



BookBrowse

How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read

by Pierre Bayard

Ways of Reading: 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*, 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 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."

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 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."

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 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.'" 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.'

'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?'"

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.

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....

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*, 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 *Odysey*, 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.

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