

ON NOT FINISHING A BOOK

I am not prone to incompleteness. Leaving a meal half-eaten, a room half-tidy, a promise unkept, a trip interrupted on a whim, are not in my nature. In my library, however, things are otherwise. To begin with, no library is ever complete: like the poem in Valéry's definition, a library is never finished, only abandoned. Neither is a book ever read fully. Having reached the last page, something has been added to the text in our reading (our knowledge of what took place, a literary web of coincidences and correspondences, a feeling of sympathy or disgust,) and therefore it is a new book that lies now before us, asking that we go through it, again and for the first time. We never enter the same book twice.

The voluntary interruption of reading is something else. I make my acquaintance with a book gradually. I'll inspect the cover, glance through the blurb, skip or not the introduction, and start to read. If I like the book, or if the book likes me, we shall proceed happily together to the end. But sometimes, after just two or three pages, if the book doesn't interest me, I give up. Books, however, are extraordinarily patient and will wait for us for as long as it takes, and so there have been times when I've come back to an abandoned book and find that I like it after all, maybe because I have changed or the book has changed. What I don't believe I've ever done, is read a book I don't like half-way through and then stop. If two or three pages don't convince me, I know that, for the time being at least, the rest won't either. I can't think of a single book whose first paragraphs I've hated and which, reading on, I judged a masterpiece. Like falling in love,

I judge my books at first sight.

Incompletion is double-edged. On the one hand, not to finish something may mean that we have pronounced judgment and found it faulty, not worthy of our efforts to reach its conclusion. On the other, it may be due to the endless postponement of something so wonderful that we dare not attain it for fear of it ending forever. *Coitus interruptus* or the blissful frolics without orgasm promised in the surah *al-Waqi'ah* of the Koran to the faithful: these as well are the opposed facets of an act of interrupted reading.

Christian dogma (whose Paradise excludes both having sex and reading fiction) demands that anything undertaken in good faith must be finished; giving-up, for the followers of Saint Paul, is considered self-indulgent and therefore bad. The Internet, which requires from us only brief and multiple periods of attention, has transformed the Christian sin into a virtue. Snippets, not volumes, are its ordinary fare and no one is expected to scroll through its seemingly endless documents from beginning to distant end.

Against the strict Pauline norms, Robert Louis Stevenson, born in the Presbyterian mists of Edinburgh, declared that "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour." To labour, to explore, to read, to recall what I have read, to enjoy the knowledge of what took place on the page just before the climax, this is all part of the art of the reader.

No doubt, abandoning a book before reaching the last page requires a certain self-discipline. There are books I have left off reading very near the end in order not to enjoy it all at once. Close to the conclusion of Conrad's *Victory*, I postponed the last chapter indefinitely because I knew this was the last of Conrad's books which I had left to discover and I didn't want the promise of an unread Conrad to be fulfilled so soon. Likewise, I waited weeks to finish Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, Roberto Calasso's *La letteratura e gli dei*, Peter Nadas's *Parallel Lives*. These unfinished books sat faithfully by my bed during the time of waiting, like presents not to be opened before a certain date. In Spanish this is called "*el placer de las vísperas*", the pleasure of the day before.

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