

Sir Roger Scruton (1944-2020)

While I was teaching at Birkbeck College in the early nineteen eighties, and a colleague of Roger Scruton, we would meet in passing to exchange a few words en route to give our lectures. One time I happened to have seen an exhibition with the striking title: *Between discipline and desire*. I mentioned it to him saying that the title seemed to encapsulate the whole of life. He looked at me puzzled and said, "But for me discipline is desire." Roger was nothing if not interesting. I smiled and headed off to give my class wondering what on earth he meant. It was years later when reading his essay, *The Golden Mean*, in this magazine, that I finally understood his remark.

In that essay, he charts moderation as a way to live and be on good terms with one's species. It avoids the excess of binging, and as he saw it the equal extreme of abstinence. It requires equilibrium, not taking the easy way, not being swept along. But that is hard won:

...if there were an easy way back to the world of moderation, we would take it. But there's the rub: balance needs discipline, be it the discipline of the tightrope walker or that of the impartial judge. (WFW Issue 1)

To some this talk of equilibrium and balance will seem ironic when they think of his outspoken politics. And it is true that he didn't always achieve that equanimity. It was, however, something to strive for: it was what he wanted. Also, as a thinker of the right he was no lover of unfettered capitalism. His philosophy was a form of cosmic high Toryism: a world where everything was in its rightful place and everyone knew their place in it. He combined this view with the idea that despite hierarchies respect was to be evenly distributed, and he practiced what he preached. He gave more time to his students than others and took great interest in their lives and their views, however different from his own. Although it pained me to see that Roger's personal politics were so much better than my colleagues on the left who espoused all the approved views but had little time for individuals, I admired him for it, despite our political differences. The real irony of his political thinking was that instead of staying in his place, Roger broke free from early moorings to become almost aristocracy, a country squire who rode to hound and wrote in praise of fox hunting.

A sense of place was important to Roger as was our duty to nature, to tend the land and leave it to others who would come in our place, and here we can see the origins for his love of wines of place. While some baulk at the idea of terroir, Roger celebrated it, almost to excess. I remember him telling me that in the Chablis he was enjoying he could discern not just the hill and the church but the stiff piety of the pews. He was not always serious; another quality that irritated his upright opponents. He loved wines of complexity and balance: wines that strained to resolve the tension between competing elements; wines after his own heart. He knew that pleasure was achieved through contrast and interest and reserved his opprobrium for crowd pleasing wines that failed to offer much. When suffering a lack of equilibrium he could be withering about the high

alcohol “squeezed out of Shiraz or the gooseberry mouth-spray of fast-fermented Sauvignon” (ibid.) But he loved wines where “something more than grapes and sunlight had gone into the making of them”, the white wines of Burgundy in particular, where we taste not just the fruit and the ferment but the years of culture and tradition behind the making. It is not just the perceptible characteristics of the wines that we appreciate and celebrate but also the values we place on the human customs and traditions of craft that produced them.

That said I was disappointed that Roger did not regard wine as an object of beauty, although he wrote beautifully about it. His strict Kantian philosophy prevented him from seeing wines as worthy of aesthetic judgment. For Kant, aesthetic judgments required disinterested pleasure, and Roger was too interested in the particularities of wine to adopt this attitude. Like Kant, however, he thought wine softened people’s characters and opened them out to one another and there was nothing more enjoyable than sharing a good bottle with Roger. Glass in hand, he would marvel at the liquid it contained as if it somehow exceeded what was there. He never lost this infectious wonder, fascination and admiration for a good wine and his early death is a sad loss for the world of wine.

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