

The Problem of Balance in *Sideways*

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The protagonist of the novel *Sideways* is a wine enthusiast, aspiring (but failing) novelist, and the thinly disguised mouthpiece for author Rex Pickett, whose manuscript was rejected fifteen times before it was accepted and promptly rewritten for the screen. The movie caused a sensation in the California wine industry, as thousands of tourists flocked to the Santa Ynez Valley to follow the trail of the central characters, Miles and Jack, from tasting room to bar in search of the perfect Pinot Noir. In truth, the film was far more successful than the book. The screenwriters captured an Academy Award while Pickett's novel was ignored by serious book reviewers. In spite of its flaws, the use of wine language — or winespeak — in the novel makes it linguistically intriguing. This paper will consider the terms and phrases selected by the protagonist, Miles Raymond, to talk about wine and consider the thematic concern for balance in the novel. Over the past forty years balance has emerged as the single most important factor in determining wine quality. It is the combination of aroma, flavor, acidity, tannin and the aftertaste that makes a wine great, and when one or more of these areas is deficient we say that a wine has poor balance. Balance is equally important in life and this is reflected in the travails of the novel's hero, Miles, an alcoholic still obsessed with his ex-wife, who is searching for love and the perfect glass of Pinot Noir.

The plot of *Sideways* is fairly straightforward. Miles's oldest friend Jack is getting married and the two have decided to go on a tour of California wineries in lieu of a stag party. Miles is in a fragile emotional state because of a difficult divorce and his repeated failures to find a publisher for his novel. Jack, on the other hand, is determined to have

a few final flings before his wedding. The more they drink, the more tensions rise and old wounds are reopened. Eventually Jack is chastened for his misdeeds and he is safely married, while Miles finds a new love interest. Amidst the reflections on romance, writing and life, Miles offers detailed tasting notes for thirty-one different wines sampled at wineries and restaurants. He may not be very good at romantic relationships, writing, or staying sober but he understands wine and is skilled at putting his impressions into words. His thoughts on La Rinconada, a Pinot Noir produced by the Sanford winery in California, are lucid and they follow what has become the standard tasting note pattern:

The wine was a deep, almost opaque purple in the glass. Against the sunlight it turned carmine, but you still couldn't see through it. On the nose it was full-throttle blackberry and leather and spice with hints of raspberry candy. The mouthfeel was explosive of highly extracted, but still young, Pinot Noir grapes draped in tannins. I suspected that another year or two would tame its exuberance, but it was fun to capture it now in its youthful promise. (55)

First he tells us what the wine looks, smells and tastes like before commenting on its overall character. In wine magazine tasting notes, professionals use a mixture of specialized winespeak and metaphoric language to tell consumers what to expect if they purchase a given product. The importance of wine in Miles' life is underscored by the fact that he will use this evaluative template in describing places and people, but first the tasting note deserves more attention.

There is a heavy reliance on metaphoric language in Miles's note. Wine is a motorized vehicle ("full-throttle"), a stick of dynamite ("explosive"), an article of clothing ("draped"), a wild animal ("tame its exuberance") and, perhaps, a teenager ("youthful promise") — anything, it would seem, but an alcoholic drink made from grapes. This is because tastes and smells are notoriously difficult to capture in words.

“Great” and “delicious” are non-conveying, and in order to be more precise we tend to say that a wine smells like something else — a flower or a spice, for example — or that it reminds us of something with which most people are familiar. Miles chooses metaphors that focus on motion and activity while James Laube, a reviewer for the magazine *Wine Spectator*, highlighted its sensual and physical aspects in a tasting note of the same vintage of La Rinconada: “A gorgeous Pinot, rich and focused, broad and supple, with tiers of spicy, sweet black cherry, anise, sage and mineral. Shows remarkable depth and complexity, with a finish that sails on” (Laube 2001). The sailing metaphor is physical, as are the adjectives and nouns concerned with aesthetics (“gorgeous,” “rich,” “complex”), size (“broad”) and structure (“focused,” “remarkable depth,” “complexity”). A curious difference between the two notes is that Miles the amateur’s description is more precise than Laube the professional’s. One wonders whether Laube is talking about La Rinconada’s appearance, body or taste when he calls it “gorgeous,” but in the absence of accompanying objective descriptors it is impossible to know for certain. The use of adjectives with contradictory meanings — “focused” and “broad” — contributes to the impression of vagueness.

Critics often discuss wines as if they have personalities and the resulting linguistic imprecision creates interpretative difficulties, as Adrienne Lehrer has pointed out. “Pretentious” is a term that she argues everyone understands when it is applied to people, but not to wine. A pretentious wine might be something young and cheap masquerading as aged and noble, but it could equally refer to an expensive wine lacking the requisite pedigree, or a new wine deemed overly ambitious (2009: 31). The cumulative effect of the adjectives in the first sentence of the professional’s review of La Rinconada is the creation of an image of luxury that tells us little about the wine’s actual attributes. Miles, on the other hand, captures the wine’s qualities without the help of abstract language, and this is because he is trying to understand the wine, not to convince others to buy it.

In the two reviews of La Rinconada, there is no substantial difference in the number of objective wine descriptors: Laube uses five; Miles,

four. In professional tasting notes is not uncommon to find up to ten aroma descriptors, or vocabulary units describing what the wine smells like, and novices are often skeptical about whether anyone could glean so much from a single glass of wine. A 2002 study into the role of wine knowledge in detecting scents found that when the participating experts discovered one or two aromatic components in a wine they accessed memory for associated scents; the novices in the study, however, did not possess such associations in their memory (Hughson and Boakes 2002: 472). In other words, if you do not learn your wine odors it will be far more difficult to assign an accurate descriptor to what you smell. The authors of *The World Atlas of Wine* agree: “Experienced tasters often rely on the immediate reaction of their memory to the first sniff of a wine. If they cannot relate it straight away to wines they have tasted in the past they must fall back on their powers of analysis” (Johnson and Robinson 2013: 40). Novices lack both tasting experience and the requisite vocabulary to describe what they might have detected. Research verifies the importance of compiling a bank of knowledge that can be accessed to verify sensations and help put them into words. A study of wine descriptors used in a blind tasting of Sauvignon Blanc in New Zealand found that the experts offered descriptions in line with the accepted characteristics of the grape while the novices’ classifications were “more idiosyncratic” (Urdapilleta 2011: 123). Novices do not know the right words, so they improvise, resorting to non-standard winespeak that means little or nothing to others.

In *Sideways*, Miles uses winespeak appropriately and he has compiled sufficient tasting experience to make the necessary mental comparisons before passing judgment. However he is handicapped by a bias in favour of Pinot Noir and against wines made from many other varieties. In other words, his palate is acute but limited. Miles’s life has been taken over by wine and this is apparent in his recurrent use of four common wine words: nose, balance, corkscrew and massive. The first two are indispensable when discussing wine; the third represents an important piece of wine paraphernalia; and the fourth is one of the most overused wine descriptors in the American wine world. Ironically,

Miles uses these words most often when he isn't talking about wine. The word "corkscrew" makes its way into *Sideways* seven times, but only on three occasions does it mean a wine-opener, as in the sentence, "I came in, bottle and corkscrew in tow" (172). Three other times the usage is idiomatic, denoting movement. People "corkscrew" into chairs (156) or onto stools (80) and Jack "corkscrew[s] his fist" in Miles's hair (111). The seventh and final usage of "corkscrew" comes in the introduction of a waitress with "corkscrew curls" (286). Since Miles probably uses a corkscrew more often than he does a toothbrush, its appearance in a wine travelogue is not unexpected, but his idiomatic usage suggests that his language choices have been affected — if not infected — by an obsession with wine.

The title of the novel refers to Miles's binge drinking and his habit of becoming horizontal, or "sideways," due to overindulgence. Balance is what he lacks and the point is reinforced by this term's frequent appearance. In the 1970s, wine critics began to concentrate on the overall wine tasting experience rather than the identification of individual components. Balance is related to structure and harmony; wines that have it are said to be "integrated" and "focused," while those that don't are "disjointed" and "muddled" (Lehrer 35). Balance is as elusive in life as it is in wine. Sommelier Rajat Parr gives the following definition: "Good balance is when nothing sticks out in an ugly way, when nothing is out of place. You don't taste too much or too little acidity, too much tannin, or too much alcohol. Balance is hard to define with words, but obvious when you encounter it in a wine" (Parr 2010: location 710). The term recurs nine times in *Sideways*, but only three times as a wine descriptor. On four occasions it refers to losing or regaining physical balance, as in, "I lost my balance and a half glass (damn!) of the Chard [onnay] went flying" (19), and on three of these occasions the word is applied to Miles. "Balance" also appears twice in the idiom, "hanging in the balance" in regards to Miles's financial difficulties (239) and the fate of his manuscript (321). We can gauge the hero's psychological and emotional state by his ability to stay vertical, or not become sideways. Balance cannot be achieved with too much of one thing or

too little of another. Miles is obsessed with one woman, his ex-wife Victoria (who is remarrying), and a single grape, Pinot Noir, and is blind to the merits of most other women and varietals. His prejudices and preferences are extreme. Like the Pinot Noir grape in the wrong growing conditions, a lot can go wrong with the overly sensitive Miles; he may turn “dark” and misanthropic” (208), to borrow Jack’s words, but when he gets it right and maintains balance he can be a charming companion.

Another important wine term is “nose,” which is a favourite of tasting note writers. Aroma and bouquet are adequate substitutes, but the appearance of “nose” forty-six times in *Sideways* serves as a reminder that what is important in wine is equally so in life. The reader soon discovers that Jack has no nose, or discernment. He will sleep with anyone and drink anything. It is therefore fitting, albeit creatively heavy-handed, for the author Pickett to have an infuriated Miles break Jack’s nose with a punch. As a wine term, “nose” only enters the novel five times in phrases and sentences like “that unmistakable Pinot nose of cassis and blackberry” (8). On eight other occasions “nose” does not mean aroma or bouquet but the physical appendage in relation to wine. At a wine tasting Miles is seen “bending over and putting [his] nose in the glass” (54). But after Miles punches Jack, the majority of the term’s usages — twenty-three in total — are connected to the pain Jack experiences and his unfortunate appearance. Much like the use of “corkscrew” as a movement verb, the most intriguing use of “nose” is as an idiomatic motion verb, in the sense of parking a car. The reader is told that Miles “nosed the 4 Runner into a space” (93) and that “Jack nosed into a parking space” (285). Perhaps life and wine have overlapped to such a degree that one cannot be separated or distinguished from the other. It is only fitting that, as the official explanation for his broken nose, Jack will stage a car accident, smashing the front of the 4 Runner — its nose — into a tree.

When Miles looks at the world he makes strong value judgments based upon his senses. It is ironic that he passes negative judgment on the “musty-smelling living room” in the house of Jack’s love interest,

Terra, because the arrangement of the items and the general lack of upkeep offend his sense of balance. Although one wouldn't say that he looks at the living room as though it were a glass of wine, he is unnecessarily rigid in the application of the principle of balance:

The décor was an anachronistic bohemian motif, furnished with Oriental rugs, ornate wall tapestries, sloppily maintained bookcases, and antique velvet upholstered chairs and a sofa draped with knitted woolen throws. A brick fireplace stacked with freshly lit logs burned a warm orange, crackling noisily. The mantelpiece was decorated with wine bottles, which gleamed translucent green in the underlight of the fire. Candles of all colors and sizes flickered everywhere as though we had crashed a séance. (139)

Nor is Miles impressed by his hostess's selection of Tom Jones as romantic background music. The following sentences describing her subsequent musical selection would probably not occur to anyone who is not a wine enthusiast: "She selected a jazz compilation CD to cleanse the air of Tom Jones" (148). The cleansing of the palate during wine tasting involves the elimination of a lingering taste by sipping water and eating bread or unsalted crackers. The jazz music is pleasantly inoffensive and, like an unsalted cracker, it wipes his listening memory clean of Tom Jones. Later Miles will critique another musical selection as if it were food or drink: "Maudlin classic rock from the '70's saccharined the emptiness with its plangent strains, further sickening me" (180). The emphasis on taste — sugary sweetness — and a corresponding physical reaction is noteworthy.

Towards the end of the novel, Miles will offer a negative evaluation of a waitress because of a perceived lack of balance:

She had dishwater blond hair with corkscrew curls and a zaftig figure that bulged her anachronistic dirndl blouse. Massive breasts threatened to explode her laced black vest and a silly

red beret completed the outfit, crowning a face so heavily made up it looked like she had done a face-plant into a bowl of flour. More abhorrently, she was one of those risible women who laugh at everything, no matter how moronic. Her laughter rose and surged and built to high-pitched crescendos at every single thing Jack said. (286)

He employs common wine descriptors — “massive” and “explode” — to describe her appearance, the usual starting point of a tasting note. Following a vivid colour description and a discussion of structural defects, the focus shifts to sound — the waitress’s laughter. Miles sees flaws everywhere. Her breasts are too large; the clothing, inappropriate; the weight, makeup and laughter all excessive.

Miles’s analyses of the living room and the waitress are as excessive as they are unnecessary. It is as though both the room and the woman had been arranged especially for him and they await his judgment. Perhaps his obsession with finding the perfect wine leads him to find fault with the world, and this reflects a central irony: when we recognize our own flaws in others we are most unforgiving because it is precisely our inability to correct them in ourselves that most rankles. Emile Peynaud, the renowned Bordelais oenologist reminds us that it is far easier for wine critics to tell us that a wine is too sweet, or is plagued by harsh tannins and insufficient acidity than it is to say what the appropriate levels of these factors would be (1983: 189). When Miles gets falling down drunk, has emotional outbursts and drinks from the spit bucket, the critic is clearly unbalanced, and this is the way he behaves for the majority of the novel. But by the end he meets and accepts his ex-wife and her new husband at Jack’s wedding; he is about to begin a new relationship with, Maya, who shares his passion for Pinot Noir; and there are suggestions that his palate is evolving. After an encounter with a coveted Burgundy wine, La Tache, Miles will reflect that the offerings in Santa Ynez Valley were “uniformly fine, if not transcendent. But then what could compare to the rarefied Bourgogne Rouges that Maya had uncorked? I had new standards now and they were

pretty exalted benchmarks to meet” (319). The fact that Miles’s standards are new, signifying change, does suggest better things are to come.

In conclusion, Miles’s use of specialized wine language points to a thorough knowledge of his subject. This becomes more interesting when the reader realizes that he knows a lot more about wine than he does life, and that he uses the same template in judging the world that he applies to wine evaluation. The concept of balance in relation to wine is one with which Miles is familiar, but his own life, actions and opinions of others are unbalanced. In an intriguing way, Miles’s problem emerges in his language use, as wine vocabulary creeps into his normal speech patterns to an unnecessary degree.

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