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## Unreading, Rereading, and the Art of Not Reading

Liedeke Plate

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# UNREADING, REREADING, AND THE ART OF NOT READING

LIEDEKE PLATE

[T]he art of not reading is highly important.

— Arthur Schopenhauer

In the early months of 2007, the highbrow Parisian publishing house Éditions de Minuit publishes Pierre Bayard's *Comment parler des livres que l'on a pas lus?* to great public interest. The book apparently answers a need: it is an immediate success and becomes one of the French bestsellers of the summer of 2007, with translations in all of the major European languages. If one overlooks the question mark at its end, as most translations appear to have done, the manual-like title suggests the book provides practical tips on how to bluff one's way through reading. As such, it places the thin paperback lightly but squarely in the "How-to" category, at the opposite end of Matei Calinescu's magisterial *Rereading* (1993), which is above all concerned with what happens *after*, and not *before* or *instead* of reading. Yet, how different are the two books really? Bayard's *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, as the title of the English translation goes, and Calinescu's *Rereading*, ostensibly differ significantly: they have different agendas, are written for different audiences, and command different readings. Yet their reflections on non-reading and re-reading also reveal structural similarities, showing re-reading and not-reading to be part of the same paradigm. In this essay in homage to Matei Calinescu, I propose to tease out some of the tensions between the art of non-reading and that of re-reading. I believe this exercise is entirely in the spirit of Calinescu's probing inquiry into the plights and pleasures of literary reading and that, as such, it forms an appropriate tribute to his contribution to Western intellectual history and to the field of comparative literature.

## *Talk About Books You Haven't Read?*

Behind the question mark in Bayard's title, *Comment parler des livres que l'on a pas lus?*, lurks a host of questions. Why would one want to talk about books one has not read? Why talk about books at all? To what social pressures

is reading subjected, that one would feel the need to talk about books – and especially about books not read? What is the social meaning of reading? And of non-reading? What, as a matter of fact, is “reading”?

There is, of course, no singular answer to the question “What is Reading?” It opens onto the vast field of reading theory – reception aesthetics and reader-response theory, as well as all manner of empirical studies of reading and readers, including sociological, psychological, and cognitive ones. To this field, Bayard now adds an inquiry into the question of what constitutes a read book: when can one say one has read a book? When is it “read” – or “unread”? As Bayard point out, reading refers to a variety of practices, ranging from scanning and flipping through the pages of a book to careful perusal of the text: “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.... Conversely, many books that by all appearances we haven’t read exert an influence on us nevertheless, as their reputations spread through society” (2007, xvi). To negotiate this grey area between the read and the unread, Bayard elaborates a system of abbreviations designed to convey the extent of his knowledge of the books he talks about, distinguishing between books that are unknown to him (UB), books he has skimmed (SB), books he has heard of (HB), and books he has forgotten (FB). This system of abbreviations he complements with notations indicating his opinion of the talked-about book, ranging from ++ for “extremely positive opinion” to -- for “extremely negative opinion” (xi, xviii).

Bayard’s inquiry into the subject of reading takes its point of departure into the identification of three constraints that govern our interaction with books: the “obligation to read,” which applies especially to canonical texts; the obligation to read thoroughly; and the tacit assumption that one must have read a book to talk about it with some precision (xiv). This set of internalized constraints, Bayard argues, leads to a generalized hypocrisy in talk about books. To counter this hypocrisy, Bayard not only advocates more candor; he also, and more provocatively, develops the thesis that one need not have read a book to talk about it aptly and accurately; in fact, it may hinder it.

### *A Poetics of Unreading*

Bayard’s analysis of what he terms “cette très riche catégorie qu’est la non-lecture” [the rich category that is non-reading] (16, xvii) ostensibly aims to assuage the guilt that attaches to non-reading. It succeeds most effectively in doing so by pointing out that non-reading “constitue notre mode principal de relation à l’écrit” [constitutes our primary mode of relating to writing] (21). We are all non-readers (of many books):

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. (6)

By placing reading within the broader field of non-reading, Bayard throws a new light on the question, so recognizable to most of us, “to read or not to read?” Reframing the time-constraint—so many books, so little time—in favor of the unread, he also reformulates the question of literacy, breaking a lance for a pedagogy of non-reading, conceived not as the absence of reading, but as a genuine activity of positioning oneself in relation to the field of books (12-13). In this perspective, skimming is a better time-use than a thoroughly immersive reading, which is redefined as a waste of time—*une perte de temps*: inefficient, ineffective, unprofessional, and yielding little knowledge about the subject. This is compounded by the possibility of forgetting—of disremembering what one has read, or failing to remember one has read the book at all.

Crucial to Bayard’s poetics of unreading is the notion of time as defined by loss and forgetting. Reading, says Bayard, is “an inevitable process of forgetting” (47). This process of forgetting is integral to the act of reading as a linear unfolding in historical time: time as passing, but also time as accountable time, to be used, managed, or spent well. Because it is also a process whereby the read rejoins the non-read, Bayard’s “To read...is to forget” (56) is a theory of reading which, at first sight, leaves little room for that eminently wasteful activity that is rereading. Indeed, as “a special case in a larger phenomenology of repetition,” as Calinescu parenthetically defines it (xii), re-reading would seem merely to redouble reading’s waste-effect. Yet, repeating reading, is rereading not also the product of reading conceived as loss—made necessary by it, even if it can only repeat the gesture of forgetting *ad infinitum*, but also its complement?

### *How Should One (Re/Un)Read a Book*

Apparently opposed, even mutually exclusive activities, re-reading and not-reading are in fact part of the same paradigm. Oscar Wilde already quipped, “If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again, there is no use reading it at all” (qtd. in Calinescu 1993, 59). Re-readability, in other words, governs readability and is the norm by which a book’s worth is to be measured. This norm, then, is not solely a matter of time; it is a question of attention. Whereas, from the perspective of time, there is no place for rereading in Bayard’s scheme, from the perspective of attention, rereading is presupposed, part of Bayard’s poetics of unreading.

As a poetics “beyond reading,” unreading is a form of rereading. Bayard’s objections to reading are, first, that it is a waste of time and energy and second, that it prevents deeper understanding of literature as a whole. Therefore, he advocates keeping a reflective distance from books, so as not to get lost in them. It goes without saying that Bayard does not reject books and does not undermine the value attributed to books. Nor does he question the importance of literacy. Rather, he proposes to rethink reading from the perspective of the unread. In this sense, his work is akin to Calinescu’s: both approach the question of reading from the perspective of a deviation from a presupposed norm. Unreading, in Bayard’s analysis, is reflection, to be produced “by a critic who closes his eyes in the presence of the work and thinks” (29). Barthes, of course, already theorized this moment when the reader looks up from the book as integral to the act of reading, for instance in *S/Z* (1970). For Calinescu, this movement of withdrawal from the letter of the text is rereading, which is about “the expectations, assumptions, and guesses of someone who returns to a known text” (xiv). This return, he characterizes as a “sharpened structural attention,” explaining that “[p]aradoxically, such a structural reading of a non-literary work by a professional... may be very fast” and involve quite a bit of skipping (19): of not-reading, then.

Is rereading then the same as unreading? It is crucial to Calinescu’s understanding of rereading as unreading that his example concerns “a non-literary work”: rereading is unreading when performed by a specialist, who is by definition in possession of a significant amount of knowledge about the subject. But what about literary reading? Is the rereading of literature similarly to be understood as a form of unreading? Or, to put it differently: what role for the amateur, the one who loves reading? Empirical research has demonstrated readers read texts differently depending on whether they think they are dealing with literature or not: slower, and with more attention for details.<sup>1</sup> Do books defined as literature, then, command a different kind of re/unreading than books perceived as non-literary?

One answer can be found in Virginia Woolf’s essay “How Should One Read a Book?,” wherein she describes reading as a two-staged process that she identifies as “the actual reading” and “the after reading.” These we can equate with reading and rereading: the first stage of “actual reading” unfolds in time. It is followed by a stage wherein, after the book has receded to the back of one’s mind, it re-emerges whole: “Details now fit themselves into their places. We see the shape from start to finish; it is a barn, a pig-sty, or a cathedral. Now we can compare book with book as we compare building with building” (8). Woolf’s after reading is evidently a rereading. Trusting the book will be completed in the after reading, it is also thoroughly invested in a metaphysics of accretion—not of forgetting.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, Zwaan (1991).

## *The Pleasures of (Re)reading*

It is the merit of Bayard's book that it acknowledges that thoroughly hypermodern condition of being continually faced with a vast array of choices, placing reading within this context of superabundance. As the recent NEA report of reading trends in America, *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*, among others, states, reading is an activity that increasingly has to compete with other activities. Therefore, it concludes, "The future of reading rests on the daily decisions Americans will continue to make when confronted with an expanding menu of leisure goods and activities" (2007, 94). The NEA report details the decline in reading, especially among teenagers and adults. Arguing the decline in voluntary reading rates and the worsening of reading skills and proficiency have "demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications" (5), the report appears to clash with Bayard's poetics of unreading, asserting instead "the central importance of reading for a prosperous, free society" and maintaining that "reading is an irreplaceable activity in developing productive and active adults as well as healthy communities" (6).

The NEA report concludes by saying that the import of its findings "is that reading frequently for pleasure is a behavior to be cultivated with the same zeal as academic achievement, financial or job performance, and global competitiveness" (94). Reasserting the intrinsic value of reading, the report addresses the future of reading in terms that have completely disappeared in Bayard's unreading.

Indeed, what is lost in unreading are the pleasures of reading (and rereading) – of being immersed in a story, focused on the letters on the page, and scrutinizing the sound patterns or the typographical layout, or savoring the rhythm of a phrase. Unreading may then be the rational answer to a world filled with more books one can ever dream of reading; it forgets that streak of irrationality that continues to drive human beings in their acts and behaviors, and that includes seeking pleasure as well as pain, and willfully wasting time. "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," Bayard writes at the close of his preface (2007, xix). Similarly, Calinescu opens his preface with the evocation of the metaphor of haunting to discuss what he terms "the essential circularity of the time of reading" (xi). Spectrality is the domain of remembrance, of things returning: (re)reading Bayard's book through the prism of Calinescu's *Rereading*, I am struck by how much his theory of unreading is haunted by the idea of rereading. This is no surprising conclusion: after all, unreading can only follow reading; rereading, on the contrary, is what cannot be forgotten.

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