

I have been working with the idea of Terroir a while.

Why am I still interested in Terroir?

Can I let go of it.

I wanted to start with this statue. I came upon it ten years ago at the end of a walk through a garden in Italy. At that point I was considering what the point of life was. Although not necessarily suicidal, I was considering the atoms of existence, what holds them together as a conscious sense of myself in the world in time.

That is a romantic after-thought.

When I first saw this statue, I was thinking about sexual drives, procreation, attraction, and the dissipation I experienced while drinking.

I saw something in the statue.

I wondered if it was some kind of metaphor, or some kind of mockery. Or maybe a tragic eulogy. A fat naked man riding a tortoise which such solemnity, and a gesture that seemed to be saying “enough”.

Ten years ago that’s all I knew, about the statue. Now I know it dates from around 1560, and it’s by a guy called Valerio Cioli, who I still know nothing about. It was commissioned by one of the Medicis, who were a Florentine based family of oligarchs. They had a banking, political and papal dynasty, that lasted, more on than off, about 300 years. From the 15th to the 18th century. Cosimo I de Medici, the guy who commissioned this statue, was known, like his predecessors, as a great banker, and a great politician. He was also considered to be a great patron to the arts. He built the Uffizzi (the Offices) in Florence which he intended, as the name indicates, to be offices in which to conglomerate all the craft guilds and administration under his control. Like an Arts Centre.

Today the Uffizzi is a famous museum, where a lot of Medici commissioned art from the centuries of their dominance can be seen.

Cosimo I commissioned this particular statue as a fountain for the main garden outside his palace in Florence. The Boboli gardens. The gardens were designed by his wife, Eleonora di Toledo. The statue is called La fontana del Bacchino, The fountain of Bacchus. Bacchus is also Dionysus, (the gods have many names). He is the God of grapes, wine, fertility, and ritual madness. What we think of as theatre, and theatres, derive from our interpretations of this god's annual festival in Athens. The festival of Dionysus.

The statue of The fountain of Bacchus is also a portrait of a real person. Braccio di Bartolo. He was a well known court dwarf belonging to Cosimo I de Medici. Dwarves were high value commodities because of their rarity and perceived monstrosity.

Braccio di Bartolo was known in his time more by his nickname, Nano Morgante.

Morgante was a giant that featured in a popular epic poem from a century earlier, written by Luigi Pulci, after being commissioned by Lucrezia Tornabuoni. Lucrezia was also known as a patron of the arts. She was Lorenzo Medici's wife. She was also the mother of Lorenzo The Magnificent, whose granddaughter, Maria Salviati, was the mother of Cosimo I de Medici.

Nano means miniscule. Nano Morgante, or Braccio di Bartolo, was listed amongst possessions of value in Cosimo I de Medici's office documents. He also featured in quite a few other artworks commissioned by Cosimo I. Always naked. Usually in some kind of riff on a popular arts motif. This one probably references an equestrian, heroic style. The conquering rider on his steed. According to some of Cosimo I's office documents, Braccio di Bartolo was valued enough at court to be given title to lands and allowed to sire children, who were allowed to inherit those lands. So he was

both a commodity owned by a banker, and a citizen of some standing in his society. It's possible to be both.

So this is a statue by a guy commissioned by a banker as a portrait of the dwarf he owned portraying a god. And a fountain.

It's many things.

The gesture, Braccio di Bartolo's gesture in this statue, reminded me of Italians who could order a bottle of wine over lunch, when you watched them, or went out with them. They could drink less than half of it, and say "Basta". Enough. Not all Italians, of course, just some from my memory of that time.

That it was possible to pay for something and not finish it all, right to very bottom, had really impressed me. Or rather it seemed incomprehensible to me. Me and my atoms, my molecules, that felt compelled to finish every bite and drink every drop, simply because I had paid for it.

Basta. Enough.

The statue made me think about my actual position in my world at that moment.

A corpulent naked man on a tortoise making an uncanny gesture, this statue made me think about the word, terroir.

Terroir is a French word. It comes via Italy, through Latin. Terra: land, domain. Territoria: groups, or offices. Land offices. In French the root is Terre: the earth beneath our feet, and also the whole planet we inhabit. So there's a duality in the word in the roots. It's big and small. It's many things.

Terroir, used in common French, basically means of a region, a territory.

As a modern international word, Terroir is often tied to a concept in the agricultural industries. This Terroir in this sense suggests, that a product can be made to be consciously representative of a region. It's particularly important as a concept in modern viticulture, wine making.

When we're talking modern viticulture, we're talking not that long. We're talking wine as a commodity. A collectable, tradable, commodity. For this you need a strong, transportable, sanitary container that you can effectively seal and put a label on.

Reliable glass, cork and labels. These things as we know them, really only came about in the late 1700s, early 1800s. So our international idea of Terroir is really post industrial. It's tied to that time when you could encapsulate and label a portable product as securely coming from specific place and time.

Or supposedly so. When we claim things so fervently with a label, there's often a lot of room for fraud. Particularly when you label things as pure. That's a whole other diversion.

Of course wine has been around much longer than the late 1700s. We've probably always made booze of one kind or another. Fermented fruit. Fermented grain. Animals get intoxicated.

Wine made specifically from grapes has been recorded from at least 6000 years ago, in the Caucuses - what's now Northern Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. People have valued and gifted wine for just as long. The Greeks brought viticulture to all their colonies, and the Romans developed most of the wine regions of Europe as part of their process of Empire – The Duoro in Portugal, and pretty well all the famous French Appellations: Bordeaux, Burgundy, Alsace, Champagne, Languedoc, Loire Valley and the Rhone. ETC... . And in the Americas, most of the wine growing regions were started by the various competing orders of the Catholic Church who planted

grapes, like Pais, so they could have a sacramental wine and accumulate souls to monopolise the real estate of heaven.

But anyway, the modern post industrial concept of terroir within agriculture, carries with it this ideal of the value of a site-specifically derived agricultural commodity.

And a romanticism about the idea of place, and the people who are able to convert place to product.

There are three major factors at play in this modern concept of Terroir:

- 1) the geographical situation of a region – its aspect to the sun, to water, to wind over a given season.
- 2) its geological history – what's in the dirt, the mix of the minerals and organic compounds.
- 3) it's human cultural history – what kind of grape vines have people grown here, what kind of people have grown here, what kind of wine do they make.

This idea of Terroir suggests that all these things, these factors, can be manipulated by someone who understands where they are, and that they can encapsulated an expression of that in a product for future consumption.

Each individual wine maker, potentially, has access to a rich consolidated heritage rooted millions of years deep in a specific place. Such a wine maker can, in the present, articulate the future potential of the past. The terroir of the artist, each variable year, expressed and encapsulated in a vintage bottle of wine.

I wrote that five years ago

As an idea, that is some deeply rooted romantic magic. That is belonging.

That's your generational, small lot farmer,

The Marquis inspired in the cellar, on his ancestral holdings.

The banker, the miner, the artisanal winemaker, understanding and working with the land they have purchased.

One of the nice things for me about being in Italy, was that I didn't belong. Italy is very regional. Very familiar. You will always be a visitor. I found this impossibility of belonging quite comfortable, because the culture was consumable for me without any responsibility.

But

About Twenty years ago, I read a book called *The Resettlement of British Columbia* by Historical Geographer Cole Harris. It started out as a tabulation of demographic data concerning 19th century miners in BC, but it went on from there, and introduced the idea of terroir to me. It made quite an impression on me. In that book's introduction, Harris talks about reading the preface of a book about French rural history. Cole Harris describes that unnamed French historian's multi-generational relationship to the land. That author's inhabited experience of terroir.

...the village of his youth and the worn stone path, that led from his house to the village brook. ...The path left the industrial and the modern, and entered their own long European antecedents – his own history leading from his own doorstep in the form of a worn stone path.

Harris is talking about the idea of belonging. An idea encountered from his own, consciously colonial, provincial perspective. And he's referencing Terroir as a sort of

elevated regionalism. A consciously crafted generational existence within a knowable compartment of the earth we inhabit.

Cole Harris also writes, Few British Columbians can live with the past in this way, the way of the French guy in his village, and suggests that here in British Columbia ... people live somewhat perched, far from various homes, in a place that is not quite their own.

That was Cole Harris's feeling then. It's a feeling I felt I understood. It was impressed upon me.

So after my encounter with the statue of The fountain of Bacchus, I wanted to think about where, and how, I , or my tortoise, might belong.

The place I have the most connections to is here in British Columbia. Think about that name. That label.

I wanted to understand my being here, through thinking about ideas of Terroir.

Nine years ago I started studying to be a Sommelier. And I started doing walks from my house. With my son. To see how far we could get in a day, or two, or three. and then from place to place. Until he got bored. (Together we got as far as Lytton).

I kept going.

I went for swim once around Lighthouse Park over here, Starboat Cove. As I walked down the trail there was an incredible smell. It kind of overwhelmed my senses. As I came over some rocks to the water, I almost stepped into a giant bloated decomposing sea lion. Right next to it were three huge turkey vultures, starring at me. I felt revulsion., fear, and shame. Because how could I not have recognised that overwhelming smell of death, but also because I had been drawn forward into those decomposing molecules. Into that heavy smell.

Now, one of the interesting templates a Sommelier will impose upon his understanding of booze is a process of blind tasting. Of using your senses to test your preconceived knowledge. Your prejudices.

You cover the label to the best of your ability and use your senses.

The five human senses are touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell.

- 1) Touch is the feel of the drink in your mouth its weight and viscosity, and because your mouth is kind of a vessel, the pressure from gasses.
- 2) You can hear the bubbles, the song of a pour.
- 3) Sight, is the colour, and clarity of an alcohol.
- 4) Taste. Our tongue apparently only differentiates between five or six basic taste sensations: sweet, sour, bitter, salty and umami, and maybe another one, a mystery one.
- 5) Smell.

That is where the action is. Our nose, or our olfactory receptors, in our nose and up from the palate.

This is where the congeners enter into us.

Congeners, that's one my favourite words related to booze, to terroir. Sounds like a Conjuror, a magician. Congeners are organic compounds that carry the distinctive aromas that give character to a wine or spirit. Molecules, suspended in the general poisons of alcohols, that trigger associations or memories. Released through fermentation, sometimes distilled. Encapsulated in sealed bottles.

We smell death, decay, transitions, because that is what smell is. It's a penetration. A real impression of the molecules released from a dissipating entity, inserting themselves, with the help of our inhalation, into our olfactory receptors.

Flowers fruit flesh...

When you drink a wine, sure you can smell/taste or think of fruit... berries, cherries apples...grapes. But it's the other trace associations that get the aficionados excited.

a mersault - rotting apples in a field from last month
a chablis - dead oysters from millions of years ago
some sauvignon blancs - a touch of old man sweat, hormones.
an aged white rioja, a vina tondonia - the discarded underwear of an ancient Duchess

Just the hint of sex, just the hint of a still transitioning death.

So when I started with my walks from my house, I started with fear, and not a little shame. Similar to the feelings from of my encounter with the sea lion.

Fear of what my senses might find, or not find, in the terroir I think I am from.

A bit shameful of where my senses might lead me.

The shame of even looking for something, with my senses.

Because the things your senses discover through the congeners of alcohol are not necessarily what you associate them to be. And what you encapsulate in a bottle, or as an idea, is not unchangeable. All things, exposed to air, will oxidise. And a blind tasting, is never really blind. There's always the context you bring. And the context you encounter.

But I kept walking, and then driving. I started to repeatedly visit some places. I started to meet people, I met people within the terroir I was walking through.

To be more than a visitor, I worked with some of them on projects. Like my friend Chris Bose on his book, N'Shaytkin. We met under a bridge in Kamloops. His book is about an event that may or may not have happened in and around Spences Bridge. Told through five perspectives, including his kid's cartoons and some Nl̓eʔkepmxcin ghost stories.

I also met people like Don Gayton, who early on took me on a hike in and around an area called White Lake. He used to work for the ministry of forests as a biologist, but is actually a grasslands specialist. We met at a cattle gate that leads to the lake. It's more of an evaporation pond. Briny with tiny shrimps. This lake is in a small enclosed ecosystem, kind of between the Okanagan and the Similkameen. On a small plateau surrounded by ridges where all the water drains to a central point, and evaporates.

We walked around the lake and over to a recent road cut, where we looked for fossils.

I found a metasequoia from the miocene era. A metasequoia was a deciduous early redwood tree that grew around here from 5 to 23 million years ago. On the coast and the interior. All over.

Don has written eloquently about the long extinct metasequoia. He's written about his experiments with the introduction of a weevil as a bio agent to try and control the invasive European species of Diffuse Knapweed. He's written about drinking in the Okanagan.

We've kept in touch.

The last time we talked he told me that the week prior, he had walked home from the strip mall. He lives in Summerland. In the little landscaped patch, next to the parking lot he had seen a metasequoia. He was shocked. Then he noticed that they were all over the place.

Apparently, in the late 1940s in a remote valley in China, a visiting European botanist stumbled upon a tree shrine, in what the local people called a water fir. He took some cuttings and propagated them back in his lab. He discovered they were the long-thought-to-be-extinct metasequoia, and that they were easy to grow, and would make hardy decorative hedges. They are very popular with industrial landscapers all over North America.

I've tried to go back to revisit with people, and with places, just to continue to question my senses. My sense of certainty.

One of those places is White Lake. Where Don first took me. Where I found the fossil. I stop and take a walk there whenever I am passing. It's not much to look at. But it's made an impression upon me. Something always seems to have occurred.

At the cattle gate where I first met Don, I once encountered an elaborate roadside shrine for a kid who had been murdered on the spot. Some kind of Fentanyl, Okanagan Valley gang, dispute.

The next time I went there I met some girls who were building tiny grass high fence-ways to encourage rattlesnakes to use the under road tunnels they had also constructed. It was apart of a project to try and save the rattlesnakes from getting squished by cars when they crossed the road and loitered to bask in its warmth. They came back a little while later just to show me a rubber boa they had found. It's the only constrictor species native to the Okanagan. To BC. To this country.

I started to take people from Vancouver with me. Sometimes it was their first time leaving the city, the lower mainland, other than plane travel to much farther destinations.

You discover different things when you are with different people. Just last month I went with a friend on a trip through parts of the Chilcotin. I had never been there. The impressions of that particular expanse in the landscape, the smells, were particular to my sharing it with that friend. We came back through the Gang Ranch. One of the largest ranches in the world. We wondered; all that land owned by one entity, one person - they let you know, lots of signs, no trespassing, property of Gang Ranch- who owns that ?

Currently , I think it's a Saudi billionaire, Ibrahim Afandi. Some people suggest he was an early financier of Osama bin Laden. No one can say for sure if he's ever set foot there. The Ranch, all that land, doesn't turn a profit. It's an investment. A possession.

There's also the Douglas Lake Ranch In the uplands and plateaus East of Merit, the Nicola Valley. Also one of the largest individually held ranches in the world. It's currently owned by American billionaire Stan Kroenke. He married a Walmart heiress. He only visits occasionally. He owns a bunch of sports teams and likes to go big game hunting, and prohibit locals from accessing the fishing lakes. In theory you can't own a lake in BC. But he thinks different. His representatives are involved in some legal actions pertaining to that.

These ranches have interesting histories of acquisition. But that's another meander, down a different path.

So in these ways I wander, and I keep acquiring different aspect of the terroir I once wanted to understand.

What should follow acquisition? Knowledge? Profit?

Dissipation?

Four years ago I started taking two brothers, Aryo and Arash Khakbour, with me. They started a theatre company together, called the Biting School. The brothers were really into visiting Churches. Something that had never occurred to me, even though, churches are all over the place. Everywhere in our landscape, you'll find churches. I had just willed my senses to be blind to them. But once you see one, you realise they are everywhere.

You discover different things when you are with different people. We met a large Congolese Catholic family visiting Benedictine monasteries. We met them at the Benedictine Abbey, in Mission.

Sex and death and property also came up. We went to a lot of churches.

We started to do these things we called a sacrifice. It was a short performance where we would meet people and ask them about the sensations in their body when they thought about sacrifice. We would ask them if they were to mine beneath the surface of the place they inhabit, what element would they be looking for. Then one of the brothers would very gently sacrifice his other brother for the person we had met. While he died, the sacrificed brother would try to embody those senses the person spoke of, and the element they were looking for.

We never knew what it was about. There was no way to know what associations to senses and elements the person we had met, might experience, or might hold within them. But sometimes we'd all get this small sense of dissipation.

The last one they did was close to here. It was during the Tabestoon Festival. The Persian festival in North Van, the summer before last. It took place on a small floating dock close to a helicopter landing pad.

When I think of that performance, I wonder if I have let go of the idea of Terroir.

Then I think of the port.

It has been almost twenty years since the port has been fenced off, secured. Sailors have to stay on their ships. Only Longshoremen, and Police are allowed in that secured, mediated zone. Longshoremen in Vancouver have a long and deep relationship to the Hell's Angels. The Police and the Hell's Angels are actually very similar entities. Loyalty cults guarding commodities. The port is now a sealed and exclusive area for the exchange of commodities.

I came here tonight from Vancouver, through North Vancouver, to West Vancouver. Why are cities here at all? From Richmond to Port Coquitlam to Port Moody, to here, they are all strung along and clinging to a large deep water port. That's why the cities, and their people, are here, in this particular landscape.

I would like to allow my senses to impress upon me what that is, what this is about. But I can't now go for a walk by the port, by the docks, I can't smell and see how we are here, and why all this is all about us.

Maybe it's just another romantic thought, or I'm just nostalgic for a dissipated idea, or an ideal that may never have been, but I like think we could overcome our fear, our shame, and get rid of these fences.

That's enough.