.

Château La Merde, 1995. Packed and tight, with oily, smoked game and petrol, yet with refined fruit, a hint of black fruit and olive flavors and aromas, and supported by meaty fruit, undergrowth and lush tannins running through the lengthy finish. Best from 2007 through 2025, Inky, with olive-tinged black currants, blackberries, tobacco and delicious vegetable flavors.

Château Grand-Cul Poilu Côteneuve, 1998. Great structure, with sage, raspberry ganache and chocolate, Asian spices, underbrush and lavender flavors and aromas, it surprises with spicy earth, sweaty fruit and bread, supported by green apple, fig paste, blackberry and spring flowers.

Château L'Ordure Pomerol, 2004. Fine minerality, dried apricots and cedar characterize this sage-laden wine bursting with black fruit and toasty oak. The inky wine supported by dusty yet silky tannins surprises with its hint of orange overlaid on crushed rock and is redolent with refined fruit, smoked game, hot fig and graphite.

Are my artificial examples any more bullshit than the real ones quoted earlier? Perhaps, but I think that is a judgment call. I think the wine trade is intrinsically bullshit-prone and therefore attracts bullshit artists. Some people are born bullshit artists, others learn to become bullshit artists, but if you fall into neither category and have ambitions in that direction, you may need my bullshit generating software.

References

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