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UNDER THE VINE AND FIG TREE

by Sam Schneider



Wine Lunacy

Apprehending Nature

WRITTEN IN BOEOTIA AROUND 700 B.C., *Works and Days* is a didactic poem composed by Hesiod and addressed to his idle brother, Perses, instructing him in the rhythms of the farmer's year, the gods' expectations of honest labor, and the correct ordering of a life close to the soil. It is also among the oldest wine-making instruction manuals in the Western tradition. "When Orion and Sirius come into mid-heaven," Hesiod directs, "then set about cutting off all the grape clusters for home." Sun them ten days, cover them five, and on the sixth day "draw merry Dionysus' gift off into jars." Specific days of the lunar month govern when to farm or when to open wine jars. "Pay due attention to the days which come from Zeus," Hesiod warns.

Lalou Bize-Leroy, who at 94 still manages the vineyards of Domaines Leroy and d'Auvenay in Burgundy—wines considered by many to be the finest expressions of Pinot Noir on earth, regularly fetching thousands of dollars per bottle—practices her viticulture "according to the biodynamic calendar, when each month the moon passes before the fruit constellations: Sagittarius, Aries, and Leo." Biodynamic agriculture is the oldest and most demanding of the natural farming movements—and the most ambitious: organic and "natural" viticulture merely exclude certain synthetic inputs; biodynamics promises to redeem farming itself by marshalling the cosmic forces behind the material world. Besides Leroy, many of the world's most prestigious domaines have adopted its methods: Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Leflaive, Lafon, Lafarge, Latour, and Palmer among them. Bize-Leroy's practices recall Hesiod, but she takes her directives not from the ancient poet—or Zeus himself—but from Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian occultist of the turn of the last century.

STEINER WAS BORN ON FEBRUARY 25 OR 27, 1861, in Donji Kraljevec—then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Croatia. He trained as a philosopher and spent seven years at the Goethe and Schiller Archive in Weimar, where he edited Goethe's scientific writings. There, he fixated on Goethe's *zarte Empirie* ("delicate empiricism")—the assertion that nature could be apprehended through sensory perception, imagination, and intuition rather than detached analysis.

Recommended wines:

Domaine Huet Haut Lieu Sec 2024
Domaine Huet Clos du Bourg Sec 2024
Domaine Huet Le Mont Sec 2024
Famille Joly Les Vieux Clos 2023
Maison Leroy Bourgogne Gamay 2019

This method was the culmination of years of botanical study in Italy, from which Goethe concluded that all plants were a single underlying archetype—the *Urpflanze*—in constant metamorphosis. Steiner drew a more radical conclusion: if Goethe could employ "delicate empiricism" to perceive the formative forces of the natural world, why couldn't the mind be trained to see the spiritual forces operating behind the material world, in the cosmos and the soul?

In 1902 Steiner became general secretary of the German section of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, then one of the largest esoteric organizations in the world. He built a following of his own within it, and by 1912 had broken away—taking most of the German-speaking membership with him. The

new system he built, anthroposophy—from the Greek *anthropos* (human) and *sophia* (wisdom)—was a departure from Blavatsky's theosophy ("divine wisdom"). Where Blavatsky had based her authority in knowledge received from hidden masters, Steiner insisted spiritual perception was a human faculty, cultivable through discipline. Having developed his own "organs of spiritual perception," Steiner claimed he could access what he called the Akashic Record—a supernatural library of all past and future events. From the Record, Steiner derived accounts of Atlantis and Lemuria; a *völkisch* racial hierarchy; the belief that Christ was the Sun God who incarnated as Jesus; and the conviction that the heart does not pump blood.

Though the Theosophical Society faded from respectable intellectual life in the early 20th century, Steiner's anthroposophy endures in elite institutions and brands to this day. His Waldorf schools—commissioned by the owner of the Waldorf-Astoria Cigarette Company in Stuttgart in 1919—today comprise more than 1,000 independent schools worldwide. Weleda, the anthroposophic pharmaceutical company he founded in 1921, sells its Skin Food hand creams in the beauty and wellness aisle at Whole Foods.

Renewing the Earth

IN 1924, THE FINAL YEAR OF STEINER'S life, he delivered a series of eight lectures on agriculture to over 100 farmers, veterinarians, and landowners gathered at Count von Keyserlingk's estate at Koberwitz in Silesia—near what is today Wrocław in Poland. They had come because their soils were failing, their livestock sick with foot-and-mouth disease, and their family farms disappearing into heavy, mechanized monocultures. They were

devout anthroposophists seeking the application of Steiner's cosmology to an immediate crisis on—or beneath—the ground.

Their dilemma traced to an agricultural revolution that began in 1840, when Baron Justus von Liebig, the father of chemical agriculture, proposed the Law of the Minimum: whichever essential nutrient was least available to a plant would limit its growth. He identified nitrogen, phosphorus, and potash as the chief minerals plants required—and set out to find ways to supply them synthetically. Decades of research followed, until two German chemists, Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch, devised a process in 1909 to synthesize ammonia from atmospheric nitrogen at industrial scale—a genuine miracle of chemistry that feeds much of the world's population. For this, Haber received a Nobel Prize. He would go on to direct Germany's chemical weapons program, and personally supervised the deployment of chlorine gas at Ypres on April 22, 1915, killing more than 1,100 Allied soldiers on a four-mile stretch of the front. Years later, his work was used to develop Zyklon B, the cyanide-based pesticide later used in the Nazi death camps.

After the armistice, the same factories that produced munitions for the Great War pivoted back to fertilizer. What neither von Liebig nor Haber had anticipated was that synthetic nitrogen, immediately available near the surface, could encourage shallower root growth and reduce the vine's dependence on the deeper life of the soil. The synthetically fed plants were lush but fragile, and more susceptible to disease and pests. Farmers typically responded with fungicides and pesticides, further degrading the soil biome and locking their fields into a chemical dependence.

To revitalize ruined soils, Steiner prescribed nine peculiar concoctions, derived from cow manure, quartz, and an herbal pharmacopeia of seven medicinal plants, including yarrow, chamomile, stinging nettle, and oak bark. Several preparations are sheathed in animal organs—yarrow in the bladder of a red deer stag, chamomile packed into cow intestines, oak bark stuffed into a domestic animal's skull still lined with its meninges, and dandelion sewn into bovine mesentery. The preparations are numbered 500 through 508 following Weleda's pharmaceutical catalog system, not—as one biodynamic winemaker insisted to me—because BD 500, the foundational preparation, contains 500 billion microorganisms per gram.

BD 500 involves packing cow manure into a cow horn and burying it at the autumn equinox under a descending moon. Exhumed at the spring equinox, the contents should be dark brown, supple, smelling of humus. Steiner called the product “spiritual manure.” “In the horn you have something radiating life—nay, even radiating astrality.... [I]f you could crawl about inside the living body of a cow—” he told his lecture audience, “you would smell how the astral life and the living vitality pours inward from the horns.” The preparation is diluted in water and sprayed across soil at 300 grams per hectare per year. Its companion, horn silica 501, is applied at five grams per hectare. That works out to just one teaspoon per two and a half acres. The contents of a single packed skull somehow manage to treat an astonishing 300 hectares of land.

Prehistoric Order

COULD SUCH AN OUTLANDISH SYSTEM work? The Chenin Blancs of Domaine Huet in the Loire provide one data point. Founded by Victor Huet in 1928 and developed by his son, Gaston—a veteran of the Resistance who spent five years in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp, where he hosted clandestine wine tastings for his companions—the estate has been biodynamic since 1990, when winemaker Noël Pinguet oversaw its conversion. Their three vineyards on Vouvray's Première Côte offer a crash course in *terroir*: *Haut Lieu Sec* 2024, from deep brown clay over limestone, is rich, friendly, and fleshy; *Clos du Bourg Sec* 2024, farmed since A.D. 372 on tuffeau chalk, is broad and powerful; *Le Mont Sec* 2024, from quartz and jasper soil, is intensely mineral, linear, and precise. Pinguet, on the subject of biodynamics, called himself *pratiquant non croyant*, a practicing non-believer. His successor, Sarah Hwang, is less equivocal, stating simply, “We believe in the moon.”

In Savennières, a two-hour drive west of Huet, the hillside that Cistercian monks first cultivated in the 12th century is today administered by true believer Nicolas Joly—who left J.P. Morgan in 1977 to return to his family's vines and became biodynamic viticulture's most faithful apostle. As he put it in his book *Wine from Sky to Earth* (1999), Joly seeks to “bridge the gap between the quantitative visible world accessible to our physical senses and a qualitative, more subtle world which is the source of

life.” He says Steiner “understood each vineyard extends up to the universe.” His *Les Vieux Clos* 2023—a Chenin Blanc grown on schist and sand—is vivid, supple, and intensely aromatic, the work of a farmer who believes the cosmos is paying special attention to his grapes.

It was Joly's example that caught the attention of Lalou Bize-Leroy—she visited his vineyards, appraised his vines, and returned to Burgundy a biodynamic convert in 1988. She lost most of her 1993 harvest to mildew rather than resort to anti-fungal spray. But the small quantity she produced was so striking that she never looked back. Her *Maison Leroy Bourgogne Gamay* 2019, from the granitic soils of Chénas in Beaujolais, arrived almost vibrating with fermentation in the bottle and dense with black sediment—its label reassuring the drinker that this is “a sign that the wine is alive.” Once the wine calmed down, it revealed itself to be noble and structured, with dried dark fruit, granite, and, as you might expect, dirt.

Though the mystical claims made for Steiner's composts are almost certainly false, his prohibitions on synthetic inputs and insistence on ritualized cultivation nonetheless seem to help growers restore soil health—rebuilding microbial life, encouraging deeper root systems, and allowing vines to drink more fully from their underlying geology. The mechanism matters less than the commitment. Biodynamics demands a total orientation: the farmer's disciplined submission to an order beyond our visible world—even if, like Pinguet, he does not believe.

Steiner's audience at Koberwitz had witnessed a civilizational apocalypse. The Great War had killed millions, devastated landscapes, broken four empires, and demolished Europe's confidence in progress. Industrial chemistry had gassed their soldiers and transformed the soils beneath their feet. The old frameworks—Christianity, national identity, agrarian life—no longer held. In that vacuum, Steiner offered the farmers in Silesia initiation into a prehistoric order: the cosmos itself. The lunar calendar does not change. The constellations are fixed. In returning to Hesiod's rhythms—the moon, the harvest, the careful attention to the stars—Steiner's followers were searching beyond the catastrophe of their time for a gnosis that predates and transcends our world. Whether in the vines of Lalou Bize-Leroy in Burgundy or in the wellness aisle at Whole Foods, we are still searching.

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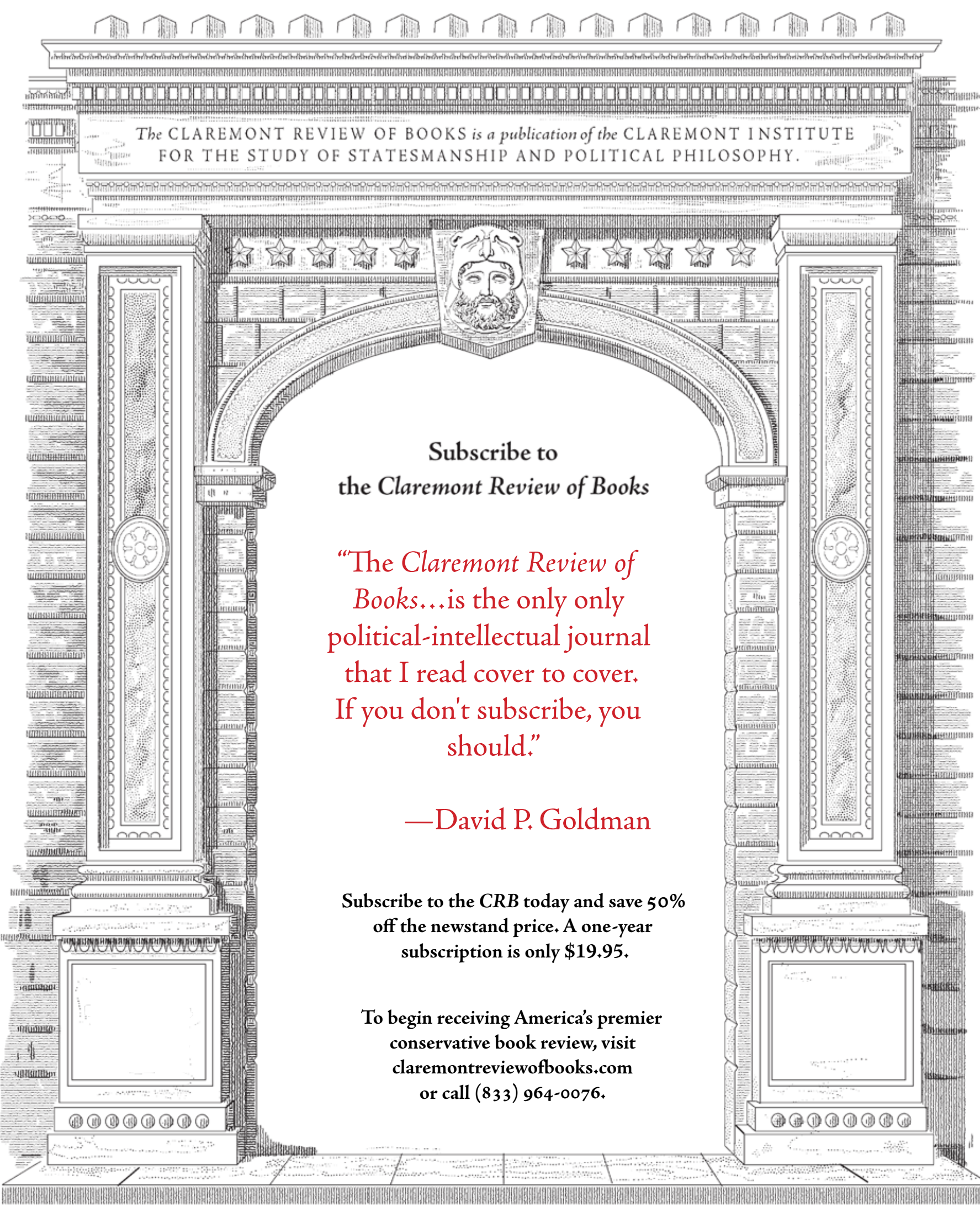
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