

Clarety: Drinking from the Crystal Goblet

by Gunnar Swanson

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*Note: Beatrice Warde (1900–69) was a typographer, writer, and scholar who edited *The Monotype Recorder*. Her essay “The Crystal Goblet” is perhaps the most famous English language essay on typography. In it, Warde argues against the introspection of avant-garde typography, asserting that classical typography provides a transparent vessel for the ideas of the author—if one notices the type, one is distracted from the thought, just as an ornate wineglass might distract the drinker from true appreciation of the wine.*

BEATRICE WARDE WROTE THAT TYPE IS LIKE A WINEGLASS. The point of the simile had nothing to do with either hand craftsmanship or the potential for lead poisoning from handling Bembo or Waterford. Warde valued a plain crystal goblet over an ornate chalice because the latter vessel obscures the observation of the wine which, she assumes, is the point of drinking. It is her greatest failing as a type critic that she never mentioned (or, apparently, even considered) the jelly jar.

Drinking wine from a jelly jar reveals the color of the wine and saves both money and landfill space. The shape of the jar may not be optimal for swirling the wine to show off its legs, but the point of oenological games is lost on me. If a wine has a feature I cannot distinguish by smell, taste, or feel, why should I care? Such observation is useful in connoisseurship, but I have little interest in that. Knowing that I’ve paid three times retail price for a better wine than the one that the folks at the next table paid three time retail price for is, for some reason I can’t explain, not central to my being.

If we are to assume that Warde was not merely a shallow snob obsessed with reassuring herself that she consumed the best available drugs, perhaps it is not the glass that she should have criticized, but the wine. I do not refer to criticizing the wine in the sense of comparing its color to various gemstones, examining its body, noting the bouquet, sloshing it around in one’s mouth, then spitting out both the wine and a pompous list of adjectives. I mean we should reconsider wine and wine drinking.

What is the relationship of color to consumption? Is the look of the wine an

arbitrary aesthetic addition to the drinking experience? How, then, are the ruby tones and visual indication of substance superior to a tankard encrusted with actual rubies—a vessel of more substance than any wine?

Such questions should not be dismissed as denigrating wine, as mere anti-oenolectualism. The wine is the medium that connects the wine maker and the drinker. It is not more important than either. Did Warde equate the typographer with the truck driver who delivers the wine to the cafe? No, I think maybe the busboy who sets the table or the restaurant manager who chose which glasses to provide... but I digress. Let's get back to the main point.

Perhaps the point of knowing whether a wine has legs is not a dry functional problem but a sweet bit of fantasy. (I have, by now, come to assume that a woman as thoughtful and accomplished as Beatrice Warde would not have ignored the jelly jar. Unless we are willing to consider the possibility of a morbid fear of getting jar lid thread marks on her lips, we must believe that the legs issue was foremost on her mind, even though her biographers have not revealed any record of discussion of the subject.) There may be some considerable satisfaction in imagining the secret pattern of the rivulets formed as one swallows.

Knowing that viscous flows of Chateau Laffite grace one's tongue while flaccid sheets of Dego Red take a lingual fall at the next table could provide a sense of separation from the evil of banality that surrounds us all. I read an interview with a man who had several rings in piercings of his penis. He said it gave him a real satisfaction to stand in a crowded elevator knowing that he had something under his suit that nobody else even imagined. An old girlfriend of mine said she liked sitting in a meeting with a group of Japanese businessmen knowing that her garter belt, lack of underpants, and shaved pubic hair set her apart from everyone else in the boardroom. Perhaps a private knowledge of vinous currents provides that same sense of personal distinction.

The corporate records at Monotype are woefully incomplete. Among other things, they offer no insights into Beatrice Warde's preferences in underwear or hairstyles, and no particularly cogent information on the role of wine choice in type design.

A dozen years ago I drank alternating gulps of Fresca and rum with someone I met in Quintana Roo (or was it Yucatan?) In retrospect it was a bit like reading Bookman with swash variations, but since we were drinking right out of the bottles I'm not sure whether Beatrice Warde would find this story relevant to her essay.