I loved learning to read this new language. It was all in the mind. The instructor devoted, at most, fifteen minutes of the first class period to French pronunciation, but we were never required to speak or write the language, to read it. I read it very well, earning an A for the yearlong, ten-hour course. Moreover, some years later I took the Ph.D. reading exam in reading French, I scored 100 percent. (p. 1)

I went to France to do library research now and then, and although my ability to speak French improved slightly and I became very good at understanding French spoken to me, I never felt any great need to make a serious effort to learn to speak French, no more than had my former professors and language teachers at SUI [State University of Iowa] felt any need to make me learn to speak (as well as read) the language in the first place. (p. 3)

I had an enormous reading vocabulary, but I could not connect it to my minuscule speaking vocabulary. When I tried to say something, the words eluded me. They did not come up mispronounced, they did not come up at all, I suppose because I read French rapidly, passing over the printed words without imagining any sounds at all, going directly from print to meaning. Some years before, I had noticed—not without pride—that I could be reading a book consciously unaware as to whether it was in French or English. But that entire sight-recognition vocabulary was useless to me in my attempt to speak French. (p. 6)

It was clear that it embarrassed me to speak French. I knew exactly why that was. I didn’t want to sound like Charles Boyer in the movies of my childhood. We hooted and groaned when he breathed down the neck of some woman on the screen. And there was the suggestion that he might do things to them offscreen that no real man would ever be caught dead doing.

A great suspicion came over me: Real Men Don’t Speak French. But just as you must survive humiliation and submit to agonizing tension, so also must you over-come embarrassment. Make an ass of yourself. If you want to learn. (p. 12)

My French was far from the worst among the foreigners. On any fair assessment, it was among the best. I noticed that the other American, who spoke far more fluently than I, did not make the elisions between words that are essential for speaking colloquial French. (p. 14)

The distinguished English historian of science didn’t do accents. Instead, he read French words as though they were English, with particular stress on all the endings that are silent in French. (p. 14)

The Italian read his paper with Italian accents, the Japanese with Japanese gutturals and deletions, and the Spaniard was halfway through his paper before any-one realized that he was reading it in French, not in Spanish. All in all, I was quite pleased with myself, except for having to answer my questions in English. On a scale of 1 to 10, I thought I surely rated no lower than an 8, whereas the Englishman got a 6 for having to have the questions translated for him into
English, although he did then, sort of, answer them in French. But I had no illusions. I could not really speak French. (pp. 14-15)

Perhaps it was just as well. All I had learned in six months of tutoring was how to read French out loud. If I had not already known this, three days at the conference would have convinced me. At the end I could not even speak the few words and sentences that had always been my mainstays in France. Something deep in me dictated that it was better to say nothing, to be thought bereft of any spoken French, than to expose the limited extent of what I knew. Moreover, to my horror, I discovered that if I did try to use the bits of spoken French that had served me in the past, all the old mispronunciations remained. My new knowledge of how to make the sounds had not transferred. I remained silent and watched the show. (p. 16)

My wife, Pat, is an archaeologist and has worked in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. She is good at languages and has studied Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, and Turkish as well as French, Spanish, and German. But often in the Near East, she would be tongue-tied while I blithely carried on conversations with a few hundred words and rudimentary grammar that I had gleaned from that wonderful and I am afraid now defunct series of blue-backed books titled *Teach Yourself Persian*, or whatever language you wanted to speak. One could not say that I really spoke Kurdish, for example, but I communicated enthusiastically and well enough. With time to think, Pat could speak these languages correctly, but I just talked, any old way. (p. 17)

What I wanted, was that when I asked a distinguished Cartesian scholar a question, as I did in a discussion period at the conference in Descartes¹, but had not dared to do in Paris, what I wanted was that he understand and answer my question, that he not look as though the village idiot had spoken to him with all the earnestness of his imbecility and as clearly as a cleft palate permitted. (p. 23)

I was more tense than I have ever been in my life or ever want to be again. The first time I ever climbed a mountain wall with hundreds of feet of exposure below me, that time we arrived back at the entrance of a cave to find a wall of water roaring in and had to crawl down-stream as fast as we could for a long distance to clamber up into passages above water level, my Ph.D. oral exam—none of those times could begin to compete with the state of tension I was enduring now.

And how am I to characterize or express adequately my sensations when with every indication of justified anger and disgust, The Professor called me an idiot and an imbecile? To be sure, she called others in the class the same as the days went on, but I was the first. I, who had been a professor in charge of my own classes for twenty-five years. In some sense of that maligned word, I suppose the experience was edifying. (p. 39)

It was not the first time in my life that I had been called an imbecile in class. But imbecility is in America, so to speak, a relative thing. In France, it is exactly defined, and certified. (p. 40)

I have mentioned a possible psychological reason. Although I loved learning to read French and

¹ The village in France where the philosopher René Descartes was born.
enjoy reading French philosophers and writers, I have a distinct dislike for the sound of spoken French. Many Americans do. Why? Because it’s weak. For American men at least, French sounds syrupy and effeminate. (p. 52)

… what made me realize how much I dislike the sound of French was the continual, unctuous, caressing repetition of “l’oiseau” (“the bird”). It is a word the French believe to be one of the most beautiful in their language. It is a word that cannot be pronounced without simpering, a word whose use should be restricted to children under five.

I did not want to speak French because it gave me the bird. (p. 53)

So how does one handle such an irrational response? I wondered if it was just the contrast with the English “bird,” which is a strong hard word. How about the German word for bird, “Vogel”? I’m going to get to German in a moment. American men don’t like to simper. And as I said, they get their notion of Frenchmen from the movies. Certainly no American boy of my generation ever wanted to grow up to be Charles Boyer. (p. 53)

Watson concedes that he’s exaggerating, but maintains his view.

All right. All right. But remember, I’m not trying to be reasonable about it. I’m just giving you my unadulterated, stupid, automatic, response. Real Men Don’t Speak French. There has to be something to that. Where did I read that during World War I, French soldiers were known as “WeeWees”? Of course that’s French for “Yes, yes” but really . . . (p. 54)

Why did I resist it so? Because, I think, all my life I have been trying to learn to write. These new French forms threatened to destroy what little progress I had made so far. Not only did I use English forms in speaking French, I was appalled to find myself using French forms when I was writing English. French was undermining my very being! My personality was in danger of disintegrating! A great clanging of alarm bells was set off in my deep unconscious, irritated by these alien influences seeping down from above. (p. 57)

The other thing I understood is why many writers resist learning a foreign language. They are defending the style and form they have perfected in their own language.

The mere reading of another language apparently does not present the same threat. But speaking is too close to writing. (p. 58)

I do not spell well in English, again perhaps a function of reading for meaning, not for the sound of words nor how they look on the page. I spell even worse in French. (Now that I have worked at learning to spell French words, I spell English words even worse than before.) On dictations I always made about twice as many errors as the number the teacher announced as allowable. I began to worry about passing the dictation portion of the final exam . . . (p. 59)

At the Alliance Française, I sank lower and lower to bottom of the class. I never missed a session. I sat there paying intense attention and looking at the teacher with hopeful eyes.
My transition to this groveling state of supplication abrupt. During that first month with Claire, I was often impatient. I was used to being in charge and had consciously to hold myself down so as not to behave like a professor, not to speak up on all subjects like a know-it-all. I did know many things the younger students did not on subjects that came up in class discussion. But this problem evaporated like dew under the desert sun during the first hour with The Professor. By the end of the first day with her I was so anxious simply to be able to work out the exercises and answer the questions in class that I lost consciousness of ever having been a professor—or of knowing anything—at all. In The Professor’s class I saw myself as did the youngest members—as a funny little old man with a white beard who was earnest and wanted to learn but who just wasn’t very good or very bright. They liked me and would talk to me at break, but there was no question who was at the bottom of the class. (pp. 60-61)

It was a depressing prospect. To learn French I might to give up my lifelong adherence to the doctrine of extreme individualism. I had been attracted by French radicalism only to discover that in language the French are hidebound conservatives. (p. 81)

Once I decided to learn to speak French it became—did I say?—almost immediately an obsession. All those years of guilt and embarrassment at being a Cartesian scholar who could not speak French (even if no one else noticed or cared), the difference between what I was and what I appeared to be, combined to drive my ambition to a frenzy. I would learn to speak French, whatever it took, however long. One day, by God, I would sit at a table in a restaurant in Paris with a group of French Cartesian scholars, and we would talk! (p. 65)

Scholars compete for prestige, and each scholar—particularly each and every idiosyncratic French scholar—attempts to make dominant his own views and interpretations. In no place in the world is this competition more intense than in Paris, the intellectual capital of the Western world. Those tight little circles of the sort I was yearning just to look into were closed not through any particularly conscious intent, but because competition is so extreme among the small number who must be admitted that they haven’t time to notice outsiders. Even more, in their assurance that the French intellectual circles are indeed the highest in the cosmos—a conviction they hold without ever thinking about it, as other people take for granted the air they breathe—French scholars can ignore the work of foreigners as having no relevance to them. Even French scientists seldom make reference to work in languages other than French. Another reason, of course, is that many of them can read only French. (p. 74)

I have always thought my bad spelling was due to inattention as to whether words end, say, with “an” or “on,” and the like. Would not impatient inattention also explain how I can look up the spelling of a word, clamp the dictionary shut, and then turn to my writing and still not know how to spell it? I had gone through the procedure of looking it up; did I have to remember it, too? And doesn’t everyone now and then reverse letters and numbers—“57” for “75” and even “Nood Gight”? Just today I asked for the “palt and sepper” at lunch, and as long as I can remember I have made that kind of exchange of initial letters perhaps once a week. Is that a kind of dyslexia? It really is not a serious problem in speaking and spelling. What is serious is my inability to listen to sounds and repeat them back. I was poor at memorizing poems and piano pieces in my
youth. Again, this was attributed by both my teachers and me to a combination of laziness and impatience, to that same refusal to spend boring hours practicing that drove me from the chemistry lab when I was a freshman in college.

But now I was trying. I was practicing. I was listen and repeating back. I read Georges Simenon’s mystery novels out loud in French, trying to accumulate an auditory vocabulary. But time and again when I wanted use a French word that I knew I knew, a word I would recognize instantly if I either read it or heard it, it would not come up. I could not hear nor see it in my mind. (pp. 102-103)

I had always liked school. In the past when fall came, and I saw young children setting out with their books and new supplies, I felt kind of a joyful uplift that surely reflects my own childhood experiences. One week after I finished my course at the Alliance Française, school started for French children and the streets of Paris filled with their passage and chatter. I witnessed this advent with a sensation of stomach wrenching horror. Thank God I was not still in school. (p. 127)

Slowly I recovered. I had been in Paris now for three months and had done almost nothing but study French. We went to the Comédie Française and to another play, and I understood most of the dialogue. We went out to dinner with French friends, and spent entire evenings speaking French.

“Look,” Pat said to me, “the transformation is amazing. Before you could hardly say a word. Now you carry on conversations for hours in French.”

“Last summer you couldn’t say a word,” Claude said. “Now you won’t shut up.”

I started working again in the Bibliothèque Nationale. I had a nice long chat with the woman in charge of the rare books reading room. People asked me for directions in the street and understood me when I told them where to go. I was, after a fashion, speaking French. (p. 129)

Anyway, there we were. And there, seated facing me, unable to escape at last, was Professor Marion. Now he would have to talk to me. I spoke to him at length, in French, rather well, I thought.

“Speak English,” he said. And he answered me in English.

“Look,” I said heatedly, “your English is just as bad as my French.”

“But I am French,” he said.

“Then speak French,” I said.

“Are you sure you can understand?” he asked.

“Of course I can understand,” I said. “I’m not an idiot.”

“All right,” he said, “I’ll speak French. But you speak English. Don’t try to speak French. Your French is terrible.” (p. 133)