Parkerization. What these two books share is a belief that wine is not a quantifiable substance, and that Parker’s preferences in wine have stripped much of the wine world of its quirky particularity, giving rise to a host of mass-produced modern bottlings that have little to do with values presumed to be intrinsic to the fermented fruit of the vine.

And it is perhaps in their very emotional plea for a new look at and a new reaction to wine that the books both excel and fall short: certain of their assumptions preclude any dialogue with those who support Parker’s work, writing, and approach. But first, let’s examine more closely the texts at hand and what they bring to the table.

Nossiter is a filmmaker by calling—after having left a first calling as sommelier and then restaurant wine-list consultant, in which he garnered early laurels through a bold choice made for the restaurant Balthazar in New York: to list wines, mainly French ones, by region rather than grape, as had been the custom in American fine-dining establishments until that time. Though Nossiter left the world of restaurants and wine lists, he returned to the subject of wine in his fourth film, Mondovino (2004), a scathing, Manichean peek into the modern mechanics of the wine world, including the would-be “hostile takeover” of a tiny southern French town by the Mondavi clan, the dubious dealings of Italian and Bordeaux dynasties, and the passionate clarity of a fiercely rustic Burgundian patriarch, among others. Robert M. Parker, Jr., appeared in that film, interviewed at his home in Maryland, and though he was not pleased with the final cut (and would later refer to Mondovino as “that migraine-inducing, disingenuous film”), to unbiased eyes he does not come across in a negative way; more an honest workman doing his job, which is to taste and rate wines. Yet this, for Nossiter, would only be prolegomena to future negative portrayals.

While the film Mondovino made a statement about the evils of globalization in a more or less backhanded way, portraying the players themselves with an almost Flaubertian cruelty in their own setting and betrayed by
their own speech, *Le goût et le pouvoir*, as a written screed, gives Nossiter the chance to come back to the battleground and put more pointedly and (often, but not always) in his own words exactly what he sees as ailing the world of modern wine production. This, in fact, can be summed up in one word: globalization. Which, in fact, given the grip and breadth of the wine world’s presiding power, is virtually synonymous with the word *Parkerization*. The “international style” of many of today’s well-calibrated wines has often been first on the list of charges against Parker. Nossiter swats off the critic with a quick dash of the pen: “…those who love facile things, like the critic Robert Parker” (p.66). Facile, faceless, international, and manipulated: the reverse of *terroir*, as Nossiter sees it.

But what Nossiter does with this notion in *Le goût et le pouvoir* and what, especially, he rails against, is not so much a blanket style of wine in different regions; it is, rather, the puffery and, in his view, absurdity of the professional wine taster, with his style of Parkerian tasting notes. “Wine jargon,” he scoffs (p.269). Through a series of encounters with different figures in the (mostly French) wine world, Nossiter expresses his standpoint clearly. He does not mince words, and his prose is often vitriolic. Already, in the early pages of the book, one of the “good” people, a smart wine-store owner with good taste and a fine selection of authentic wines, is shown up in a detective-novel-worthy tale of a bottle adulterated and gone unrecognized as such. This incident proves that wine is unknowable and a shifting element. “I found the story revealing, showing that even the people I respect the most, who do work I admire, as wine merchants or winemakers, can make a mistake just like me. Wine means making mistakes” (p.59).

Fittingly, then, “this book is not a guide,” as Nossiter writes. “I am against wine guidebooks and a culture that pushes us to submit our personal tastes to the law of experts—a perverse and grotesque thing. Would you hand
over the choice of your sexual preferences to an expert or a
guidebook?” (p.24)

The early chapters of Le goût et le pouvoir are promis-
ing—highly dramatic and involving, unashamed of their
scathing take on certain parts of modern wine culture. The
book then switches tacks and heads into a series of chap-
ters involving pow-wows with various people. This strategy
weakens the essay and slows its pace. The lengthy, verbatim
transcribed dialogues take a turn for the ponderous, and
suddenly, Nossiter’s authorial asides seem more like intru-
sions and manipulations than fair-handed commentary, as
we will see below. And, increasingly, one thing becomes
clear: descriptions of wine in terms like those used by
Parker are anathema.

As Nossiter’s travels around France and his encounters
with winemakers, sommeliers, and restaurateurs evolve,
a pattern becomes apparent: there are the authentic
types, best typified by a group of vigneron
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As becomes clear over the course of the book, Nossiter’s
view of wine is that it should be an unreflective thing.
Almost preconscious. Since he likens it to sex more than
once, we can see that to him, the experience of wine is a
visceral one: precognitive, not open to silly breakdowns into
points and flavor components. And certainly not to be led
by a man sitting behind a desk in Maryland. “Robert Parker
told me, when talking about his 100-point system, ‘That is
when I finally let myself get carried away by emotions.’ I
think he sees the world backwards. For me, emotion should
be the starting point. How sad to think it should only be the
end, and then only in the rarest cases” (p.110).

Alice Feiring also has a human, emotional, and visceral
view of wine. This comes through differently in her book,
though, with an angle that characterizes her writing: her
tales are an admixture of life (especially romantic life) and
wine criticism. What makes The Battle for Wine and Love
an interesting read is that not only does it tell the story of
a character named Alice Feiring (who is also, in the col-
loquial sense of the word, quite a character); it interweaves
that story with pertinent details about how wines are made
today. A reader pulled in by the dramatic, vaguely chick-
lit-inflected prose (“Could I put on a Supergirl costume
and fly over to Rioja, rip out their small, new barrels and
micro-oxidation bubblers and throw out their bags of
enzymes and yeasts?” [p.96]) is also in for a lesson in the
modern practices of viticulture.

As with Nossiter, the discovery—or “battle,” as Feiring’s
title has it—involves travel and inquiry, meeting various
characters who are either on the “good” (terroir, noncorpo-
rate, traditionalist) side or, conversely, the bad one. (Most
egregiously, a Paso Robles winemaker tells her, “I put
everything in the wine at the beginning: acid, tannin, wood
chips, enzymes. That way, I can take things out instead of
adding them later. It’s like making a rich soup” [p.44]).

Yet unlike Nossiter, who is prepared to savage what
he sees as disingenuous or market-oriented in those who
represent the globalized, Parkerized world, Feiring has a
consistently emotional reaction to the people she encoun-
ters. In her writing there is a true ambivalence, and we see
her reviling beliefs and practices, yet sometimes finding
humans behind the beliefs and practices who aren’t to be
cast out along with them. Conversations with Professor
Roger Boulton of University of California, Davis’s enology
school are a case in point. Boulton does not believe that
“natural” winemaking should be taught as a potential course
of viticulture; he is modern and wants to teach the current
techniques and manipulations. Yet Feiring cannot bring
herself to condemn him, as much as she would single-handedly

BRUNO: It smells like linden, verbena. It’s very aromatic.

I look at Bruno, whom I respect very much, but I feel like we’re getting
off to a bad start. That is exactly the kind of sentence that horrifies me
when talking about wine. For now, I don’t say anything. (p.190)
wipe out the plagues of reverse osmosis, micro-oxygenation, acidification, oak chips, and other such tricks.

A reverse case in point is to be had with the “natural” winemaker François Ribo, who, despite Feiring’s admiration for his viticultural practices and wines and her desire to find him worthy, is just, well, humanly flat. “He met all of my questions with grunts of oui or non. The man—who, in the fictional version of my journey, I would fall in love with, join forces with, and fight an SDS-inspired war against modern wines and the powerful media outlets that foster them—was going to be a huge disappointment” (p.84). The only way through this disappointment is to find the rapture again in the wines. “The St-Jo, all silk and velvet. Soft tannins melted into the purity of baking bread and smoke and a touch of lime” (p.86). In moments like this, we can see the grip; the emotion is painted, and the wine comes to life. Feiring seems to realize that the force of this rapture can make us want to equate those who are producing the wine with the liquid in the bottle; but the equation, being just as fallible as humans and the soil and the weather, sometimes falls apart.

On the other hand, once there is no longer any soul in those who make wine, it is clearly not possible to get it back. As Feiring comes to discover, Krug champagnes, now owned by multinational LVMH, simply no longer taste good. Moët & Chandon, also part of that empire, sends Feiring to walk in the vineyards of Champagne; there, the soullessness of the company comes through: “I wasn’t convinced that it was a beautiful vineyard, nor was I convinced that Moët cared how to work it. In fact, the famed chalky-white soil wasn’t ‘worked’ at all—it looked dead, with a cadaverlike grayness. Chemical weed killers had clearly been deployed instead of vineyard plows” (p.119).

So, how did this disconnect come about? Like Nossiter, Feiring would argue that it is because Parker does not care enough about starting from the emotion. So once again, he is to blame, both directly and indirectly. Both authors might posit that if even if the wines produced from Moët’s pallid and dead vineyards were, by some miracle, well-balanced and structured, Parker would praise them and score them accordingly, without a thought to the corrupt horrors of their production. “As a critic Parker focuses on wine tasting and scoring. His criteria, it seems, are power, concentration, and jam. He quantifies. As a writer, I focus on the way wine is made and why the wines I like taste the way they do. I focus on the story. I qualify. I am short. He is tall. I am left leaning; he swerves to the right. We were looking at the world from different points of view” (p.216).

For both Feiring and Nossiter, this is the crux. If what is happening in the world of wine criticism is a neat split into two different camps, each with an opposing weltanschauung—or perhaps we should say weinanschauung—how can any understanding be reached? Unfortunately, neither book does much to persuade. They remain amusing, enlightening essays for those who already understand their point. Just as Nossiter seems to darken the unexceptional talk of some of his interviewees after the fact, Feiring already knows that she does not like the way Parker comes at wine, or the effect she says this has had on the way wine is made in many places today. In the “showdown” section of her book (fittingly called “My Date with Bob,” in keeping with the romantic thematics) Parker talks to Feiring on the phone. He is there with his plain talk, just as he always has been. He is guarded and sure, coherent and even-handed. “You know,” he said, “I actually just write and take notes” (p.220). That is his view.

Now what are we going to do?

NOTES