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How to Talk About
Books You Haven't Read

PIERRE BAYARD

Translated from the French
by Jeffrey Mehlman

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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*,¹ 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."²

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.³

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.⁴

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*.⁵ 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).”⁶

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*⁷ 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.⁸

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

be of other people's books, to the point where he cannot even recall whether he has read them, he is no more capable of remembering his own:

It is no great wonder if my book follows the fate of other books, and if my memory lets go of what I write as of what I read, and of what I give as of what I receive.⁹

Incapable of remembering what he has written, Montaigne finds himself confronted with the fear of all those losing their memory: repeating yourself without realizing it, and knowing the anguish of losing mastery over your own writing only to remain unwittingly all too faithful to yourself. His fear is all the more justified in that the *Essais* address not topical subjects, but timeless questions. These may be broached on any occasion, and a writer without memory is thus vulnerable to treating them again without knowing it, and in identical terms:

Now I am bringing in here nothing newly learned. These are common ideas; having perhaps thought of them a hundred times, I am afraid I have already set them down.¹⁰

These "repetitions," which Montaigne finds regrettable in an author like Homer, seem to him even more "ruinous" in

9. *Ibid.*, p. 494.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 734.

texts like his own, "which attract only superficial and passing attention,"¹¹ and which he risks rewriting word by word, from one chapter to the next, without even perceiving it.

But fear of repeating himself is not the only embarrassing consequence of forgetting his own books. Another is that Montaigne does not even recognize his own texts when they are quoted in his presence, leaving him to speak about texts he hasn't read even though he has written them.

For Montaigne, therefore, reading is related not only to defective memory, but also, given the contradictions that arise from it, to the anguish of madness. While reading is enriching in the moment it occurs, it is at the same time a source of depersonalization, since, in our inability to stabilize the smallest snippet of text, it leaves us incapable of coinciding with ourselves.



With his repeated sense that his self is being eclipsed, Montaigne, more than any of the other authors we have thus far encountered, seems to erase any distinction between reading and non-reading. Indeed, if after being read a book immediately begins to disappear from consciousness, to the point where it becomes impossible to remember whether we have read it, the very notion of reading loses its relevance, since any book, read or unread, will end up the equivalent of any other.

However extreme his case may be, Montaigne's relationship

11. *Ibid.*

with books reveals the true nature of the relationship we all have with them. We do not retain in memory complete books identical to the books remembered by everyone else, but rather fragments surviving from partial readings, frequently fused together and further recast by our private fantasies. In the end we are left with falsified remnants of books, analogous to the screen memories discussed by Freud, whose principal function is to conceal others.

Following Montaigne, we should perhaps use the term *un-reading* rather than reading to characterize the unceasing sweep of our forgetfulness. This process involves both the disappearance and the blurring of references, and transforms books, often reduced to their titles or to a few approximate pages, into dim shadows gliding along the surface of our consciousness.

In every consideration of reading, we should remain mindful that books are linked not only to knowledge, but also to loss of memory and even identity. To read is not only to inform ourselves, but also, and perhaps above all, to forget, and thus to confront our capacity for oblivion.

The *reading subject* that emerges in this essay of Montaigne's is not a unified and self-assured figure but an uncertain one, lost among fragments of texts he can barely identify. For this figure, no longer able to distinguish his own texts from those of others, each encounter with a book becomes terrifying, for it threatens to bring him face-to-face with his own madness.



As agonizing as it may be, Montaigne's experience may nonetheless have the salutary effect of reassuring those to whom cultural literacy seems unattainable. It is vital to keep in mind that the most conscientious readers we might speak to are also, just like Montaigne, involuntary non-readers, and that their forgetfulness extends even to books that in all good faith they believe themselves to have mastered.

To conceive of reading as loss—whether it occurs after we skim a book, in absorbing a book by hearsay, or through the gradual process of forgetting—rather than as gain is a psychological resource essential to anyone seeking effective strategies for surviving awkward literary confrontations. Having defined the different kinds of non-reading, it is to these social situations that we now turn our attention.