

HONORS THESIS 2013

Into the Vineyards: Cultural Lessons in French Wine Country

Honors Thesis Creative Project

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Précis

Studying abroad in the south of France during the spring of 2012 opened my mind and heart in ways that led me to write every day about everything I saw, heard and felt. I knew that I wanted to write a collection of stories that would answer two main questions: *what is it about travel that opened my mind so much?* and *Had other people felt that way?*

My creative Honors Thesis, “Into the Vineyards: Cultural Lessons in the French Wine Country,” is the first in that collection of travel writing. The essay is set in May of 2012 during my internship with Isabelle Foret, a French wine journalist who spoke little English. I decided to focus on this story because it was the deepest cultural and linguistic immersion experience I had while in France. I looked to well-known travel writers like Pico Iyer, Paul Theroux and Edith Wharton to explore the travel writing genre and develop my own style.

The main theme I wanted to focus on throughout my essay was the transformative and educational nature of travel. I emphasized that theme by structuring my essay around the four parts of the learning story that education theorists Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope described in their book *Learning by Design*. The four parts are: where does the learner come from, where does the learner go, what happens there, and what does the learner become as a result (Kalantzis and Cope). The story line in my essay follows that pattern, making it clear that a transformation took place as a result of immersing myself in a foreign culture.

In addition to structuring my story around that theory, I also compared my experience to that of other travel writers, specifically Pico Iyer. Isabelle helped me experience what Pico Iyer meant when he wrote “every trip to a foreign country can be a love affair” in his essay “Why We Travel”: she pushed me to learn a new language, took me somewhere I hadn’t been, and ultimately deposited me, to quote Iyer again, “in the midst of terror and wonder.”(4).

By comparing Kalantzis and Cope's definition of transformative learning to the way Iyer describes travel, I make the argument that travel – choosing to live in an unfamiliar setting – is transformative learning. "Into the Vineyards: Cultural Lessons in French Wine Country," chronicles my personal transformation and demonstrates the conclusion that travel is a unique form of education about identity and culture.

Further research on education theory, French culture and the region of France where my story takes place would strengthen my narrative. Additionally, integrating outside sources and transitioning between scenes and expository writing are areas where I could improve my writing. My future steps are to pursue publication for my story, so I plan to work on those areas. I've already talked with my advisor about continuing to work with him on editing and making the essay print-worthy. We will also discuss publishing venues best suited to my work. This will be my first step into the publishing world, an introduction to what I hope my future will bring. I also plan to use this story as the foundation for a book project. I want to collect several stories about my experience abroad that use common themes.

Introduction

The essay's very first line raised bumps on my arms, and every subsequent sentence made them spread over my body. I'd never met this author – this Pico Iyer – and yet for the second time in my life he was describing my thoughts with his words. The first time it was about punctuation. I read his essay “In Praise of the Humble Comma,” for an English course, and fell in love with his writing then and there.

“A world that has only periods is a world without inflections. It is a world without shade. It has a music without sharps and flats,” he said (“In Praise of” 1), and I responded – *yes, punctuation is that crucial, thank you, Mr. Iyer! I love writers and their love of language.*

Now, here he was, explaining travel exactly as it felt to me. It took my breath away. Several passages of that article entitled, “Why We Travel,” matched the feelings and ideas of journal entries I wrote while studying in the south of France in the spring of 2012.

For example, one of the passages that impacted me most was a realization he had after one of his first trips to Southeast Asia in the 1980s.

“For if every true love affair can feel like a journey to a foreign country, where you can't quite speak the language, and you don't know where you're going, and you're pulled ever deeper into the inviting darkness, every trip to a foreign country can be a love affair, where you're left puzzling over who you are and whom you've fallen in love with.” (“Why We Travel” 3).

In my journal on January 10, 2012, my first month in a foreign country, I wrote:

“Today I felt the beginnings of how I will change from this experience. It will take action, stepping into the unknown and being scared and unsure. I just must be open to it, and I think I am. I am surprising myself every day. I have this overwhelming sense of love.”

Iyer, an icon of contemporary travel writing and author of more than a dozen books, writes more eloquently than I. “Why We Travel” was published in Salon.com in 2000, while I

lifted my writing from my personal journal. Still, the same themes are there: entering the unknown, a changing sense of identity and the overall feeling of being in love. Living in France for five months caused a shift in my way of thinking and outlook on life, making me feel open and in love in a way I never had, an experience which also had me constantly writing. I kept a blog for the first time, and wrote about more than just my daily activities. I documented cultural observations, what I learned from them, how I was changing. Amidst all of those things I also wrote character sketches and described pieces of scenery in detail. I was preparing notes for short stories and books. I thought I would write a memoir about the impact study abroad had on me.

In fact, on January 26, 2012, just 23 days after I arrived in France, I wrote in my journal “I will collect this place into vignettes. Into snapshots of real stories with only slight embellishments...It will be my first book.” At the time I did not realize something that should have been rather obvious – the book I would one day write would be a travel piece.

Yet, truth be told, I had avoided reading travel books before heading to France. I believed the genre to consist only of travel guides and Rick Steve’s accounts of where to eat in this or that town. I chose to travel because it seemed like my next step towards a better understanding of the world, and I wanted to experience that step without the bias of previous travelers. When I was 12 years old, a camp counselor I admired introduced me to the idea of studying abroad when he gave me a link to his blog that would chronicle his time in Denmark. He represented everything I wanted to be one day – intelligent, worldly and confident. Before meeting him I did not know that studying abroad was an option or that blogs existed. I followed his adventures weekly, admiring the pictures of buildings that looked like they belonged in *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* and stories of last-minute trips to other countries. Travel became a non-negotiable goal. For years I depended on books like Madeline L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* and Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* to

lead me into new worlds that made me question my own, and school to teach me how the world worked. By the time I got to college I wanted more and travel seemed like the logical next step.

According to the writer Robin Hemley, director of the University of Iowa's graduate program in nonfiction writing, true travel writing should include more of that personal experience. In his book *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing*, he wrote, "As in journalism, there's almost always some immersion involved in travel writing, but for it to truly be a piece of immersion writing, it has to include the narrator and not simply be standard guidebook fare listing the best places to eat and stay the night." (Hemley 97).

My journaling and blog posts fell under that definition – first-person narratives about being immersed in a different culture. Keeping a blog seemed to go hand in hand with studying abroad because it was a good way to keep family and friends updated back home. Throughout college my interest in writing grew, so by the time I left for France I also wanted to use it to practice writing for an audience. During my sophomore I had started a different blog that consisted of ramblings of my ideas about the world that were too long and abstract to draw in readers. But in my new travel blog from my trip to France I wanted to convey ideas succinctly and share tidbits about the world that might interest others. A good example is the blog entry I wrote on March 29, 2012 about Antibes, the town in the French Riviera where I lived. It is an international yachting port, so starting in late March, when yachting season begins with the warmer weather, the demographics of the town change.

Currently, we are under some Anglo-invasion. Yachting season is beginning, and therefore the British, Australians and South Africans are flowing in. Young people who are hoping to work on yachts and older people who own the yachts. As a result, more restaurants and shops are opening in old town Antibes – largely English-influenced as well. A bagel place and more pubs and boutiques with lots of khaki. I like a bit more life in town, and also dislike it. I am sad to see the French part of this town get pushed even more to the wayside – but I suppose that is what happens when you live in the French Riviera. The longer I have lived there the more I am aware that this area was really built

by tourists – by Americans and Brits who wanted to customize a vacation spot for themselves.

The passage includes aspects that might attract a tourist, like the fact that Antibes, though French, is largely an English-speaking town, but it also includes cultural commentary and my personal frustrations with the change.

Still, a question remains, why write about travel in this way? What purpose does it serve?

There are two major factors to consider in answering these questions, the traveler's reason for writing, and the audience's reason for reading.

A common pattern in books and articles by prominent travelers is the pursuit of some quest, personal or otherwise. For instance, in his book *Fresh Air Fiend* Paul Theroux, one of America's most notable travel authors, wrote, "Who are the great travelers? They are curious, contented, self-sufficient people who are not afraid of the past. They are not hiding in travel, they are seeking" (30). And in "Why We Travel" Iyer wrote, "many of us travel not in search of answers, but of better questions" (3). Writing helps to answer those questions because it allows the writer to lay out his experiences and what he learned from them.

Writing for that reason means a good travel piece should stay relevant years after it is published. Theroux's *Great Railway Bazaar*, his 1975 account of a year spent traveling the world by train, is a good example. The work is still in print and I argue it is because the question he is asking -- *what would it be like to circle the globe by train alone?* -- is universal and simple enough to hook the readers' curiosity and send them off on their own adventures. For example, before I read chapters 24 and 25, Vietnam, the subject of those chapters, was not a place I considered visiting. Theroux's writing changed my mind. Rather than talking about tourist sites he described the people he encountered, introducing questions about the affects of the war on that country, and illuminating ideas about the resilience of the human spirit.

“It seemed incredible, but here were schoolgirls with book bags, and women with huge bundles of vegetables, and men with trussed fowl, and others, standing at the doors of what were essentially freight cars, off to work in Bien Hoa. After so many years one expected to see them defeated; the surprise was that they were more than survivors. From the cruel interruptions of war they had stubbornly salvaged a routine: school, market, factory.” (Theroux 248).

Theroux’s writing made me want to know how the country is now, more than 30 years after his journey. Have living conditions improved? Would Vietnamese officials treat me as they treated Theroux? The questions that *The Great Railway Bazaar* left me with suggest that the readers of travel literature want to know more about the world and to help put their own abroad experience in context. And maybe there is something about that experience abroad that helps them put the culture of their own country into sharper perspective.

What motivates my thesis involves both why people write and read about travel. I travelled abroad in search of my own definition of culture, an understanding of how other people live, so that my day to day living might be more informed. What I found was that travel itself – the simple act of living in an unfamiliar setting – is an education unlike what I experienced in the classroom. My mind and heart opened in ways that led me to write every day about everything I saw, heard and felt. Once I arrived back in America, I had questions about that experience. And now I wonder what is it about travel that opened my mind so much? Had other people felt that way? I sought answers to those questions by comparing themes in my writing to themes I found in travel books and academic articles. Then I set off to write my story, using all of these new-found travel writing companions as guides.

Writing Goal

My creative Honors Thesis, “Into the Vineyards: Cultural Lessons in the French Wine Country,” is the first in the collection of travel writing I hope to publish. The essay is set in May

of 2012 during my internship with Isabelle Foret, a French wine journalist who spoke little English. I decided to focus on this story because it was the deepest cultural and linguistic immersion experience I had while in France. Isabelle helped me experience what Pico Iyer meant when he wrote “every trip to a foreign country can be a love affair” in his essay “Why We Travel”: she pushed me to learn a new language, took me somewhere I hadn’t been, and ultimately deposited me, to quote Iyer again, “in the midst of terror and wonder.”(4). My essay aims to explore and expound on Iyer’s idea, showing how living in that vulnerable place, immersed in a foreign setting, is a unique form of education about culture and identity.

Literature Review and Influences

People may write in solitude, but they do not write alone. The impact that writer’s have on each other is a crucial part of the writing process. In fact, some authors end up writing whole books about their literary influences, including Pico Iyer’s *The Man Within in my Head* about Graham Greene and Paul Theroux’s *Sir Vidia’s Shadow* about V.S. Naipaul (Yabroff 1). Greene and Naipaul both wrote novels and travel essays that shared similarities with Theroux and Iyer’s writing. Iyer even described Greene as haunting him, a “figure in [his] head” who knew him better than friends and family, which demonstrates the importance of the connection between writers (1).

The authors who influenced my essay can be separated into groups based on their areas of expertise. Paul Theroux and Pico Iyer were my experts on travel writing structure, style and themes. Edith Wharton, Peter Mayle, Gustave Flaubert, and Julia Child are a few of my historic guides into French geography and culture.

Travel writing: structure, style and themes

Fresh Air Fiend, a collection of Theroux's travel essays, is the kind of book I want to publish. He starts with a discussion of writing and travel, and more specifically how his first long-term travel experiences led him to write.

"Writing in Africa gave me access to the past, helped me cope with periods of isolation in a foreign place...I am speaking of an early period in my writing life, but the most crucial one," he wrote. His subsequent essays tell stories about different countries, but also connect to the ideas expressed in part one of the book. My Honors Thesis and *Fresh Air Fiend* have structural similarities. My creative analysis is similar to part one of his book because both discuss the relationship between travel and writing and major themes that come up in our travel essays. My creative project is similar to his essays because it uses a travel story to convey a message or new way of understanding.

However, we differ in the themes that tie our pieces together. Theroux discusses how memory is induced by writing and travel. He writes, "My need for external stimuli inspired in me a desire to travel – and travel, which is nearly always seen as an attempt to escape from the ego, is for me the opposite: noting induces concentration or stimulates memory like an alien landscape or a foreign culture." (30).

To make that point he turns to Sigmund Freud, specifically to his paper "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming." Throughout part one Theroux makes several references to Freud, using him as an external source who can validate Theroux's claim that travel, memory and writing are connected (26). While this theme comes up in the background of some of his travel essays later in the book, Theroux keeps all direct references to Freud in part one. Like Theroux, I also turned to theorists to support my argument that travel is a form of education (which I will discuss

further in the methodology). Before reading *Fresh Air Fiend*, however, I tried to make direct references to the theorists in my travel essay, meaning that my narrative would alternate between scenes with dialogue and characters to multiple paragraphs of expository writing about education theory. While using outside sources can give travel essays credibility and make the story richer, those sources are usually other travel writers or authors who can give the essay historical context. Bringing in academic theories is less common, and can disrupt the flow of the story if it is not done well. Reading part one of *Fresh Air Fiend* made me realize that I could explain the theory in my creative analysis, and then use it as an underlying theme to structure what happens in my travel essay. By doing that my essay maintains its flow and entertainment value, while still conveying a larger message to my readers.

I also turned to Theroux's writing for examples of style, as a kind of model for my writing. As I mentioned above, part of effective travel writing is using broader research sources to give one's own writing validity. The author is saying, "*this is true, and look, these well known authorities agree with me.*" Additionally, building on or rebutting past arguments strengthens the point the author is trying to make. I have training in journalism and academic writing so I understand how to use quotes and where to put them, but working quotes into a creative piece is different than into a news article or academic essay. More transition is required to avoid disrupting the narrative between quotes and exposition. Here is an example of how Theroux worked in a quote from an outside source.

From Theroux's essay *Dead Reckoning to Nantucket*: "The place is full of fishermen and millionaires, Yankees and Ivy Leaguers. It is, as Melville wrote, 'a mere hillock, an elbow of sand,' and yet if you somehow delete all the Jeeps and sport utility vehicles, it has one of the most beautiful main streets in America." (Theroux 78).

On page 18 of my essay, I borrowed Theroux's technique when I used a quote from Edith Wharton: "Isabelle took us on a small detour because she wanted us to go through the village Orange, and around the same arch that author Edith Wharton described as 'the great golden-

brown arch – standing alone in a wide grassy square – keep[ing] on three sides a Corinthian mask of cornice and column, and a rich embossing of fruit and flower-garlands, of sirens, trophies and battle-scenes. All this decoration is typically Roman.’ Isabelle told us much the same, pointing out all of the other Roman aspects of the town as we drove through and on to Visan.”

In both cases, the outside sources are experts on the area – Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* was set in Nantucket, and Edith Wharton described Orange in her book *A Motor-Flight Through France*. Those broader sources build the authors’ integrity by proving that we did not make these places up, and that our descriptions are accurate. I followed Theroux’s lead by working the quote into the sentence, rather than introducing it in a new paragraph.

Historic guides: French culture and geography

Peter Mayle’s *A Year in Provence* is another valuable model for my writing because it details his adjustment to life in Lacoste, a French village just an hour south of Visan, the main setting of my essay. His book helped me remember and explain aspects of the region, such as the Mistral wind, which is a major feature of weather that affects both the Rhone Valley, where Visan is located, and the Cote d’Azur, where I studied for the semester. Many French people talked to me about this wind, so I knew I needed to include it, though I had never actually experienced this wind at its strongest. So, I turned to Peter Mayle. Here is an excerpt from my essay where I use him as an external source:

On my second day in France I learned of this Mistral, a wind so dry and powerful that it withered the fragile vines in the Rhone Valley, and ruffled the temperaments of the people who live there. I never experienced the wind myself, but in the book *A Year in Provence*, author Peter Mayle explained that “It drove the people, and animals, mad...it blew for fifteen days on end, uprooting trees, overturning cars, smashing windows, tossing old ladies in the gutter...every problem in Provence that couldn’t be blamed on

the politicians was the fault of the *sacre vent* which the Provencaux spoke about with a kind of masochistic pride.” (“Into the Vineyards” 1).

Using his quote allowed me to give my readers a visual of the wind’s destruction even though I had never experienced the Mistral at its most powerful. I also paid attention to the detail he used in describing scenery and the people who surrounded him. His writing is engaging because he keeps it in-scene, while still conveying an overall message of the adjustment that comes with living in a foreign culture. He moved easily back and forth between experiences in Provence and how they challenged his assumptions. Interactions with his neighbors, specifically a man named Faustin, brought up most of those contradictions.

“Faustin, we knew, traveled around the neighboring farms as a visiting slaughterer...we thought it an uncharacteristic occupation for a softhearted man who spoiled his dogs, but he was evidently skilled and quick,” Mayle wrote (11).

The American writer and well-known Francophile, Edith Wharton, gave my essay historical context and influenced the way I wrote about the road trip itself. In the very beginning of her book she talks about the wonders of car travel, which made me remember a similar realization I had while driving with Isabelle. I noticed the way Wharton described scenery as she passed it, giving tidbits of historical information along the way, and I tried to do the same. I also used her as an expert source and a way to develop Isabelle’s character, which is illustrated in the excerpt about Orange I mentioned earlier.

Julia Child’s book, *My Life in France*, was helpful because it touches on themes in my essay, such as her battle with the language, and the French relationship with food and wine. She also goes beyond just making observations about French culture and takes the risk of expressing her own speculations. She was tackling the French relationship to food, a topic that is constantly written about, and yet she still found new ideas to add to the discussion.

After talking with a friend about the impact World War II had on Paris, Child wrote, “Helene’s war story made me think about the French and their deep hunger – something that seemed to lurk beneath their love of food as an art form and their love of cooking as a ‘sport.’ I wondered if the nation’s gastronomical lust had its roots not in the sunshine of art but in the deep, dark deprivations France had suffered over the centuries.” (66).

I had never considered relating the French war experience to their love of food, so it furthered my interest in what insights Child might share next. Also, I aimed to spark the same kind of curiosity in my readers by offering some new dialogue on French wine. My unique perspective came from traveling with a woman wine expert through France’s vineyards. I introduce the idea through my interactions with Isabelle, but Child’s writing made me realize I could incorporate more of my own speculation to strengthen my point.

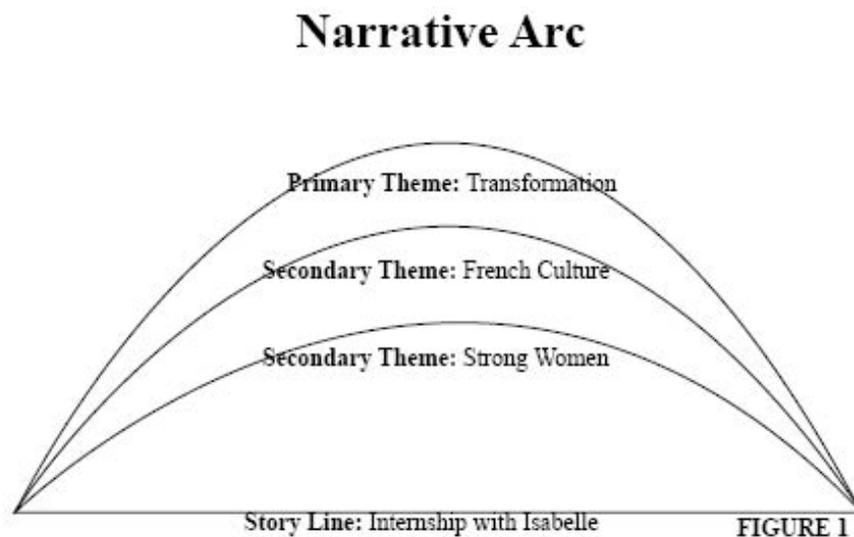
Part of the reason I chose to read Edith Wharton and Julia Child was so I could include the voices of expert women in my narrative. Like the wine industry, most of the prominent travel writers are men, so in entering the industry as a woman I wanted to follow the example of those women who came before me.

Methodology

The tools of travel writing are traveling in the field, taking field notes, doing formal research, and the writing process itself. While in France I wrote almost every day about the culture and its effects on me. I did not know at the time exactly what story I would be writing, but I did record my observations.

My formal research consisted reading the travel writers discussed above, as well as educational theory and travel writing theory. I will discuss the educational and writing theory research, but in order to incorporate that research into my travel essay, I had to decide on a

narrative structure and themes. I chose to use a narrative arc as my structure, which is a method I learned in a non-fiction course I took at WSU in fall 2012. The arc is a diagram outline often used by magazine editors. I drew my arc in the shape of a semi-circle. The line that runs along the bottom is the physical story, what the characters are doing, where they are and who they are meeting. The arc that runs from one end of the line to the other represents the major theme of the story, and secondary arcs can be used to represent secondary themes (see **Figure 1**). I chose to use this structure because it helped me identify where I could weave themes into scenes.



The main physical story was my internship with Isabelle, focusing on our journey to Visan. My primary theme was the transformation caused by travel and the secondary themes were about French culture and strong women (see **Appendix A**).

To discuss transformation through travel, I turned to education theorists Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope. They wrote a book called *Learning by Design*, which describes how transformational learning “takes the learner on a journey to new and unfamiliar terrains.” (Kalantzis and Cope). In their article they refer to a mental journey a student goes on when

learning something complex and unfamiliar, such as an English student learning Chinese. Kalantzis and Cope explain that journey by itself can be a profound learning experience, a narrative of self-transformation and growth, which is an idea that is directly applicable to how travelers learn while abroad. Travelers take literal journeys into the unknown, which, as Iyer wrote, “shows us the sights and values and issues that we might ordinarily ignore; but it also, and more deeply, shows us all the parts of ourselves that might otherwise grow rusty.” (“Why We Travel”).

So to clearly convey the idea of travel as a form of education, I built my narrative arc around the “learning story” structure that Kalantzis and Cope defined as, “who the learner was, where they went, the things they encountered, and what, as a consequence of their learning, the learner has (knowingly) become. In this story, learning is the key thread in what turns out to be a kind of cultural journey.” (Kalantzis and Cope). Setting my structure up that way made transformation learning a theme that tied the story together.

In the opening pages of my creative project I answer the first two questions: who the learner was and where they went. On page 2 I explain that before meeting Isabelle I had lived in an international port with mostly English speaking friends (who I was), and that Isabelle was going to take me away from “everything familiar...and deeper into the midst of terror and wonder,” (where I was going). From pages 4 to 28 I describe the things I encountered, the biggest moments being lunch at Isabelle’s home, the three hour car ride to Visan and dinner with her colleagues. Those experiences brought out my secondary themes. I had to struggle through French with Isabelle, though at the same she was teaching me about French culture by letting me observe her daily life. As a woman in the wine industry, she herself was a strong woman, and constantly reminding me of other strong women in my life.

All of those observations and experiences transformed me, a point that is evident at the end of dinner with Isabelle and her colleagues.

“After a wonderful meal and a few bottles of wine the night had gone from being a completely foreign experience to an evening spent with new acquaintances and old friends. Isabelle had taken me past the tip of the iceberg of French culture and language, showing me that we share more similarities than differences. At the heart of it all, we are people with ambitions and passions and a desire to interact.” (“Into the Vineyards” 29).

Getting all of those scenes and themes into one story was a cyclical writing process. I would free-write the scenes I wanted to include, meaning I would write out a rough draft in one intense writing session. Then I would read it aloud, edit the draft, free-write again to further develop scenes, read it aloud again to develop ideas further, and continue editing. I relied heavily on my advisor and peer group for the editing process. Anne Lamott’s book about writing, *Bird by Bird* also helped me through this process, especially in moments when I felt lost or discouraged with my writing. She explains how the most important thing is just to start writing, and if you write four pages that only have one good paragraph, it is all part of the process.

“You don’t care about those first three pages; those you will throw out, those you needed to write to get to that fourth page, to get to that one long paragraph that was what you had in mind when you started...you are learning what you *aren’t* writing, and this is helping you to find out what you *are* writing.” (Lamott 9).

Into the Vineyards is the longest, most involved creative piece I have ever written, and it has been a learning process all its own.

Lessons and Further Steps

I learned the difficulties involved in non-fiction writing, the power of writing, and my own identity as a writer. One of my major frustrations with academic writing and journalism is remaining objective, which is a strict demand of those two disciplines. But I wanted to write more subjectively about travel and the way it affects people. I wanted to be able to use my honest

voice to do so. Creative non-fiction in the tradition of Theroux, Iyer, Wharton and others gave me that license, but the genre also comes with its own set of challenges. The ones I battled with the most were using scene rather than expository writing, including informed speculation and integrating sources. As mentioned previously, I tried to overcome those challenges by following the examples of writers I chose as models, and while I did show improvement, integrating sources and transitioning between scenes and expository writing are still the weakest areas of my essay. As I work towards publication, I will focus specifically on improving them.

Working on this creative project made me realize how much I enjoy writing, and how I really want to pursue it professionally. Before this year I thought writing would always be a side-hobby, but working with my advisor and reading other writers opened my eyes to an area of writing I had not considered much before: freelance writing, writing for hire. Over the past two semesters I held two jobs related to my degree, took a capstone course that required me to work with an actual client and volunteered as a marketing intern for *LandEscapes*, the campus literary journal. Yet, I found I was happiest when writing, the most fascinated when writing, the most willing to spend hours locked in the library when writing.

My future steps are to pursue publication for my story. I've already talked with my advisor about continuing to work with him on editing and making it print-worthy. We will also discuss publishing venues to best suited to my work. This will be my first step into the publishing world, an introduction to what I hope my future will bring. I also plan to use this story the foundation for a book project. I want to collect several stories about my experience abroad that use common themes.

Conclusions

Writing creatively has been an evolving motif of my college life – or perhaps even a full-fledged theme. I did not fully recognize my strong attraction to writing until I traveled. Now writing is at the forefront of my life, encompassing my passion and my goals for the future. I unwittingly began the practice of gathering notes about my observations and status details while in France. Back in America I had the thought of putting all of my travels together, and enrolled in a writing class that I thought would help with that. I did not expect the process to begin so soon however, or to receive support that would help me mature as a writer in ways I did not even realize I needed to mature.

Another conclusion of my creative project is the transformative nature of travel. By entering into Pico Iyer’s “terror and wonder” I found out more about myself, the French and our similarities. Travel writers come to this conclusion often, but always with a different twist based on their outlook on life. For Paul Theroux in *Fresh Air Fiend*, the twist was about memory.

“The greater the access I have had to my memory, to my mind and experience, searching among the paraphernalia in my crepuscular past,” he wrote, “the more I have felt myself to be a part of the world.” (29).

For me, it was about leaving the familiar. Leaving the places and framework that built me into the person I was before going to France gave me a new perspective. I was able to find out more about the people and things that had influenced me only after I went away. Only then was I able to peel the familiar from my skin so I could step back and see it lain out and in context with the outside world.

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Appendix A

Into the Vineyards: Cultural Lessons in French Wine Country

By Alyssa Patrick

Two hours into our drive the land began to flatten, and the road nestled into a shallow valley of vineyards. I sat up straighter in the passenger seat and watched the brown arthritic grape vines change shape and height and thickness against a back drop of a powder blue sky hung with cotton ball clouds. Leaves the green-yellow color of ripening bananas sprouted from some vines. Rows of cypress trees popped up here and there like fence lines, which they were--the viticulturists' attempts to keep the maddening northern Mistral wind at bay.

On my second day in France I learned of this Mistral, a wind so dry and powerful that it withered the fragile vines in the Rhone Valley, and ruffled the temperaments of the people who live there. I never experienced the wind myself, but in the book *A Year in Provence*, author Peter Mayle explained that "It drove the people, and animals, mad...it blew for fifteen days on end, uprooting trees, overturning cars, smashing windows, tossing old ladies in the gutter...every problem in Provence that couldn't be blamed on the politicians was the fault of the *sacre vent* which the Provencaux spoke about with a kind of masochistic pride."

Mayle and his wife lived in Lacoste, a town in the south-western Provence region of France that was a little over an hour from Visan, the village where we were headed. Before the Mistral wind smacked against Mayle's farmhouse, it tore through the same vineyards we were driving through. As we drove the air was still, but the tall trees we passed looked like angry winemakers raising their fists, daring the wind to try and destroy their precious fruit.

In the car, however, I had my own worries: understanding and speaking the French language with a native French person.

“Les vignes là-bas, elles sont très vieilles” said Isabelle Foret, the wine journalist with whom I was interning and who was piloting the car that carried us through this wine country. *The vines over there, they are very old.*

I smiled and cleared my throat and looked over at her, then back at the road. I scrunched my eyebrows and rolled my eyes upward, battling against my own personal Mistral. The great wind blew French words around in my brain, making it difficult to catch the right ones and nearly impossible to put them in order. I didn't have time for that, so I just started at my go-to phrase and let the rest fall into place. *“Oh, très intéressant! C'est ...uh...parce que les branches sont, sont plus....uh...épaisses que les autres ?”* I stuttered. *Oh very interesting! It is...uh...because the branches are, are...uh...thicker than the others?*

Given an hour, I could have said that sentence flawlessly. Unfortunately people cannot really stick with conversations that slow, so Isabelle was stuck with my choppy French.

“Oui, exact!” she responded with a smile. I let go of a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, she had understood at least some part of what I said! She kept her blue eyes on the road and both hands on the wheel of her small, silver Peugeot, a basic four-door sedan that is standard vehicle for many French. Her smile curled up and tucked its corners just under her high, prominent cheek bones, the lips slightly parting in the middle, rarely showing teeth. With this smile came a glint in her eye that made it seem as though she knew a tantalizing secret she never intended to share. Her hair – still a chardonnay blond despite her 50-some years, was cropped, brushing the neckline of her black tunic, a swoop of bangs running across her forehead. I was happy to see the smile now, and how the lines on her forehead had smoothed out because her eyebrows were once again resting over her eyes, rather than furrowed together as they had been two hours ago.

The road trip had not started out as originally planned. In fact, initially, the road trip had not been part of my plan at all. I got this three-week internship with Isabelle because of my experience with social media. She wanted to sell her fourth wine guide for women, *Femivin: Le Guide du Vin au Feminin* in America, so she needed help translating and building a name for herself among her English speaking audience—women interested in French wine. She was so excited about my experience with social media that she overlooked my poor French, something I found harder to do, and decided to include me on this trip.

When I got the email about the internship, I thought it sounded at once amazing and impossible. I had traveled to France in search of something foreign, something outside of my normal world, but before meeting Isabelle I had done pretty well surrounding myself with the familiar. I studied in Antibes, a French Mediterranean town and international yacht-port where most vendors knew English and most bars were inhabited by British, South African and Australian “yachties.” I lived in a long-stay hotel with about 30 other Americans in my study abroad program. Besides two French classes, the rest of my courses were taught in English. Still, I had taken French for five semesters in college and two years in high school; Isabelle, however, spoke very little English, and working with her was going to strip me of my friends, my language, and everything familiar. And yet that was the very adventure I was looking for. Cultural discovery was both why I wanted to travel in the first place, and what terrified me at the same time.

Like travel writer Pico Iyer writes in his essay *Why We Travel*, “...all good trips are, like love, about being carried out of yourself and deposited in the midst of terror and wonder.” My natural curiosity about the world and people had led me to study abroad, but the fear that

naturally accompanies travel kept me from jumping into a full immersion experience. In France, I was hoping get some solid professional marketing experience and learn about a different culture. But Isabelle swooped in at the very end, providing just the push I needed to step further out of my comfort zone, and deeper into the midst of terror and wonder.

The idea for the road trip came up during my first meeting with Isabelle. That morning, I couldn't eat. My stomach tightened and I began to sweat as I walked to the train station to meet Isabelle's other American intern, Kristin, at the train station where we were getting picked up. She stood at the curb watching the passing Fiats and Peugots. Her left arm rested against her torso and she used it as a perch for her elbow, making it easier to take puffs from her cigarette. She wore big sunglasses, skinny jeans and a black leather jacket that contrasted with her dirty blond hair. Even though Kristin and I had a French class together all semester, we hardly ever talked. As my nerves mounted I really wished one of my other friends could have been there as well.

"I'm glad Ed is picking us up," she said, "I'm not ready to speak French yet today."

Ed, the man who arranged the internship, was Isabelle's agent. An American expat who had married a French opera singer, he split his time between producing B-grade movies and promoting Isabelle. Since Isabelle lived about a thirty-minute drive from Antibes he was picking us up, which was the only thought giving me peace that morning. I envisioned Ed as my walking, talking dictionary, kindly helping me through conversations with Isabelle to make sure I didn't say anything offensive.

"Yeah, I've been trying to speak French more in the past couple of weeks, but it hasn't been going so well," I said, shaking my head.

I was tired of practicing French. I just wanted the language to untangle itself in my head and flow past my lips effortlessly. But that wasn't going to happen. French and I have a love-hate relationship. I love the language, but it hates me.

My love for the language started because of its romance. As the oldest child of three, an avid reader and blossoming writer, I strove to be intellectual and desirable, and French held both of those things in its lilting sounds. While consonant-heavy German has abrupt halts and dense sounds (“danke” and “eich en”) the French lilt all of their words together, and often ignore consonants all together. Most words end in vowels, in delicate sounds that require an open mouth and intricate use of the vocal chords. German, to me, sounds heavy and harsh, like bratwurst. French sounds like it should be whispered in your ear in a wine bar lit only with candles that smells of red wine and cigar smoke.

When it came to actually learning the language, however, I was at a loss. As it is with learning any language, I had a hard time remembering the different grammatical structures, placing articles correctly and building my vocabulary. A class I took during my sophomore year in college was when that Mistral wind really started blowing in my brain, and I learned the price that comes with a beautiful language.

“It is not ‘ou,’ it is ‘iou’” the professor would say, her lips tightened into a circle just big enough for a straw.

I heard the difference, and could say it correctly when it was isolated, but put it in a sentence where I also had to worry about properly purring the “r’s” and oing the “u’s” and I was lost. In class we worked on the sounds by watching and discussing French music videos.

“Alyssa, what did you think of the song? Try to use some words that incorporate nasal sounds” the professor asked.

“*Le chanson avait un theme interessant sur le topic de la relation entre les garcons et les filles.*” I responded, reading the sentence that I had been working on since the beginning of class. I felt pretty good about my answer, and the friend sitting next to me smiled with encouragement. The professor, who was the first French person I ever knew, was less impressed.

“You pronounced the *an, un* and *on* the same, and you did not pronounce the *tion* in *relation* clearly enough. Please try again,” she said. I slumped down in my seat slightly, trying to hide the sudden urge to cry. This happened just about every time I answered a question in class, it felt as though nothing I said could be right. Since she was the first French person I ever really knew, I did not yet understand that the French teach by fixing flaws rather than praising strengths. Since, as an American I was used to hearing “that was really good effort,” I found the French intimidating.

That intimidation mixed with a desire to impress Isabelle only grew as we stood at the train station in Antibes, waiting for Ed. By the time he got there, 20 minutes later than our meeting time in true French-fashion, my hands were clammy and my throat dry.

“Hi girls, jump on in,” he called from his car, a tiny gray Toyota Corolla with chipping paint.

“Oh, you have to pull that door closed harder than that. It’s had that problem for a while,” he said when Kristin got into the front.

“Hi, nice denim seats,” I said, sliding into the back. The inside of the car looked like some kind of craft project from the 90s.

“Oh yeah, pretty weird huh? That’s how the seats were when I got the car,” Ed laughed as he pulled into traffic. The hair he still had was red and going white around the edges. He was

loud, wore a slightly wrinkled button-up shirt and jeans, had dimples and a gravelly laugh, and overall seemed too American for France.

“Do you mind if I smoke in the car if I roll down my window?” Kristin asked, pulling a cigarette pack from her purse.

“Yeah that’s fine, mind if I bum one from you? I’m trying to quit, so I don’t have any with me,” he replied. I tried to picture him married to a French woman and came up with an empty frame. I started to get worried – what had I gotten myself into? Ed was not the safety net I thought he would be, instead I started to question everything about the internship. Ed had set up the whole thing, which he seemed too scatter-brained to organize well. I started to wonder if Isabelle was really as well-known as he said she was, but at that point, there was nothing I could do but watch cigarette smoke stream by my window and run through French phrases in my head.

After about 30 minutes a green traffic sign pointed us in the direction of La Roquette, the village where Isabelle lived. It took us about two minutes to drive through the narrow, cobblestone roads at the center of town, and another five minutes up a gravel road lined with cypress trees. Ed turned left into a driveway marked by a ceramic plaque that read *Mas de la Vigne*. Right then I forgot my worries about Isabelle and the internship. It is a common practice in France to name homes, and throughout my time there I had passed by many homes I wished I could visit. *Mas* is a Provençal term that refers to the faded yellow and pink lime-coated farmhouses that are usually on a large plot of land are common in that region. Though the bright turquoise of the Mediterranean had played a large part in luring me to study in the south, exploring France over the past four months, I grew to prefer the more rural areas – both for their landscapes and history in wine. On train rides to Paris and Lyon I saw numerous *mas* built

amongst olive trees and vineyards and I desperately wanted to visit one, to find out the kind of people that lived there.

I forgot about French for a moment as parked next to Isabelle's car in the gravel driveway shaded by tall, leafy trees.

"Well, here we are. Pretty nice place, huh?" Ed said as we got out of the car. I was too distracted by the house that was now visible on the left to respond. Vines thick with yellow-green leaves reached from right to left across the house's pink façade. White window shutters opened against the greenery and ceramic potted plants gathered around the door. On the right side of the house there was a long wood table under a white canvas awning, and behind us, a fallow vineyard. It was everything I had wanted France to be.

Isabelle came out of the house in a long, white linen shirt that was embroidered around the collar, jeans and simple tennis shoes. She was no taller than 5'5 and had that quiet, mischievous smile already.

"*Bonjour et bienvenue,*" she said, greeting us with *bises*, the French custom of kissing on the cheeks, or in some cases just touching cheeks. The spell of the scenery broke and I remembered my French problems again.

"Hello, I am pleased to meet you," I said in very formal French, "your home is beautiful."

"Thank you, it is my dream house," she said.

"I can imagine," Kristin added, "I'd love to have a house like this one day."

“Well move to the south of France!” Isabelle laughed, “this house has a wonderful and unique history. The first people who lived here in 1870 were a group of women winemakers. It was fate for me to find it.”

“It’s true. It was pretty run-down when she found it, but she had to have it. The remodeling took a while, but look at it now,” Ed chimed in, speaking French with a such a strong American accent that I looked over at him suddenly, wondering if some other man was speaking. If Ed had lived in France for as long as he said he had, long enough to have two children and a business there, why was his accent so bad still? It made me think at first that he couldn’t actually speak French well, which wasn’t the case. He was fluent, but did not attempt to match any of the sounds my French professor had tried so hard to get us to learn.

“Lunch is just about ready. It is beautiful today so I thought we could eat outside. What do you think?” Isabelle asked, bringing my attention back to her. I really wanted to see the inside of the house, but of course I wasn’t going to say that.

“Yes, that sounds nice,” I said instead.

“Can we start off with some wine?” Ed asked.

“*Bien sur*, we’re having pasta with a white sauce so I have a rosé and a white chilling,” Isabelle answered. She went inside and came back with the wine and a basket of bread.

“I just have to finish a few things, and then I’ll bring the lunch out,” she said as she walked back inside. We sat down and Ed poured us all a glass of wine.

“Great thing about coming to Isabelle’s house, always great wine,” he said. He started giving us background on Isabelle’s wine guide and what they wanted us to do for the next three weeks. We found out that Isabelle first became known as an expert in women and wine when she published her first book, *Elles et Bacchus*, in 1985. Her interest in wine began at the age of

10, when her great-grandmother, a wine-maker in Burgundy, a north-west region of France, introduced her “delicate taste buds” to wine and awakened a passion for wine and viticulture.

We also found out that Ed enjoys talking and inserting colorful stories that I had a hard time believing, and felt awkward hearing while Isabelle was just a few feet away, cooking us lunch.

“Isabelle has three kids, two of them she had with Claude Francois. Have you heard of him?” Ed asked.

“I feel like my French professor may have mentioned him, wasn’t he a singer or something?” Kristin said.

“Yeah, he was really popular in the late 50s and early 60s, France’s Elvis Presley. Isabelle was modeling for a magazine in Paris when she was like 18. He saw her on the cover of magazine, and told his manager he wanted to meet her. So he did.” Ed poured himself another glass of wine while he talked. Isabelle came out with a salad and plates and Ed told her he was telling us about Claude. She just nodded and smiled and told us lunch was almost ready. I felt like Ed had to be exaggerating some part of the story. She seemed too content cooking and talking about wine at her historic *mas* to have spent years living and having kids with a rock star. But she didn’t deny it. This internship just kept getting more and more interesting.

Towards the end of lunch, we started to make plans for our next meeting.

“I will be gone Friday and Saturday, for the wine jury in Visan,” Isabelle said.

“Oh, you should tell the girls about that. I went one year. Really interesting, all of those women knew far more about wine than me,” Ed poured us all another glass of rosé.

Isabelle told us she had been visiting Visan for the past nine years. As the author of three wine guides geared towards women, she knew many winemakers and winery owners, and as far as I was concerned, just about everything there was to know about wine. Ten years ago she had proposed to the owner of Visan's winery, Théo Théodosio and his wife Christiane, the idea of creating a jury of women to test 10 different *cépages* of grapes every year. The blend the women chose would become that year's *Femme* wine.

That idea was why I so admired Isabelle – here she was, a woman in an industry dominated by men in a country famous for its patriarchal culture, creating a wine based around women's tastes. Something that also struck me about Isabelle was her patience.

“Do you think the girls could go with you Isabelle? It would be a great experience for them, don't you think?” Ed interjected. I almost laughed out loud when he said that. Going with her and being a part of that experience sounded amazing, like something I might have day-dreamed while passing the time on a train ride to Nice. I could not imagine Isabelle saying yes to this – why would she want to be responsible for a couple of American girls at an event with her friends and colleagues that she created? Plus, trying to impress one French woman gave me enough anxiety; I could not imagine trying to impress her and her colleagues.

“*Oui, bon idee,*” she said, “they could film parts of the jury and explain it in English for my English blog to post *sur Facebook*. Would you girls be available?” Isabelle responded, smiling and slightly flushed from the wine. I couldn't believe it.

Kristin and I agreed and she went inside to call a friend that might be able to arrange last minute housing for us.

“There is a room in a bed and breakfast available, you're all set to come with me,” Isabelle said as she started to clear the dishes from lunch.

Ready or not, I was going to Visan.

Kristin and I were at the train station again, this time waiting for Isabelle. Kristin sat on her duffle bag, slouched forward with her smoking arm resting on her knee and long blond hair falling across her face. The strap of my bag was wearing a pattern into my shoulder and since my thick brown hair was too short for a pony tail, it hung in my face, sticking to the sweat developing at my hairline. The morning hadn't started out great. There was a train strike, which meant the train we were going to take to meet Isabelle in Cannes, which was easier for her to get to than Antibes, was delayed by an hour. Since I was used to train strikes at this point (they are almost a monthly occurrence in France), I thought I had figured out a different train line that would get us there, but that line was cancelled all together. The change in plans also meant I had to call Isabelle on the phone, which meant I had to struggle through French unaided by body language. And we were going to be later than originally planned for dinner with the winery owner and his wife that night, so Isabelle did not sound happy.

The train station officials were not the right French people to start my day with either. Since there were so many people in Antibes just to work or party on yachts, the station officials had to deal with a lot of people who made no attempts to speak French. As a result, they did not try too hard to speak English either, and did not have a lot of patience with my slow French. So my language confidence for the day was shot before I even got in the car with Isabelle. I really wanted to avoid sitting in the front seat because I knew that would put more pressure on me to keep up conversation with Isabelle.

But, I ended up in the front seat, a clammy bundle of nerves.

“I have a headache right now, but I’ll sit in the front on the way back,” Kristin said as she slid into the back seat. I got in and tried to settle my nerves, but Isabelle looked frazzled.

I felt sick. “Great,” I thought, “now not only am I a poor-excuse for a French speaker AND American, now we’re going to make her late for her dinner. She’s gotta be wishing we didn’t come. I wish I could curl up into a ball and die.” Since that was not an option, I attempted to apologize instead.

“Je suis désolée que nous sommes en retard. J’ai essayé de trouver un train, mais la grève a arrêté toutes les routes.” I used my hands while I said this, kind of swatting at the air as if I could waft my meaning to Isabelle.

“That’s okay, but we’re going to be later than we planned. There is a lot of traffic today,” Isabelle said. Her eyes darted from side mirror to rearview mirror and forward again as she pulled into traffic. I wanted to explain more, to tell her how I had mapped out all of the possible train options the night before, and how the schedule ended up being wrong, and how I’m never late to things. I hate being late. I felt that if I could just show Isabelle part of my past, just explain the kind of person I am to her, it would all be ok.

But as the travel writer Pico Iyer said once, the nature of travel does not make that easy because, “abroad is the place where we live without a past or future, for a moment at least.” I felt like that with Isabelle – like all I had with her was the present, and I had to summarize myself as succinctly as possible. Succinctness is not my specialty, even in English. I like words too much.

Summarizing myself in English was difficult, but in French it was basically impossible. I never knew if Isabelle understood everything I said, or if I understood her. Being immersed in a language is also like constantly being submersed under water. Like you’re waving at each other

through the hazy murk and your conversation is limited to whatever meaning you can convey through hand gestures. In fact, I do use hand gestures often when I'm stumbling through French.

"Um, so it is three hours away right? And Visan is in the Rhone Valley? I just translated the section on Rhone wines for your guide" I said, moving my open hands in front of me, trying to offer extra meaning through them. I hoped small talk might calm her down a bit, or at least show I was trying to do something.

"Yes, just about three hours," as she answered we pulled up behind a semi-truck. "*Oh zut! Je déteste les camions.*" Her eyebrows furrowed again. *Oh damn it! I hate semi-trucks.* She had her hands firmly set at 10 and 2 on the steering wheel and kept her eyes on the road as she talked.

"I don't like to talk too much while driving. I must pay attention to the road," she said. I began to breathe a little easier.

"That's ok. Driving in traffic is not my favorite either," I said. That sounded like great news to me; less talking meant less chances of making a fool of myself. Another semi-truck came up beside us. Isabelle shook her head.

"Those *camions*... I prefer driving on Sundays. They don't run on Sundays," she said, her tone more aggravated and brow wrinkled with tension.

Isabelle's frustration made her more human and easier to relate to. Seeing this side of Isabelle began to relax me a bit. My resentment towards the three hour drive lessened, and I started to appreciate Isabelle in a new way. Isabelle's driving did not reflect the stereotypes about French driving that I constantly heard. One of my American friends sometimes got rides to our university from one of the French students. She'd always come into class afterwards wide-eyed.

“Crazy French drivers,” she said, “he drives so fast and just pulls u-turns like they’re nothing.”

By inviting me to come on this road trip, she helped me separate her from my general knowledge on the French. I began to see her as an individual, and in fact her attentiveness to the road and constant checking mirrors and blind spots had started to remind me a bit of my mother. My mom is an insurance adjuster and as a result knows every way a car accident can happen and how fast. She is a nervous driver. I did not expect to be reminded of my family when I was so far from home immersed in a foreign culture. But it was like something Paul Theroux wrote in *Fresh Air Fiend*, “It is simply not possible (as romantics think) to lose yourself in an exotic place. More likely you will experience intense nostalgia, a harking back to an earlier stage of your life.”

Because Isabelle brought me that nostalgia while we drove, she became a bit less intimidating. She displayed a characteristic I had seen before, that was part of what philosopher Edmund Husserl would call my lifeworld, or everyday life experience. As a result, I felt a bit more at ease and began to see Isabelle as a guide, my Virgil, leading me to a deeper understanding of the French, myself and culture in general.

After about an hour and a half the feathery, green fields in the distance crumbled into dry soil and rocks, and then rose again into the chalk-white slopes of the distant Mt. St. Victoire. We drove through Provence with its lavender fields and *mas*. After about two hours, neat rows of vines began to alternate with fields. We were entering the Rhone Valley.

“I love the way vineyards look,” Isabelle said, “all of the neat rows and the way the vines twist as they grow.”

“Me too. I just started working on the Rhone Valley section of your guide. I like it. This is an AOC, *n’est-ce pas?*” I said, thinking how grateful I was that Isabelle was still so patient with my French.

AOC is the *appellation d’origine contrôlée*, a term I had heard of but did not really understand until I read the chapter about it in Isabelle’s guide, which explained that AOC “is the name given to high-quality wines that are identified by the village where vineyards are planted. These wines must be produced according to criteria that regulate the winemaking process and the kinds of grapes used. The number of bottles produced per acre and the alcoholic content are also fixed by law, and a tasting committee determines if the rules are being followed,”

Learning more about wine and the process of making it made me realize the French people are like wine themselves. There is all of this pretension around wine – regulations on labeling, strict conditions about where the grapes are grown, proper ways to open the bottle, to pour the wine, to taste it.

Isabelle’s guide explained that “Wine has a special place in French hearts. For two millenniums, France has developed a “wine lifestyle” that every French family adopted and passed down through the generations. As part of this wine culture, the French acquire a taste for wine and learn its rich traditions, symbolism and history. Each great French vineyard stands witness to the important events that shaped the country. They are noble testaments to the style, fabric, and soul of a nation.” Wine critics such as Robert Parker, make it seem that drinking wine requires intellect and class, that if you drink anything younger than a 1980 Pinot Noir from a small village in Bourdeaux, than you are not worthy of being a wine drinker.

Living in France showed me another part of the French relationship to wine. A French man I met earlier in the year said wine is treated like a meal, something to be prepared correctly

and savored and shared with friends. Wine takes some warming up to, but the more you have and the more you learn about it, the more you realize the beauty of it. It is an art form really, and something that brings people together. The French are also this way. A common stereotype of French people is that they are grouchy and have little patience – a perception that comes from tourist’s interactions with locals in Paris. A French friend of mine explained that the French are generally more reserved and keep to themselves around strangers.

“Americans like to be friendly with everyone. They are very social and have a lot of friends that they may not be very close to. French people take a long time to make friends, but once you are friends, you will be forever,” he said.

The French treat making wine like making friends; they spend so much time in regulating and perfection because they respect wine and the warmth it brings to them. The joy it adds to a meal or to a summer evening with friends. Some of my favorite memories from my time abroad were dinners with friends that began and ended in wine. In the four months I spent in France I had grown to respect and love the French, but I’ve always struggled with explaining this to friends who only know the culture from movies or books. I think the best description I’ve yet to read is from Mort Rosenblum, an American journalist and observer of France who said, “The French know how to live. They can be pains in the ass at times but basically they are a good society and they have their priorities straight. It’s a cliché but it is true: they work to live as opposed to living to work. They eat well, they think about things, they take care of their old “stuff” yet they are quick to embrace new things.”

“We are getting close now, maybe 45 minutes. Oh, see that vineyard there? It is run by a woman winemaker. I’ve met her a couple of times, she makes good wines,” Isabelle said. We had recently pulled off the main *autoroute* and were surrounded by vineyards on both sides.

“I am excited to be a part of this because I like women, well I mean I am like a feminist – is that the right word? Do you know what I mean? well, uh ...” That was all I could manage to say in French. I used my hands, gesturing with open palms, trying to conjure meaning out of the air.

Isabelle is laughing and her eyebrows raised. “Oh really, you are?”

“Did I just say I’m a lesbian?” I wondered. Just when I was getting more comfortable with my French, I decide to tackle something like feminism. “Awesome,” I thought to myself, “find a way to dig yourself out of this one.”

“I mean I think women should be equal and, I like strong women, umm...” Isabelle nods. She says she understands, tells me that the word for feminist is *feminist*. Seems like it always works out that way – I’ll struggle over a word for a good five minutes and then find out it is merely the English word said with a French accent. The way my brother would have said *feminist* to make fun of the French.

Relieved that I had gotten my way through that conversation, I decided to stay quiet for a bit. Kristin woke up in the back seat, so I let her take over conversation as Isabelle turned towards Orange, a city just 35 minutes south of Visan.

While Visan does not even appear on most maps of the region, its vines actually predate the well-known Chateauneuf du Pape region that is 45 minutes south. In her book *A Motor-Flight Through France*, travel writer Edith Wharton did not make it through Visan, but she did point out the Roman influence in Orange, a bigger village that Isabelle also drove us through. She wanted us to see the arch in the center of town that Wharton described as “the great golden-brown arch – standing alone in a wide grassy square – keep[ing] on three sides a Corinthian mask of cornice and column, and a rich embossing of fruit and flower-garlands, of sirens,

trophies and battle-scenes. All this decoration is typically Roman.” Isabelle told us much the same, pointing out all of the other Roman aspects of the town as we drove through and on to Visan.

We parked in front of the winery’s visitor’s center, the Cave des Couteux, a modern building with large French windows displaying a wine bar and racks of bottles. A thin woman with white hair and a black dress locked the front doors of the shop and waved to Isabelle.

“That is Christiane, my friend and the wife of the winery owner, Théo,” Isabelle said as we stepped out of the car.

The two women greeted each other with the traditional French *bise*, except when Christiane leaned in, she wrapped her right arm around the top of Isabelle’s back, and Isabelle did the same. I watched this and knew right away that they were close companions. *Bises* is traditional throughout France and is used even when greeting someone you’d just met, which made me feel awkward on more than one occasion. Leaning in and rubbing cheeks with strangers is ok, but other contact is not. The French only hug close friends and family, something I learned through many bizarre looks I got from French students I tried to hug.

“Christiane, this is Alyssa and Kristin. They are helping to translate my guide into English and setting up social media marketing that will make me well-recognized in America.”

I nodded in agreement and greeted Christiane with *bises*. Her eyes lit with excitement when she realized we were American, and she attempted a little English. *Do you like France?* and *Where do you come from?* She reminded me of my mother, who would have envied Christiane’s 50’s inspired short-sleeve dress that cinched at the waist and flared into a triangle that stopped just under her knees. Her naturally white hair was pinned in wisps to the back of her

head, and her attentive eyes and soft, round face made me feel less self-conscious about my language. I assured her that I wanted to practice my French that evening, so she did not need to worry about English – a choice my tired mind did not appreciate later.

Christiane led the way out of the parking lot and down a gravel path to the *chambre d'hôtes* where we were staying. The hotel where Isabelle was staying didn't have any rooms available on such short notice.

“Oh, Isabelle! I watched CloClo a couple of weeks ago. I thought it was very good. I was surprised by some parts of the story that I did not know before! Were you happy with it?” Christiane asked.

“Yes, I thought they did a pretty nice job. Of course it didn't all go exactly as they said, but it was pretty close,” Isabelle responded, her face not changing at all. She had expected this question.

Kristin and I had been discussing our nervousness about the upcoming dinner, and our hopes for the menu, but stopped talking and met eyes when we heard “CloClo.” Over the past couple of months giant movie posters on the bus stops in Antibes had advertised the movie CloClo. It had always caught my attention, and I thought it was about some classical musician I should have recognized. Turns out it was about Claude Francoise, the rock star Ed had told us about at lunch. It turns out he wasn't exaggerating after all. Even though the drive had made Isabelle a bit more familiar to me, her relationship with Claude still didn't make sense. Her whole vocation now centered on “liberating women” by empowering them to take a larger role in the wine world – how could she have settled with a rock star long enough to have two children with him?

The longer I spent with Isabelle and further into her world she invited me, the more questions I had, another aspect of travel I had not expected. Iyer wrote "...many of us travel not in search of answers, but of better questions," and as the evening progressed, my curiosity did as well. How did Isabelle get to this point in her life? What was she like at 20? What did she think of me?

A minute or two down the path a long, rectangular white stone and brick building with terra cotta roof emerged to the right. As we got closer we saw a yard lined with cypress trees extending behind the cottage, and a short, wide turret at the right end of the building. Perpendicular to the main cottage was another, shorter one with a wooden door and blue, wooden shutters. Since we were staying for free I had expected a single bedroom in a little house, but the landlady gave us a key to an entire wing of her cottage. Kristin and I walked through the bedroom and living room and I gasped with delight at each new intricacy revealed. A spiral staircase at the far end led us to a loft smaller than a single dorm room.

"Oh my god. This is unreal. Look at the books, look at the books!" I said while taking pictures of each part of the tiny room, my voice raising an octave on the word "books."

"The bed is so small," Kristin said at almost the same time. "Do you think we have wifi?"

Since we'd left Antibes late, we had about 20 minutes to change and freshen up before we were to meet Christiane and Isabelle back at the visitor's center. Thoughts of a nap and brief lapse into speaking English were left strewn around the cottage with our clothes as we hurried to change and look less travel-weary.

"I wish we had more time," Kristin said, "I'm gonna go smoke for a sec."

I envied her that vice. My stress relief was writing, and I had been looking forward to untangling my thoughts before dinner. As Theroux wrote in *Fresh Air Fiend*, writing “made me more joyful, because at its best it has always demanded a mental journey and led me deeper into my unconscious mind.” While I have kept diaries and journals since I learned to write, living in France had made writing a necessity in the same way Kristin was constantly saying, “I don’t smoke this much in America, it’s just because we’re in France.”

We had survived the drive, but Visan was offering new anxieties. Isabelle’s slow, patient French had disappeared as soon as she greeted Christiane. She spoke faster than she normally did with us, and did not really try to keep us in the conversation. Plus, the dinner we were headed to was bound to be long. In France, dinners have no end time. Waiters in restaurants will not bring the check unless you ask for it because it is unacceptable to rush the meal. Dinners at the homes of friends started with wine and *aperitifs*, and the main course was usually not served until 9pm. Since we were dining with the owner of the winery and the focus of the trip was wine, I knew we were in for a long night.

It was around 8pm when we met Christiane and Isabelle back at the visitor’s center, which sat between us and the winery’s restaurant. The four of us walked down the road, past Isabelle’s hotel, and then arrived at the restaurant. A waiter saw us coming and opened the door with a smile. “*Bon soir Christiane!*”

He Isabelle and Christiane walked in, talking and laughing, and Kristin and I followed silently behind. I tried to run through French phrases in my mind while also listening to their conversation, searching for moment when it might be safe to say something. The restaurant was small and simple – textured, white plaster walls and exposed oak beams. The lighting was soft

and matched the warmth of the chatter filling the room. Christiane led us to the very back where a rectangular table set for six ran parallel with the back wall. Théo, her husband, walked out with a waiter from behind a white curtain to the right, which appeared to conceal a storage room. It seemed they were in the midst of a business conversation, but upon seeing Isabelle, Théo, a slight man with dark hair, smiled and greeted her.

“It is so good to see you, Isabelle! Welcome, welcome,” he said in French as he kissed her cheeks. Though he was a good looking man he did not hide his age as well as his female counterparts. His white hair and prominent salt and pepper eyebrows brought out the warmth in his olive skin, but there were dark circles under his eyes and parentheses around his mouth. He was quick to smile and had a deep laugh that made me want to tell him jokes.

“Thank you, I’m glad we made it. Let me present Alyssa and Kristin. They are helping translate *mon guide* and with *reseau social*.” Isabelle smiled warmly at him, a bigger smile than her usual. Kristin and I both shook his hand, nodded.

“*Bon soir. Merci pour l’invitation de – uhh – de avoir le – non – de diner avec t – uh vous,*” I managed. He laughed and shook my hand and welcomed me, but then turned his attention back to Isabelle and Christiane where it remained for the rest of the evening. Kristin looked tired and I felt like my eyes were as big as saucers, like a nocturnal animal with ears constantly moving to pick up sounds. As the people we met kept getting more interesting, my desire to participate in conversation grew as well. Even though Isabelle was not talking directly to me, I became even more grateful that she had invited us on this trip. It felt like she had me by the hand, leading me further into her life without any noticeable reservations. She was a professor of the lifeworld – teaching about the way French friends and colleagues interact, and about French life in general, without even meaning to. I figured the very, very least I could do

was be engaged, pay attention. Given the uniqueness of this situation, my senses were on higher alert anyways. Pico Iyer said there is ecstasy in paying attention, and I had the adrenaline coursing through me to prove it.

We sat around the table, Kristin and I across from each other, Isabelle between me and Théo, and Christiane across from him.

“Isabelle, what wine should we start with tonight?” Théo asked.

“Hmm, how about a rosé, and of course, a *Femme*, maybe the – “

“- the 2009? *Bien sur*. And we have a nice 2010 rosé,” Théo flagged down the waiter and ordered both wines.

The interaction amazed me. Through the portions of Isabelle’s guide that I was translating to English, I had learned that typically the man of the table selects the wine. Since Théo was the only man at the table, not to mention the owner of the winery, I fully expected him to order without consulting anyone. Choosing the wine for the evening is exactly what Isabelle asks women to do themselves. Her guides educate woman on the world of wine and denounces the idea that women are poor judges of quality wine just because they may prefer a rosé over a Pinot Noir promoted by American wine critic Robert Parker.

“I want you to take pleasure in sharing knowledge of wine with men in a partnership, rather than being told which wines to appreciate,” she wrote in the introduction to her latest guide.

When the waiter brought the two bottles of wine she had requested, he first presented the bottles to Theo.

“*Non*,” Théo refused, “Ask Isabelle. She is the wine expert after all,” he indicated to Isabelle. She read the label, checking that it indicated the AOC where the grapes were grown,

and did the first tasting of the wine to make sure it wasn't corked, an expression meaning the wine is spoiled. Again, that is something the man at the table usually does. I watched Isabelle as she moved the glass in circles on the table, brought it to her nose and breathed in sharply, took a small sip and then sucked in air through pursed lips and clenched teeth to bring out the true flavor. Théo watched and waited for approval. Again, I was struck with my gratefulness for being there, for getting to see firsthand how Isabelle is changing the wine industry for women.

Just after Isabelle had determined both wines acceptable for drinking, a tall black woman with an impressive afro and a smile nearly as wide, came to the back of the restaurant. Christiane raised her arms in greeting, beaming the same way she had upon first seeing Isabelle, and hugged her.

This new dinner guest with her cinnamon-colored hair, floor-length purple jacket and tight red top was quite unexpected, and I welcomed the surprise – I even looked up and silently directed a thank you to the heavens for adding even more color to an already vibrant evening.

“This is my friend Rianne. She is an actress and comedian from Paris,” Christiane said in French, motioning Rianne to sit next to her.

“Actress or unemployed, you choose,” laughed Rianne as she leaned over the table to exchange kisses with Isabelle, Théo, Kristin and myself. My desire to speak freely with these people, to partake in their conversations and be understood completely intensified with the arrival of Rianne. At the same time, she brought an even more unreal quality to the evening – could I *actually* be eating dinner with a French actress? I felt like Julia Child during one of her first dinners with her husband's friends in Paris.

“More than half the guests were French, but I could barely say anything interesting at all to them. I am a talker, and my inability to communicate was hugely frustrating,” she wrote in *My Life in France*.

Everything I wanted to say welled up in my chest at the base of my throat; words waiting to be translated by a mind far too tired and incompetent for the job.

So, I smiled a lot. I laughed a lot, with my whole body rocking in my chair a little, scrunching my eyes and covering my mouth. I laughed when the others laughed, which was virtually every moment Rianne spoke, and while I caught some of the humor in what she was saying, my physical whole-body laughter was more a desperate attempt to show understanding than a response to her wit. My cheeks were sore from smiling and my eyes dry from constant movement and not enough blinking. I wanted to watch everyone, to memorize how they looked when they talked to each other, glean as much meaning as possible from their conversation and body language.

“If travel is like love, it is, in the end mostly because it’s a heightened state of awareness, in which we are mindful, receptive, undimmed by familiarity and ready to be transformed,” Iyer wrote. I was indeed in love.

Love was a topic of conversation Rianne quite enjoyed as well. Well, love and lust and men. At first, I did not imagine Isabelle getting along well with this woman. While Christiane’s questions about *CloClo* made me believe Isabelle had been with Claude Francois, her interaction with Rianne made me understand why. What I had seen of Isabelle was reserved and proper, a queen of etiquette and all things being well presented. At this dinner dominated by women and red wine, that image began to shift.

At some point in the conversation, somewhere between the *aperitif* and the soup, Rianne got on the subject of a cowboy she once dated in Texas. She followed him and his business back and forth between Dallas and a less important city.

“Was he really like a cowboy?” Isabelle asked.

“Well you know, he wore one of those hats, and had a lot of money. But like any man, he was lazy and complained. But again, that money, you know? I was young, it was a good time.”

Isabelle laughed and made a face like she knew exactly what Rianne meant. Again I was surprised to find that she reminded me of someone from home, an old boss and current friend, a strong and independent woman who also fought for mutual respect with men. And then there were my friends, mostly single women with plans for graduate school and working at a zoo in a big city and starting a non-profit for the arts in schools. Strong, independent women that I surrounded myself with and admired without direct intention. It happened by default – a quality I learned to respect without even realizing I was learning anything at all.

As I pondered that realization, I lost track of the conversation for a moment, and found myself roped back into it by Rianne asking Kristin and I what we thought of French men.

“Oh man, here we go,” I thought. By this point we had gotten through the before dinner wine, the *aperitif*, the duck (delicious, of course), the with-dinner wine, and had finally reached dessert. In that time I had avoided inadvertently saying anything offensive, and thought I was going to make it through the rest of the night that way. Backed by the warmth and (perhaps false) confidence of wine, I jumped in. In broken, poorly-phrased French I said something along the lines of:

“I’ve met some interesting French men, not dating any though,”

“Oh it’s better that way, you’re traveling, keep yourself available,” Rianne interjected much to my satisfaction – proof that she knew what I said!

“I do really like Irish men though,” I added.

“Oh, the Irish!” Rianne laughed and winked at me, “why them?”

“Well, they’re so big, um...broad, I mean tall! Well I met one in Ireland and he was nice and well, ya.” That was about all I could muster and I had them laughing, likely more because of my facial expression than my content, but I decided to stop while I still knew I hadn’t said anything too catastrophic.

Rianne turned to Kristin to get her opinion. She looked tired and was likely feeling as unsure about answering this question as I did. Eventually she said that she was dating a British guy who worked on yachts who was a few years older.

“Men can always date younger women and it is seen as some sort of accomplishment. Women date a younger men and the world calls them a cougar. I’ve been one of those once or twice in my life,” Rianne said, taking over the conversation. Isabelle laughed in agreement, and then the pair continued the conversation with each other. I felt equally happy to have participated in conversation with them and relieved to be off the hook again.

By 10:30pm, the waiter was finally bringing us coffee and tea to end the night. I looked around the restaurant and was surprised to find that we were the only ones left and the other tables had been set for the next day. The restaurant had closed and I did not even notice. Conversation at our table was quieter; everyone’s cheeks flushed cheeks and eyelids heavy. Isabelle sat next to me, playing with the wrapper from her tea cookie, a tiny action that reminded me of my grandmother. I wanted to hug her.

In one evening, Isabelle went from reminding me of my mom, my friend to my grandma, so many important women from my familiar life in America. After a wonderful meal and a few bottles of wine the night had gone from being a completely foreign experience to an evening spent with new acquaintances and old friends. Isabelle had taken me past the tip of the iceberg of French culture and language, showing me that we share more similarities than differences. At the heart of it all, we are people with ambitions and passions and a desire to interact.

