Place and World

Robert W. Mayberry

Grand Valley State University

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by Robert W. Mayberry

Place and World

In January, 1998, Professor Robert Mayberry of Grand Valley’s School of Communications was proclaimed a Knight of the Order of Merit—Chevalier de l’Ordre du Mérite agricole—on the recommendation of the French Minister of Agriculture. This distinction recognizes more than twenty-five years of Mayberry’s writing, lecturing, and consulting on the subject of the wines and wine industry of France and, in particular, of the Rhone Valley, where he is known among the winemakers of the region as le professeur. Mayberry’s writing combines meticulous scholarship with an eloquent explication of the ways in which wine and winemaking reflect and are part of the large cultural tensions shaping our world. His book *Wines of the Rhone Valley: A Guide to Origins* is simultaneously a compendium of hard information and an extended Virgilian meditation on the specificity of place, which it is our general responsibility to respect and safeguard.

Professor Mayberry was officially presented with the regalia of the Order of Merit by M. Daniel Gagneaux, Trade Commissioner and Commercial Counselor to the French Consulate in Chicago, at a ceremony in Allendale on September 1, 1998. The following were his remarks at the ceremony. —Edd.

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Robert W. Mayberry, Associate Professor of Communications, has taught rhetoric, hermeneutics, aesthetics, and theories of communication at GVSU since 1971. His Liberal Studies course, “Wine: History, Anthropology, Appreciation,” is offered every other year.

Thank you, Monsieur the Commercial Counselor. Please convey my thanks to Monsieur the Consul, to Monsieur the Ambassador, and to Monsieur the Minister of Agriculture.

I also want to thank the vigneron of the Rhone Valley, to whom I owe any knowledge that you might attribute to me.

I want to thank my New Rochelle High School French teacher, Mrs. Schein, wherever you are, who made more things possible than either she or her student could have known.

To give credit where credit is due, it was my Latin teacher, Miss Bowers, and Julius Caesar who first introduced me to the Gauls.

I want to thank Grand Valley, which shares in receiving this award, and in particular President Lubbers and two successive deans under whom I worked, Adrian Tinsley and Forrest Armstrong, who let all this “count” academically. I am grateful for their vision in encouraging people to be scholarly in what they loved to do, in their passions, as the Frenchman expresses the spirit—the kind of local kind of the resonances of the spirit, as it were, along with the change.

First text:

There is a hand of iron, a heart of stone, that breaketh the edifice of a nation. This, at one end of the American journalist W. A. Clark expresses the outlook in which the French wine industry is sometimes depicted, where the spirit of the Gauls is called the spirit of the artichoke.

Next text:

Monsieur, une artichoque.

This, at the other end, from a grocer in the course of explaining the local kind of the Vaucluse, “in his land artichokes are small and so affectionately asked if he had them from Spain. He replied, ‘Besides, he said, ‘I never knew an artichoke.’”

Third text:

Technology produces the same place and the same commodities as it does so in some other place of origin, of the same time, or of the same history, and their products...
passions, as the French would say, as part of building an institution that would have a distinctive and local as well as generic character.

That brings me to the very brief and maybe too cryptic body of my remarks. They are based on the resonances among three texts, which lie, as it were, along a spectrum of time and exchange.

First text:

There is a harmony among all things and the places where they are found.

This, at one end of the spectrum, from the American journalist Waverley Root's *The Foods of France*, expresses the outlook I hoped to learn concretely when I began my study of Rhone wines. It was an outlook in which I was well tutored there in the Rhone Valley, because it was largely shared by the French growers of wine at that time. It is called the spirit of terroir.

Next text:

Monsieur, un artichaut est un artichaut.

This, at the other end of the spectrum, comes from a grocer in Vaison-la-Romaine, Vaucluse, in the course of explaining why I could not find the local kind of artichoke, "petits violets du Vaucluse," in his store. (It helps to know that they are small and somewhat triangular shaped.) I had asked if he had them, seeing only big green globes from Spain. He said no, they were too expensive. Besides, he said, "Monsieur, an artichoke is an artichoke."

Third text:

Technology procures, at the same time and in the same place, a bewildering variety of commodities and styles from all over the globe, but does so in such a way as to conceal any trace of origin, of the labor processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production. ... As Gadamer suggests in
his critique of the "aesthetic consciousness," they consequently lose their place and the world to which they belong.

This, from the contemporary philosopher Lorenzo C. Simpson, I think describes the spectrum itself. It helps me to explain what I have tried to do as a writer, which, as I see it, was to make sure, to the limited extent possible for an individual, that with the arrival on our shores of Rhone wines and Rhone grape varieties came some expression of their meaning, that is, their origins, the processes that produce them, and the social and cultural relations implicated in their production and consumption.

Perhaps my attempt is a microcosm of what universities need to do, or to do more, for their students and for the communities they serve, wherever the commodities in their trade area also meaningful cultural objects. The hopeful prospect is that along with the exchange of products comes an exchange of meanings and a fusion of horizons of appreciation. But this can only come to pass if consumers and producers at both ends of the spectrum of exchange stand by the importance of offering and demanding the distinctive and local, wherever it is from.

Perhaps under conditions of real existing globalization, the new version of the old slogan has to be, "Think locally when we act globally." Otherwise, the more fearful prospect is that in every place there comes to be only the generic, the copy without an original called a "simulacrum" by the French philosopher Baudrillard.

And otherwise, although there is much to buy and sell, there may be nothing left to trade.

References