

## *Books You Don't Know*

(in which the reader will see, as demonstrated by a character of Musil's, that reading any particular book is a waste of time compared to keeping our perspective about books overall)

THERE IS MORE THAN one way not to read, the most radical of which is not to open a book at all. For any given reader, however dedicated he might be, such total abstention necessarily holds true for virtually everything that has been published, and thus in fact this constitutes our primary way of relating to books. We must not forget that even a prodigious reader never has access to more than an infinitesimal fraction of the books that exist. As a result, unless he abstains definitively from all conversation and all writing, he will find himself forever obliged to express his thoughts on books he hasn't read.

If we take this attitude to the extreme, we arrive at the case of the absolute non-reader, who never opens a book and yet knows them and talks about them without hesitation. Such is

the case of the librarian in *The Man Without Qualities*,<sup>1</sup> a secondary character in Musil's novel, but one whose radical position and courage in defending it make him essential to our argument.

Musil's novel takes place at the beginning of the last century in a country called Kakania, a parody of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A patriotic movement, known as Parallel Action, has been founded to organize a lavish celebration of the upcoming anniversary of the emperor's reign, a celebration that is intended to serve as a redemptive example for the rest of the world.

The leaders of Parallel Action, whom Musil depicts as so many ridiculous marionettes, are thus all in search of a "redemptive idea," which they evoke endlessly yet in the vaguest of terms—for indeed, they have neither the slightest inkling of what the idea might be nor how it might perform its redemptive function beyond their country's borders.

Among the movement's leaders, one of the most ridiculous is General Stumm (which means "mute" in German). Stumm is determined to discover the redemptive idea before the others as an offering to the woman he loves—Diotima, who is also prominent within Parallel Action:

"You remember, don't you," he said, "that I'd made up my mind to find that great redeeming idea Diotima wants and lay it at her feet. It turns out that there are

1. SB and HB++.

lots of great ideas, but only one of them can be the greatest—that's only logical, isn't it?—so it's a matter of putting them in order."<sup>2</sup>

The general, a man of little experience with ideas and their manipulation, never mind methods for developing new ones, decides to go to the imperial library—that wellspring of fresh thoughts—to "become informed about the resources of the adversary" and to discover the "redemptive idea" with utmost efficiency.

The visit to the library plunges this man of limited familiarity with books into profound anguish. As a military officer, he is used to being in a position of dominance, yet here he finds himself confronted with a form of knowledge that offers him no landmarks, nothing to hold on to:

"We marched down the ranks in that colossal store house of books, and I don't mind telling you I was not particularly overwhelmed; those rows of books are not particularly worse than a garrison on parade. Still, after a while I couldn't help starting to do some figuring in my head, and I got an unexpected answer. You see, I had been thinking that if I read a book a day, it would naturally be

2. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, vol. 1, translated by Sophie Wilkins (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 500. In this quotation as in the others, Stumm is speaking to his friend Ulrich.

exhausting, but I would be bound to get to the end sometime and then, even if I had to skip a few, I could claim a certain position in the world of the intellect. But what do you suppose the librarian said to me, as we walked on and on, without an end in sight, and I asked him how many books they had in this crazy library? Three and a half million, he tells me. We had just got to the seven hundred thousands or so, but I kept on doing these figures in my head; I'll spare you the details, but I checked it out later in the office, with pencil and paper: it would take me ten thousand years to carry out my plan."<sup>3</sup>

This encounter with the infinity of available books offers a certain encouragement not to read at all. Faced with a quantity of books so vast that nearly all of them must remain unknown, how can we escape the conclusion that even a lifetime of reading is utterly in vain?

Reading is first and foremost non-reading. Even in the case of the most passionate lifelong readers, the act of picking up and opening a book masks the countergesture that occurs at the same time: the involuntary act of *not* picking up and *not* opening all the other books in the universe.



If *The Man Without Qualities* brings up the problem of how cultural literacy intersects with the infinite, it also presents a

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3. Ibid., pp. 500–501.

possible solution, one adopted by the librarian helping General Stumm. This librarian has found a way to orient himself among the millions of volumes in his library, if not among all the books in the world. His technique is extraordinary in its simplicity:

“When I didn’t let go of him he suddenly pulled himself up, rearing up in those wobbly pants of his, and said in a slow, very emphatic way, as though the time had come to give away the ultimate secret: ‘General,’ he said, ‘if you want to know how I know about every book here, I can tell you! Because I never read any of them.’”<sup>4</sup>

The general is astonished by this unusual librarian, who vigilantly avoids reading not for any want of culture, but, on the contrary, in order to better know his books:

“It was almost too much, I tell you! But when he saw how stunned I was, he explained himself. ‘The secret of a good librarian is that he never reads anything more of the literature in his charge than the titles and the table of contents. Anyone who lets himself go and starts reading a book is lost as a librarian,’ he explained. ‘He’s bound to lose perspective.’

‘So,’ I said, trying to catch my breath, ‘you never read a single book?’

‘Never. Only the catalogs.’

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4. Ibid., p. 503.

'But aren't you a Ph.D.?'

'Certainly I am. I teach at the university, as a special lecturer in Library Science. Library Science is a special field leading to a degree, you know,' he explained. "How many systems do you suppose there are, General, for the arrangement and preservation of books, cataloging of titles, correcting misprints and misinformation on title pages, and the like?"<sup>5</sup>

Musil's librarian thus keeps himself from entering into the books under his care, but he is far from indifferent or hostile toward them, as one might suppose. On the contrary, it is his love of books—of *all* books—that incites him to remain prudently on their periphery, for fear that too pronounced an interest in one of them might cause him to neglect the others.



To me, the wisdom of Musil's librarian lies in this idea of maintaining perspective. What he says about libraries, indeed, is probably true of cultural literacy in general: he who pokes his nose into a book is abandoning true cultivation, and perhaps even reading itself. For there is necessarily a choice to be made, given the number of books in existence, between the overall view and each individual book, and all reading is a squandering of energy in the difficult and time-consuming attempt to master the whole.

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5. Ibid.

The wisdom of this position lies first of all in the importance it accords to totality, in its suggestion that to be truly cultured, we should tend toward exhaustiveness rather than the accumulation of isolated bits of knowledge. Moreover, the search for totality changes how we look at each book, allowing us to move beyond its individuality to the relations it enjoys with others.

These are the relations that a true reader should attempt to grasp, as Musil's librarian well understands. As a result, like many of his colleagues, he is less interested in books than in books about books:

"I went on a little longer about needing a kind of timetable that would enable me to make connections among all kinds of ideas in every direction—at which point he turns so polite it's absolutely unholy, and offers to take me into the catalog room and let me do my own searching, even though it's against the rules, because it's only for the use of the librarians. So I actually found myself inside the holy of holies. It felt like being inside an enormous brain. Imagine being totally surrounded by those shelves, full of books in their compartments, ladders all over the place, all those book stands and library tables piled high with catalogs and bibliographies, the concentrate of all knowledge, don't you know, and not one sensible book to read, only books about books."<sup>6</sup>

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6. Ibid., p. 502.

Rather than any particular book, it is indeed these connections and correlations that should be the focus of the cultivated individual, much as a railroad switchman should focus on the relations between trains—that is, their crossings and transfers—rather than the contents of any specific convoy. And Musil's image of the brain powerfully underscores this theory that relations among ideas are far more important than the ideas themselves.

You could quibble with the librarian's claim not to read any books, since he takes a close interest in the books about books known as catalogs. But these have a rather particular status and in fact amount to no more than lists. They are also a visual manifestation of the relations among books—relations that should be of keen interest to anyone who truly cares about books, who loves them enough to want to master all of them at once.



The idea of perspective so central to the librarian's reasoning has considerable bearing for us on the practical level. It is an intuitive grasp of this same concept that allows certain privileged individuals to escape unharmed from situations in which they might otherwise be accused of being flagrantly culturally deficient.

As cultivated people know (and, to their misfortune, uncultivated people do not), culture is above all a matter of *orientation*. Being cultivated is a matter not of having read any book in particular, but of being able to find your bearings within books as a system, which requires you to know that

they form a system and to be able to locate each element in relation to the others. The interior of the book is less important than its exterior, or, if you prefer, the interior of the book *is* its exterior, since what counts in a book is the books alongside it.

It is, then, hardly important if a cultivated person hasn't read a given book, for though he has no exact knowledge of its *content*, he may still know its *location*, or in other words how it is situated in relation to other books. This distinction between the content of a book and its location is fundamental, for it is this that allows those unintimidated by culture to speak without trouble on any subject.

For instance, I've never "read" Joyce's *Ulysses*,<sup>7</sup> and it's quite plausible that I never will. The "content" of the book is thus largely foreign to me—its content, but not its location. Of course, the content of a book *is* in large part its location. This means that I feel perfectly comfortable when *Ulysses* comes up in conversation, because I can situate it with relative precision in relation to other books. I know, for example, that it is a retelling of the *Odyssey*,<sup>8</sup> that its narration takes the form of a stream of consciousness, that its action unfolds in Dublin in the course of a single day, etc. And as a result, I often find myself alluding to Joyce without the slightest anxiety.

Even better, as we shall see in analyzing the power relations behind how we talk about reading, I am able to allude to my non-reading of Joyce without any shame. My intellectual library, like every library, is composed of gaps and blanks, but

7. HB++.

8. SB and HB++.

in reality this presents no real problem: it is sufficiently well stocked for any particular lacuna to be all but invisible.

Most statements about a book are not about the book itself, despite appearances, but about the larger set of books on which our culture depends at that moment. It is that set, which I shall henceforth refer to as the *collective library*, that truly matters, since it is our mastery of this collective library that is at stake in all discussions about books. But this mastery is a command of relations, not of any book in isolation, and it easily accommodates ignorance of a large part of the whole.

It can be argued, then, that a book stops being unknown as soon as it enters our perceptual field, and that to know almost nothing about it should be no obstacle to imagining or discussing it. To a cultivated or curious person, even the slightest glance at a book's title or cover calls up a series of images and impressions quick to coalesce into an initial opinion, facilitated by the whole set of books represented in the culture at large. For the non-reader, therefore, even the most fleeting encounter with a book may be the beginning of an authentic personal appropriation, and any unknown book we come across becomes a known book in that instant.



What distinguishes the non-reading of Musil's librarian is that his attitude is not passive, but active. If many cultivated individuals are non-readers, and if, conversely, many non-readers are cultivated individuals, it is because non-reading is not just the absence of reading. It is a genuine activity, one that consists of adopting a stance in relation to the immense

tide of books that protects you from drowning. On that basis, it deserves to be defended and even taught.

To the unpracticed eye, of course, the absence of reading may be almost indistinguishable at times from non-reading; I will concede that nothing more closely resembles one person not reading than a second person not reading either. But if we watch as these two people are confronted with a book, the difference in their behavior and its underlying motivation will be readily apparent.

In the first case, the person not reading is not interested in the book, but *book* is understood here both as content and location. The book's relationship to others is as much a matter of indifference to him as its subject, and he is not in the least concerned that in taking an interest in one book, he might seem to disdain the rest.

In the second case, the person not reading abstains, like Musil's librarian, in order to grasp the essence of the book, which is how it fits into the library as a whole. In so doing, he is hardly uninterested in the book—to the contrary. It is because he understands the link between content and location that he chooses not to read, with a wisdom superior to that of many readers, and perhaps, on reflection, with greater respect for the book itself.

discourse about books focuses on the discourse of other people about those books, and so forth ad infinitum. The abbey's library stands as a luminous symbol of such discourse about discourse, in which the book itself disappears in a fog of language, since libraries are the site par excellence of infinite commentary.

At the core of such discourse is the one we address to ourselves, for our own words about books separate and protect us from them as much as the commentary of others. As soon as we begin to read, and perhaps even before that, we begin talking to ourselves and then to others about books. We will resort thereafter to these comments and opinions, while actual books, now rendered hypothetical, recede forever into the distance.



For Eco even more than Valéry, it seems, the book is an undefined object that we can discuss only in imprecise terms, an object forever buffeted by our fantasies and illusions. The second volume of Aristotle's *Poetics*, impossible to find even in a library of infinite capacity, is no different from most other books we discuss in our lives. They are all reconstructions of originals that lie so deeply buried beneath our words and the words of others that, even were we prepared to risk our lives, we stand little chance of ever finding them within reach.

## *Books You Have Forgotten*

(in which, along with Montaigne, we raise the question of whether a book you have read and completely forgotten, and which you have even forgotten you have read, is still a book you have read)

AS WE HAVE NOW SEEN, there is not much between a book that has been "read"—if that category still has a meaning—and one that has been skimmed. But Valéry has even better grounds than this for merely flipping through the works he discusses, and Baskerville, likewise, for commenting on books without opening them, which is that the most serious and thorough reading quickly metamorphoses after the fact into summary. To appreciate this, we must take into account a dimension of reading neglected by many theorists: that of time. Reading is not just acquainting ourselves with a text or acquiring knowledge; it is also, from its first moments, an inevitable process of forgetting.

Even as I read, I start to forget what I have read, and this process is unavoidable. It extends to the point where it's as

though I haven't read the book at all, so that in effect I find myself rejoining the ranks of non-readers, where I should no doubt have remained in the first place. At this point, saying we have read a book becomes essentially a form of metonymy. When it comes to books, we never read more than a portion of greater or lesser length, and that portion is, in the longer or shorter term, condemned to disappear. When we talk about books, then, to ourselves and to others, it would be more accurate to say that we are talking about our approximate recollections of books, rearranged as a function of current circumstances.



No reader is safe from this process of forgetting, not even the most voracious. Such was the case for Montaigne, who is fundamentally associated with ancient culture and libraries and who nevertheless presents himself, with a frankness that anticipates Valéry, as an eminently forgetful reader.

The flaws of memory are, in fact, a persistent theme in the *Essais*,<sup>1</sup> if not the best known. Montaigne complains endlessly about his memory trouble and the unpleasantness it causes him. He tells us, for example, that he is incapable of going to look for a piece of information in his library without forgetting on the way what he is looking for. When speaking, he finds it necessary to maintain a tightly

1. SB and HB++.

ordered discourse so as not to lose his train of thought. And he is so unable to remember names that he resolves to refer to his servants according to their jobs or countries of origin.

The problem grows so serious that Montaigne, always on the brink of an identity crisis, occasionally fears that he will forget his own name. He even goes so far as to ponder how he will navigate daily life on the inevitable day that such a misadventure occurs.

This general faultiness of memory plainly affects the books he has read. Toward the beginning of his essay on his reading, Montaigne unhesitatingly acknowledges his difficulty in keeping track of what he has read: "And if I am a man of some reading," he declares, "I am a man of no retentiveness."<sup>2</sup>

Montaigne experiences a progressive and systematic erasure that attacks every component of the book from the author to the text itself, each vanishing one after the other from his memory as quickly as it entered:

I leaf through books, I do not study them. What I retain of them is something I no longer recognize as anyone else's. It is only the material from which my judgment has profited, and the thoughts and ideas with which it has become imbued; the author, the place, the words, and other circumstances, I immediately forget.<sup>3</sup>

2. The *Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 296.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 494.



This effacement, in other words, is the flip side of an enrichment. Having made the text his own, Montaigne rushes to forget it, as though a book were no more than a temporary delivery system for some general form of wisdom and, its mission accomplished, might as well disappear. But the fact that the implications of forgetting are not altogether negative does not solve all its associated problems, especially the psychological ones. Nor does it dispel the anguish, intensified by the daily obligation of speaking to others, of not being able to fix anything in one's memory.



It is true that we all experience mishaps of this sort, and that all literature ends up providing us only a fragile and temporary kind of knowledge. What seems particular to the case of Montaigne, however, and indicates the breadth of his problems with memory, is his inability to recall whether he has read a specific book:

To compensate a little for the treachery and weakness of my memory, so extreme that it has happened to me more than once to pick up again, as recent and unknown to me, books which I had read carefully a few years before and scribbled over with my notes, I have adopted the habit for some time now of adding at the end of each book (I mean of those I intend to use only once) the time I finished reading it and the judgment I have derived of it as a whole, so that this may represent

to me at least the sense and general idea I had conceived of the author in reading it.<sup>4</sup>

The memory deficit is revealed as even more acute in this case, since it is no longer just the book but the experience of reading that is forgotten. Here, the forgetting erases not just the contents of the object—whose general shape, at least, can still be called to mind—but the act of reading itself, as though the radical nature of the erasure had ended up affecting everything related to the object. We would be justified in such circumstances in wondering whether reading that we cannot even remember performing still deserves to be called reading.

Curiously, Montaigne displays a relatively precise memory of certain books he dislikes; he is, for instance, capable of distinguishing different kinds of texts by Cicero or even the different books of the *Aeneid*.<sup>5</sup> One gets the impression that these texts in particular—conceivably because they made a deeper impression than the others—have escaped oblivion. Here, too, the affective factor proves decisive in the substitution of a screen book for the hypothetical real book.

Montaigne finds a solution to his memory problem through an ingenious system of notations at the end of each volume. Once forgetfulness has set in, he can use these notes to rediscover his opinion of the author and his work at the time of his original reading. We can assume that another function of the notes is to assure him that he has indeed read

4. Ibid., p. 305.

5. HB++.

the works in which they were inscribed, like blazes on a trail that are intended to show the way during future periods of amnesia.



What follows in this essay about reading is even more astonishing. After explaining the principle behind his notational system, Montaigne unflappably presents the reader with a few excerpts. In doing so, he tells the reader about books that it is hard to say whether he has read, since he has forgotten their contents and must rely on his own notations—writing, for example, “Here is what I put some ten years ago in my Guicciardini (for whatever language my books speak, I speak to them in my own).”<sup>6</sup>

The first author “discussed” is indeed the Renaissance historian Guicciardini, whom Montaigne deems to be a “diligent historiographer,” and all the more trustworthy in that he was himself an actor in the events he recounts and seems little inclined to flatter those in power. His second example is Philippe de Commines, for whom Montaigne has unstinting praise, admiring his simplicity of language, narrative purity, and absence of vanity. Third, he evokes the *Memoirs*<sup>7</sup> of du Bellay, an author whose work in public office he admires, but who, he fears, is too much in the service of the king.<sup>8</sup>

6. Montaigne, op. cit., p. 305.

7. UB+.

8. Montaigne, op. cit., p. 306.

In reading his notes in order to comment on these texts—which he may not remember reading, and even if he does, whose contents he may have forgotten—Montaigne finds himself in a contradictory position. The commentary he is reading is not exactly his, without its being foreign to him either. He conveys to his reader the reaction he had to these books on an earlier occasion, without taking the trouble to verify whether that reaction coincides with what he might experience today.

For Montaigne, an inveterate practitioner of the art of quotation, this is an unprecedented situation: instead of citing other writers, he cites himself. Indeed, at this extreme the distinction between quotation and self-quotation vanishes. Having forgotten what he said about these authors and even that he said anything at all, Montaigne has become other to himself. He is separated from the earlier incarnation of himself by the defects of his memory, and his readings of his notes represent so many attempts at reunification.

However surprising we may find Montaigne's reliance on this system of notes, he is, after all, only drawing out the logical consequence of something known to anyone familiar with books, whatever the state of his memory. What we preserve of the books we read—whether we take notes or not, and even if we sincerely believe we remember them faithfully—is in truth no more than a few fragments afloat, like so many islands, on an ocean of oblivion.



The reader of Montaigne has still more surprises ahead of him. The author goes on to reveal that as forgetful as he may