Summarising Proust, Poisoning Aristotle, and Losing Montaigne: Reading, Not-Reading, and Being Read in the Modern World

J.J. HALDANE

Introduction

As academics we spend a large amount of our time reading, from great works by great thinkers, to far more humble review articles in obscure journals. We read because we have to, we read because we ought to and, in the last category, we read because we want to. But for every book we have read there are countless books that we have not. It is this truism that is at the centre of Pierre Bayard's provocatively irreverent study of our interaction with the printed word. In *Comment parler des livres que l'on n'a pas lus?* [How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read], Bayard's *prima facie* central thesis is that we cannot hope to read every book and that we should instead content ourselves with the knowledge that most reading is highly irrelevant, and a waste of time and energy: far better to ignore the 800-odd pages comprising *The Pickwick Papers* in preference to a condensed, summarised, and wikified *Pickwick Paper*.

Bayard, a French literature professor, delightfully exposes reasons for not reading and admits himself to having at best skim-read works with which his colleagues might expect him to be intimate. He takes a phenomenological approach to his subject and use heuristic examples taken from anecdotes and literature to make his successive points. Much is made of the ridiculous and nonsensical situations in which both readers and non-readers find themselves. This little book offers a large number of *mises-en-abyme:* one of its central theses is that, after all, we do not have to have read a book to proffer an opinion on, or to discuss any wider points it may raise. As I opened the book I had a hunch I would be reviewing it, but the Oscar Wilde epigraph warned me to think again: 'I never read a book I must review; it prejudices you so.' However, I persevered for reasons varied and multiple, some touching the very heart of my being. So, if you are still reading, which I can only assume you are, then please read on…

It is interesting that a literature professor should have written this tome as it is in many respects a socio-anthropological study of that breed of person to whom culture is genuinely more important than money, and who would rather have a book published by OUP than win the lottery. That breed of 'professional reader' (i.e. us) is certainly targeted here, as are its foibles and weaknesses.

Although in many respects an extremely clever tome, it leaves us somewhat unsatisfied (as does speaking about a book you have not read). It is, after all a somewhat pithy exercise by a professor steeped in the heavy intellectual tradition of the French who 'deconstructs' what it is to read, but its apparent confessional truthfulness is ironic enough to refuse to be taken as a genuine declaration of ignorance. If a Spice Girl were to have written this book then we would be in no doubt that the author was genuine when she said that she had not read the works in question (although we may doubt she *actually* authored the book) but Bayard is secure enough to confidently expect most people to refuse to believe his admissions.

Indeed this exercise might reasonably be expected to bolster his reputation for wit and erudition. Read on yet another of its myriad levels, for the book's premise, serious or not, is irresistible in terms of discursive fodder, is not Bayard undertaking a clever and engaging *reductio ad absurdum* defence of reading and of those who read, and poking fun at those who do not?

Bayard divides the many books he refers to into four categories; UB, SB, HB and FB. These denote books unknown to the author, books skimmed by the author, books the author has heard about, and books that the author has forgotten about, respectively. There are a further four symbols that judge the book in the following terms; ++ (extremely positive opinion), + (positive opinion), − negative opinion, and, -- extremely negative opinion.[1]

The book is divided into three parts (the *argumentum in tres partum* being the only way to do things in France) and the first deals with these four categories of non-reading. The first key idea advanced uses a secondary character from Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, a certain General Stumm ('mute' in German), to explicate how the decision to reject books is ironically an important way to embrace them. For reason of vanity, and in order to impress a lady, the General decides to read his way to enlightenment at the Austro-Hungarian Imperial library in Vienna, but is surprised at the sheer number of tomes he might be expected to read. The librarian reveals that the secret to knowing about the content of the works (there are roughly three and a half million) is to make a wilful pact with oneself to desist from reading individual books and to instead concentrate on the catalogues. The point here is that any choice to read is in itself a decision not to read, as Bayard argues: '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.' (p.6) The second chapter looks at the art of skimming works and discusses how this practice can give us a good idea about the style and content of a novel. It also relates to the first idea of economy of time. In the case of Proust, one does not have to have read the whole opus to get some idea of what makes his way of writing so unique, particularly the technique of exploring associations from the smallest detail or fleeting moment, most famously the madeleines episode (and conveniently I might add, this occurs in the early part of *Du côté de chez Swann*). But this technique can be witnessed and appreciated at any point in the oeuvre and one example can serve as a reference point for an episode of which you may be in complete ignorance, yet still appreciate. Equally, one can rely on the trusted judgment and opinions of friends and dispense with reading altogether. On Proust's death Paul Valéry wrote an NRF tribute in which he mourned the loss of such a great author while simultaneously confessing to be relying on the opinions of others, having never read 'a single tome' himself.

The next chapter (3) extends and amplifies the concept of non-reading by evidencing the work of Umberto Eco, whose *Name of the Rose* shows that it is enough to rely on what other people say and write about a given work, to form an opinion. In this highbrow medieval whodunit, William of Baskerville, an English monk is sent to investigate mysterious deaths in a north Italian monastery. After the usual suspects are eliminated, and the red herrings avoided, Baskerville identifies the labyrinthine library as the scene of the murders, as he believes that monks are being killed for their desire to read a certain book, and deduces that the murderer is therefore its guardian. The book, it transpires, is the lost second volume of Aristotle's *Poetics* and the murderer, an old monk named Jorge, has simply laced the area at the top of the offending

[1] It should be noted that there is no category of book that covers books positively and properly read. Works are either skimmed or forgotten.

work's pages with poison, where the holy men's fingers would turn the leaves. The motive for murdering the monks was quite simply a desire to deny them access to this work, which purportedly explored the theme of laughter: 'Rather than condemning laughter, the book dignifies it as an object worthy of study– and to Jorge, laughter is antithetical to faith.' (p.37) Baskerville arrives at the truth not by knowing the title nor the contents of the book concerned, and having never read it, but is able to get a fairly accurate sense of its contents by other means; not least the empirical observational information of the effect and strong feeling and reactions the work has inspired and provoked in those around him. He suppositions are largely confirmed by the old monk but, of course back in the 'real' world, hypotheses and academic theories are what inform our own knowledge of the philosopher's treatise. For Eco is in much the same position as his fictional hero: he can only guess, or rely on the informed opinions of others. In this case however, the reliance on the opinions and judgements of others is all we have (not a conscious decision to read or not read) for those upon whom we rely are not in the privileged position of Jorge as a 'real' reader (albeit fictional), and might be hopelessly off target in our opinions.

The last of Bayard's reading categories concerns books that have been read and forgotten; as well as those that the reader (or non-reader) is in genuine ignorance of ever having read. All reading, Bayard argues, is not only the acquiring of knowledge, but the inevitable and unavoidable process of forgetting. Even the greatest of geniuses are victims of this process, having read the most and therefore logically forgotten the most. To take one of those eminently forgetful eminent minds, Montaigne was notably concerned with his faultiness of memory, a recurring theme in his *Essais*: 'And if I am a man of some reading, I am a man of no retentiveness.' (Montaigne, p.296). Reading would enrich and contribute to his wisdom as it entered the cranial knowledge reserves, but once possessed of the words, one sentence or passage would be as subsequently identifiable as the proverbial drop in the ocean. For Montaigne forgetfulness does not have particularly negative connotations however, but is an inescapable flipside of self-improvement. For whatever the reader preserves of the books, is at best fragments and often-unreliable impressions that recede with time, as works once read retreat into the deepest recesses of our mind.

Expressing Knowledge in Ignorance and Ignorance in Nothing: Being Read and Reading Others

The second part of Bayard's work is in many ways the most interesting as it deals with the 'Literary Confrontations' that the individual reader (or non-reader) may encounter as he navigates his way through society, hoping for occasions where his wit, alacrity and culture will be showcased and admired, and dreading those moments where he will be publicly humiliated as fraudulently shallow—the intellectual equivalent of slipping on the banana skin and falling head first into the cream pie in front of the girl you fancy. The most vexing times are obviously those moments when the conversation moves onto the dangerous ground of a book that one has not read, but because of human vanity one decides not to express the truth in the hope of getting away with it. It is at these moments of weakness and foolishness that the reader is at his most vulnerable. The character of Rollo Martins in *The Third Man* evidences this ill preparedness taken to extremes as Graham Greene's protagonist masquerades as another author (with whom he shares the same *nom de plume,* Dexter) in order to receive board and lodging, and finds himself in the unenviable position of facing an audience of informed admirers of the other Dexter. The *quiproquos* are used to great literary effect and in the end the arrogant and nonsensical replies are taken to be charming character traits of the madcap artist.

When I say that this part of the book is the most interesting I mean that this is the part that raises the

questions, 'why *do* we read?' and 'why do *we* read?' For *we* are academics and reading is the only way in which we can accede to the aspired category of cultured individual, although expectations of just what that might mean, and comportment relating thereto differ from country to country. In the Parisian university world, the spiritual home of the public intellectual, conversations often stray into the realms of pretension bordering on caricature, and yet somehow manage to remain within acceptable boundaries. They are fun exercises in mental gymnastics that bewilder and enthral at their best, and yet at their worst became dreadfully contrived and formulaic. Of course, public debate and discussion has always had its element of showmanship and Socrates himself provides us pretenders with a model. For the rank and file of the academy, for whom Bentleys, diamonds and wads of cash will forever be consigned to the imagination, this is the closest we get to putting on our furs, jewels and medals, and showing off. Some are certainly better at it than others but the key to being able to play, your entrance ticket at the very least is a cursory knowledge of history, politics, philosophy, art and literature that is be worn as a profound but nonchalant omniscience: in Europe the key to being cultivated is being cultivated (one either is or one is not), and this must necessarily involve a fair degree of knowledge and a fair degree of bluff.

Such a charade is a risky business (or at least as risky as a life spent in complete absence of any danger can be). You cannot be totally ignorant in order to play the game, and you must at least have index cards in your head that contain key points in the genre of Monty Python's summarizing Proust competition. Your cards for Flaubert, for example, might plausibly contain the following information '19th c. French writer, *Madame Bovary* (books and suicide), *Education sentimentale,* realist(y).' When a Flaubert specialist (or at least someone with similar index cards upstairs) proffers a mundane opinion on something related to the Frenchman, you can take the game to a whole new level of ignorance with the production of an innocuous new index card and retort with another truistic gem. And so the game continues in an infinite regression of over trumping. Now of course the better you are at playing the game, and the longer you spend on earth, the greater your knowledge becomes until, in the end, you may actually find yourself in the surprising position of genuine knowledgeability on a given topic, although this is very rare. At least your advanced years will lend your blasé claims to forgetfulness a convincing patina. Still, while the young academic may feel terribly fraudulent to begin with, he or she will soon perceive some of the rules of the game (as industry and integrity are revealed to be the preserve of the naive and the foolish) and might even risk exposure with a bit of date throwing (the art of remembering otherwise unimportant dates), name dropping, did-you-knowing and, the great evergreen, quoting from texts with a knowing grin of self-satisfaction. The quote does not necessarily have to have anything to do with the general gist of the conversation, as the witnesses will be so panicked by the possibility of their non-recognition of the quote that they will assume that any relevance not detected reveals their ignorance. You can follow this up with those dreaded words *'comme disait le poète'* (as the poet says) which assumes your audience will know the author (unlikely), and allows you a moment of glory, a good twenty seconds of knowing eyebrow raising, winking, and other signs of a non-existent collusion, as you survey the audience's attempts (some better than others) to look as though what you have just said was so enlightening as to warrant the pregnant reflection. They may force a laugh and shake their heads as they rack their brains for a come-back (much like trying to remember a joke) before going on. In football terminology you have scored a goal, and providing you do not put your studded foot in your mouth before the game is over, your teammates will applaud you.

In Britain the game has somewhat different rules. You are not allowed to play unless you are deemed worthy, which requires the appearance of uncommitted insouciance. Discussion will first revolve around routine topics such as troublesome drains and leaves on the line. You must appear to be in humble and bumbling ignorance of most things and blissfully (but not too) inaccurate when it comes to names, dates

and places. Earnest discussions are embarrassing and will be met with quiet disapprobation. 'Sparkling' displays of intellect are taken to be the height of bad taste and somewhat tedious (the importance of *not* being earnest is paramount, for one cannot be earnest *and* cultured). Gaudy showbiz is left to the undergraduates, but beware, you are being watched, and for things that no wikipage will help you with: the following example is extreme but exemplary. The entrance procedures at what is surely the world's most elite academic institution, All Souls, asks that candidates in the final stages for fellowship undergo a 'knife and fork' test where cherry pie is served to see 'what one does' with the stones.

Now do not mistake what I am saying, not any joker can play at this game of knowledge, it is after all a very serious game of bluff. Our very professional identities and reputations are at stake. You cannot be caught thinking that Louis XIV was before Henry VIII, that Franklin and Shakespeare went on country walks together, that Zola influenced Rousseau (before playing for Chelsea), that de la Tour was an Impressionist, that Fra Lippi was a Cubist, that Hobbes was German, or that Ovid was from Melbourne. You must have some sort of idea of the grand scheme of things, like a delicate carapace that allows references to make sense… like a encyclopaedia built into your brain that permits easy access to names, dates and concepts.

University Professing Professionals

To return to Bayard's example of Martins, the situation in which he finds himself makes for particularly uncomfortable reading for the academic, as awkward literary encounters are fairly frequent for those who work in the university world, as I have shown above. For if we are shielded from these difficult encounters in high school, thanks to it being generally more shameful to admit to reading and swotting than the opposite, by the time we are at university the confluence of time and events conspire to arrange some of the most discomforting ones.

As undergraduates we have all been in a similar position: in a small tutorial we sit, poised to discuss a work which we had every intention of reading the previous week (for the week before we were in a not dissimilar spot) and yet some social event seemed to ensure that *Clarissa's* thirty-eight thousand pages were again not disturbed. We sweat through the tutorial and yet somehow manage to make reasonable, pertinent points based on a more general knowledge of the work, or epistolary exchanges with a girlfriend that can somehow be transposed to fit a reading (or rather non-reading) of Richardson's gargantuan doorstop. When we emerge from the office aware of having pulled the wool over our tutor's eyes the feeling is one of guilty pleasure at having got away with it. What we do not realize at the time is that it is often not the students who have got away with this *'grande déception'* but rather the professor who may be the real culprit after all. And yet the whole tutorial could have been immensely rewarding, perhaps far more so for not having devoted whole months to Richardson. Bayard makes this point in the opening paragraph of Chapter 6, Encounters with Professors, and confesses that he is often obligated to speak about books he has never read (or forgotten about) to an audience more often than not in a similar position, and has found this to be totally unproblematic: 'I have observed over the years that this situation in no way unsettles my students, who often comment about books they haven't read in ways that are not only relevant, but indeed quite accurate, by relying on elements of the text that I have, involuntarily or not, conveyed to them.' (pp.75-76)

Overcoming Inadequacy and Shame and Imposing Your Opinions

The final part of Bayard's thesis concentrates on reading's associated emotions and first underlines the importance of genuinely refusing to be ashamed of a lack of knowledge. The first part of the book underlined the impossibility of reading all but a tiny percentage of that which we feel we should, and therefore established that there should be little shame associated with admissions of nescience. We have already noted that it is not the lack of knowledge that is likely to trip you up in a literary encounter, and because it is socially acceptable to give a certain amount of leeway to your fellows in conversation. Admitting that you have not read a particular tome will automatically get you out of a sticky situation and is liberating, and we need liberating, Bayard argues, to 'free ourselves of the oppressive image of cultural literacy without gaps, as transmitted and imposed by family and school, for we can strive toward this image for a lifetime without managing to coincide with it.' (pp.129-130).

But once we have overcome the genuine fear of public failure and associated shame, what is there left for us? Bayard argues that we should have the courage to declare that we have not read a given work and, what is more, that we should not feel the need to abstain from any comment or reflection. The key here is the art of imposing your ideas and opinions on others for the work is mobile and not the possession of any given person. Again, Bayard uses perhaps the most notorious category of non-reader, the reviewer, to evidence this view, and the fictional example of Balzac's Lousteau in *Lost Illusions*, as a fine example of the reviewer who does not bother reading the books, relying instead on the skim-reading of a few passages and the opinion of his girlfriend, a voracious reader (her rare disapproval is the gold seal for Lousteau and he actually reads and lauds those works she declares bad). The book's main character, Lucien Chardon is an aspiring poet and friend of Lousteau, and is appalled by his friend's attitude. Having been disabused of the fallacy that critics read the books they review, the disillusioned Chardon decides to devise a test for Dauriat, the reviewer of his new collection of poems−using a ink stained piece of string that holds the book shut-to see whether the work has been opened, let alone read. Chardon is incandescent with rage when he sees that the string has been undisturbed as Dauriat rejects the work despite praising it highly in generalities and clichés. At the suggestion of Lousteau, Chardon takes his revenge by penning a bad review of a writer Dauriat champions. With the preconceived idea of rubbishing the book, Chardon is faced with the problem that it is evidently brilliant, but the wily Lousteau reminds him that its worth is quite irrelevant and that anything can be ripped apart by the resolution to take the evident qualities as symptomatic and demonstrative of real weaknesses. Thus does Chardon pen an acerbic destruction of the work for everything it is not. Dauriat later buys Chardon's silence by agreeing to publish the previously rejected, and still unread, poems. In these two examples of not reading Balzac gives a good and cynical illustration of the irrelevance of the content of a book to the reputation it may come to enjoy. Bayard's argument is that we should be constantly aware that opinions and politics are of a primary but constantly evolving significance, so we should not be afraid that our opinion is any more or less valid for not having read, as the content is secondary and often immaterial. For we in the academic world this realisation is often a painful one.

However, as reading is the most personal of activities, it should not surprise that our reactions and interactions with books are often far less about the content (let alone the author) and more about our personal circumstances of opinion, belief and situation, as well as those who surround us. If a work ostensibly undermines all that we hold to be true, despite any literary merits it may have, then is it not enough for us to discard it out of hand, as might be the case with a Jew's refusal to read *Mein Kampf*? It is often sufficient to simply know enough about a book to refuse to open it, established on prejudices themselves based on

our own conception of what and who we are. Bayard's last chapter underlines the role of the book as primarily an aid to self-discovery with the assistance of Oscar Wilde's elucidations on the role of the critic. Wilde argues that when a critic writes, he is not concerned primarily with the work at all, but instead about himself. Self-reflection is the main purpose of critical activity and it is only when the critic is fully aware of this that he will reach heights that may allow his review to be described as art, through a process of literary phagocytes: the absorbing and destroying that allows life.

Conclusion

If there is one aspect for which Bayard's work deserves respect, it is that it asks that we look at ourselves and the way in which we interact with books: to many of us the most cherished of objects, both tangible and conceptual. Bayard's mirror may not reflect what we want it to, but so be it. If we have forgotten why it is important to read then this tome asks us to remember. If we have become complacent in our literary cocoons then this work goads us to ask more of ourselves than blind reliance on the safe clichés offered by the shallow sanctuaries of the abstract. It asks us to reject the superficially profound and profoundly superficial in preference for original thought. It asks us to reflect upon how and why we actively decide to enrich ourselves. In saying we should not read, it reminds us just why we should.

All philosophy, it is often argued, is about coming to terms with death, and Montaigne, as a philosopher, was naturally concerned with our own last pages before those terminal words, 'The End'. Montaigne's concept of a trade-off between the enrichment of one's knowledge and the sure prospect of loss can be extended as an allegory for life itself. Death is an integral part of life just as forgetting is an integral part of memory. The loss of a given phrase or stanza as it becomes a part of us is an essential part of the ephemeral, just as our lives may touch and enrich before disappearing into the collective memory of those around us. In that sense every last bit of knowledge we possess will disappear within us before disappearing with us. In this way, reading is about coming to terms with life.

Reading *is* pointless, just as life *is* pointless, but then you knew you that anyway…

THE END

References

Balzac (1971), *Lost Illusions.* (Trans. Herbert J. Hunt). London: Penguin Books.

Bayard, Pierre (2007), *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read.* (Trans. Jeffrey Mehlmann). London: Granta Publications.

Freud, Sigmund (1965), *The Interpretation of Dreams.* (Trans. James Strachey). New York: Avon.

Greene, Graham (1950), *The Third Man.* London: Heinemann.

Montaigne (1957), *The Complete Essays of Montaigne.* (Trans. Donald France). Stanford: Stanford UP.

Mount, Harry. A Few Things Pointy-Heads Should Know (1999, October 4). *The New Statesman,* Retrieved May 28, 2008 from http://www.newstatesman.com/199910040016

Wilde, Oscar (1913). "The Critic as Artist" in *Intentions* (London: Methuen & Co).pp.93-217.