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How to Talk About
Books You Haven’t Read

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Translated from the French
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Born into a milieu where reading was rare, deriving little pleasure from the activity, and lacking in any case the time to devote myself to it, I have often found myself in the delicate situation of having to express my thoughts on books I haven’t read.

Because I teach literature at the university level, there is, in fact, no way to avoid commenting on books that most of the time I haven’t even opened. It’s true that this is also the case for the majority of my students, but if even one of them has read the text I’m discussing, there is a risk that at any moment my class will be disrupted and I will find myself humiliated.

In addition, I am regularly called on to discuss publications in my books and articles, since these for the most part concern the books and articles of others. This exercise is even more problematic, since unlike spoken statements—which can include imprecisions without consequence—written commentaries leave traces and can be verified.

As a result of such all-too-familiar situations, I believe I am well positioned, if not to offer any real lesson on the subject,
at least to convey a deeper understanding of the non-reader’s experience and to undertake a meditation on this forbidden subject.

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It is unsurprising that so few texts extol the virtues of non-reading. Indeed, to describe your experience in this area, as I will attempt here, demands a certain courage, for doing so clashes inevitably with a whole series of internalized constraints. Three of these, at least, are crucial.

The first of these constraints might be called the obligation to read. We still live in a society, on the decline though it may be, where reading remains the object of a kind of worship. This worship applies particularly to a number of canonical texts—the list varies according to the circles you move in—which it is practically forbidden not to have read if you want to be taken seriously.

The second constraint, similar to the first but nonetheless distinct, might be called the obligation to read thoroughly. If it’s frowned upon not to read, it’s almost as bad to read quickly or to skim, and especially to say so. For example, it’s virtually unthinkable for literary intellectuals to acknowledge that they have flipped through Proust’s work without having read it in its entirety—though this is certainly the case for most of them.

The third constraint concerns the way we discuss books. There is a tacit understanding in our culture that one must read a book in order to talk about it with any precision. In my experience, however, it’s totally possible to carry on an
engaging conversation about a book you haven’t read—including, and perhaps especially, with someone else who hasn’t read it either.

Moreover, as I will argue, it is sometimes easier to do justice to a book if you haven’t read it in its entirety—or even opened it. Throughout this book, I will insist on the risks of reading—so frequently underestimated—for anyone who intends to talk about books, and even more so for those who plan to review them.

The effect of this repressive system of obligations and prohibitions has been to generate a widespread hypocrisy on the subject of books that we actually have read. I know few areas of private life, with the exception of finance and sex, in which it’s as difficult to obtain accurate information.

Among specialists, mendacity is the rule, and we tend to lie in proportion to the significance of the book under consideration. Although I’ve read relatively little myself, I’m familiar enough with certain books—here, again, I’m thinking of Proust—to be able to evaluate whether my colleagues are telling the truth when they talk about his work, and to know that in fact, they rarely are.

These lies we tell to others are first and foremost lies we tell ourselves, for we have trouble acknowledging even to ourselves that we haven’t read the books that are deemed essential. And here, just as in so many other domains of life, we show an astonishing ability to reconstruct the past to better conform to our wishes.
Our propensity to lie when we talk about books is a logical consequence of the stigma attached to non-reading, which in turn arises from a whole network of anxieties rooted (no doubt) in early childhood. If we wish, then, to learn how to emerge unscathed from conversations about books we haven’t read, it will be necessary to analyze the unconscious guilt that an admission of non-reading elicits. It is to help assuage such guilt, at least in part, that is the goal of this book.

It is all the more difficult to reflect on unread books and the discussions they engender because the concept of non-reading is itself unclear, and so it is often hard to know whether we’re lying or not when we say that we’ve read a book. The very question implies that we can draw a clear line between reading and not reading, while in fact many of the ways we encounter texts sit somewhere between the two.

Between a book we’ve read closely and a book we’ve never even heard of, there is a whole range of gradations that deserve our attention. In the case of books we have supposedly read, we must consider just what is meant by reading, a term that can refer to a variety of practices. Conversely, many books that by all appearances we haven’t read exert an influence on us nevertheless, as their reputations spread through society.

The uncertainty of the border between reading and not reading will lead me to reflect more generally on the ways we interact with books. Thus my inquiry will not be limited to developing techniques for escaping awkward literary confrontations. By analyzing these situations, I will also attempt to
articulate a genuine theory of reading—one that dispenses with our image of it as a simple, seamless process and, instead, embraces all its fault lines, deficiencies, and approximations.

These remarks bring us logically to the organization of this book. I will begin in the first section by describing the principal kinds of non-reading—which, as we will see, goes far beyond the act of leaving a book unopened. To varying degrees, books we’ve skimmed, books we’ve heard about, and books we have forgotten also fall into the rich category that is non-reading.

A second section will be devoted to analyzing concrete situations in which we might find ourselves talking about books we haven’t read. Life, in its cruelty, presents us with a plethora of such circumstances, and it is beyond the scope of this project to enumerate them all. But a few significant examples—sometimes borrowed, in disguised form, from my own experience—may allow us to identify some patterns that I will draw on in advancing my argument.

The third and most important section is the one that motivated me to write this book. It consists of a series of simple recommendations gathered over a lifetime of non-reading. This advice is intended to help anyone who encounters one of these social dilemmas to resolve it as well as possible, and even to benefit from the situation, while also permitting him or her to reflect deeply on the act of reading.
These opening remarks are intended not only to explain the general structure of this book, but also to remind us of the peculiar relation to truth that infuses all our traditional ways of referring to books. To get to the heart of things, I believe we must significantly modify how we talk about books, even the specific words we use to describe them.

In keeping with my general thesis, which posits that the notion of the book—that-has-been-read is ambiguous, from this point forward I will indicate the extent of my personal knowledge of each book I cite, via a system of abbreviations.¹ This series of indications, which will be clarified as we go, is intended to complete those that traditionally appear in footnotes, and that are used to designate the books the author theoretically has read (op. cit., ibid., etc.). In fact, as I will reveal through my own case, authors often refer to books of which we have only scanty knowledge, and so I will attempt to break with the misrepresentation of reading by specifying exactly what I know of each book.

I will complement this first series of indications with a second series conveying my opinion of the books being cited, whether or not they have ever passed through my hands.² Since I will argue that evaluating a book does not

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¹ The four abbreviations used will be explained in the first four chapters. UB designates books unknown to me; SB, books I have skimmed; HB, books I have heard of; FB, books I have forgotten (see the list of abbreviations). These abbreviations are not mutually exclusive. An indication is given for every book title, and only at its first mention.

² The abbreviations used are ++ (extremely positive opinion), + (positive opinion), – (negative opinion), and —— (extremely negative opinion). See the list of abbreviations.
require having read it, there is, after all, no reason for me to refrain from passing judgment on whatever works I come across, even if I have never heard of them before.\textsuperscript{3}

This new system of notations—which I hope will one day be widely adopted—is intended as an ongoing reminder that our relation to books is not the continuous and homogeneous process that certain critics would have us imagine, nor the site of some transparent self-knowledge. Our relation to books is a shadowy space haunted by the ghosts of memory, and the real value of books lies in their ability to conjure these specters.

\footnote{It will be observed that this system of notations is valuable as well for its omissions, specifically RB (book that has been read) and NRB (book that has not been read), the very notations one might have expected, which will never be used. It is precisely in opposition to this kind of artificial distinction that the book is organized, a distinction conveying an image of reading that makes it hard to think about the way we actually experience it.}
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

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.”

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 some-
time 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 mil-
lion, 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 life-
time 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.’” 4

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.’

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?"' 

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.

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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." 6

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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, 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, 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

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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.