

Books I Have Never Read

A Symposium

[A few weeks ago the Drifter published a list of ten indispensable books which he had never read and suggested that it would be a good idea if literary editors and critics would consent to draw up such lists in place of the more usual "Ten Best Books." Many newspapers commented upon this suggestion and many readers wrote in to say that they felt much better themselves after reading this confession from a professional. We decided, therefore, to ask some of the best-known writers on literary subjects to admit their deficiencies, and we publish below some outstanding replies.—
EDITORS THE NATION.]

CARL VAN DOREN

THESE are not the ten best books I have never read but the first ten that came into my mind when I was asked to think about the matter. Various authors: "The Bible"; Dante: "The Divine Comedy"; Ariosto: "Orlando Furioso"; Cervantes: "Don Quixote"; Spenser: "The Faerie Queene"; Goethe: "William Meister"; Carlyle: "The French Revolution"; Landor: "Imaginary Conversations"; Browning: "The Ring and the Book"; Nietzsche: "Thus Spake Zarathustra."

I cannot claim that I know nothing about them. Actually I have read a part—in some cases a large part—of each of the ten books, just as I have, at one time or another, looked into most of the great books of the world. But I have always been too busy, or too impatient, to read any book to the bitter end unless (1) I was being paid to do it, or (2) the book itself compelled me. Readers who for other reasons read more than that seem to me to be people who have nothing better to do.

HARRY HANSEN

The Drifter's comment on unread books makes me think that a list of books read and forgotten would be much more interesting. I remember attending a class in English sixteenth-century poetry with Shaw's "Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant" under my arm; today I have forgotten the poetry, but I remember the plays vividly.

I don't think it really matters, but I have never read the Book of Revelation or Deuteronomy, the works of Erasmus, Fouqué's "Undine," Guizot's "History of Civilization in Europe," Henry Lea's "History of the Inquisition," James Bryce's "Holy Roman Empire," Grant's "Personal Memoirs," Livingston's "Missionary Travels in South Africa," or Samuel Butler's "Odyssey."

P.S. And I don't intend to.

BRANCH CABELL

Modesty forbids me to enter a symposium which in any way concerns the topic of reading. For I find that I no longer read, or care to read, anything. I appear to have reached, without being proffered any alternative save only the tranquilizing and dark ministrations of the funeral parlor, that stage in life when reading is not any more a

diversion. My eyes tire very, very easily nowadays, even when perusing the most shocking sentiments; but, above all, I perceive that I have read as many books as I care to read, in any honest sense of that verb, by which I mean the deliberate assimilation of a book from its title-page to its colophon.

It follows that the Drifter's confession has caused me, in the first place, to look back with incredulous wonder on my former exploits, on my forced marches and prolonged sieges, in the way of reading. It has led me to regard, with a proper pride, such prodigies, let us say, as my unfaltering slow conquest of each canto of "The Faerie Queene," of some eight volumes of the Shelburne "Essays," of Chaucer's every, most illiterately spelled line (in addition to the Preliminary Essay, the Memoir, the Introduction, and all the footnotes, by the Reverend W. W. Skeat, M.A.), of Milton's "Collected Works," of one whole novel by Ludwig Lewisohn, and of Adelaide Anne Procter's "Legends and Lyrics"—without my having pusillanimously skipped one word in any of these dreadful productions.

Nor does that harrowing list record one-tenth of one percent of my self-inflicted discomforts. The Drifter's confession, in the second place, has led me to consider that, as go the world's dreary "literary classics," I seem to have read some part of all books, or in any event of all books existent in English, that had any claims to be called important, howsoever many hundreds of them I never happened to finish. I sigh then, making the customary reference to good Cynara; and I return (more or less) to the subject in hand, with sigh number two.

For I estimate roughly that, as one sole result of all this time-wasting, I today remain upon visiting terms, as it were, with a thousand or so volumes, to which I elect now and again to return, as one seeks out a familiar friend, informally and briefly, reading only a page or two, and then putting aside the book with the frankness permissible between old associates. That contents me, as goes the obsolescent practice of reading. And I have no true desire to hobnob with any other authors, whether living or dead.

ERNEST BOYD

Georg Brandes once said of Walter Scott that he was the kind of author every child has read but no adult can read. In dispensing with "indispensable" books, I should apply that principle to almost all works of fiction. The kind of novel that can really entertain an adult man is not, so far as I am concerned, the kind one reads in one's 'teens. As regards non-fiction, the process of elimination is obviously determined by the extent to which one has the courage of one's prejudices. Here is the list. Publius Vergilius Maro: "The Aeneid"; Giovanni Boccaccio: "The Decameron"; Edmund Spenser: "The Faerie Queene"; John Milton: "Paradise Lost"; John Bunyan: "The Pilgrim's Progress"; Alexandre Dumas: "The Three Musketeers"; Victor Hugo: "Les Misérables"; Charles Dickens: "David Copperfield";

Walt Whitman: "Leaves of Grass"; and Mark Twain: "Huckleberry Finn."

H. L. MENCKEN

My chief apology must be, not for having left too many gaps in my reading, but for having read too much. I have been hard at it since I was ten years old, and for every good book that I have got through I have probably read a hundred bad ones. A few weeks ago I actually read "Pilgrim's Progress" for the second time—an unhappy experience, for it is dreadful nonsense, and, despite the ardors of the pedagogues, mainly badly written. Shortly afterward I had a second bout with Plato's "Apology of Socrates," and came away more convinced than ever that Socrates deserved to die, if not as a corrupter of youth then as a bad lawyer, and that Plato knew it. I have actually read "Paradise Lost," and, what is more, "Paradise Regained." If Milton had written a "Paradise Lost Again" I'd probably have read it too.

Fortunately, I tackled Dante when I was too young to fathom anything save Gustave Doré's illustrations, and God has preserved me from going back to him since. The same circumstance rescued me from George Eliot, who existed in a horrible set of tall, black volumes at home. Later on, for some reason that I can't give, I found "The Brothers Karamazov" impossible, and so I have read no Dostoevski since, though men I venerate say he had the gift. Jane Austen and the Brontës also await the leisure of senility, and so does "The Cloister and the Hearth" and all of Trollope save "Phineas Finn" and another that I forget. I refuse flatly to read "The Faerie Queene," despite the seductions of William Lyon Phelps. Scott sickened me after "Ivanhoe" and I have not been back. Of Cooper I have read nothing save "The American Democrat." I have never read "Mme Bovary," or "Mlle de Maupin," or "Paul and Virginia," or Goethe's "Faust" (I tried twice, once in English and once in German, and had to give up both times).

BURTON RASCOE

When I began my tenure as literary editor of the New York *Tribune* (now the *Herald Tribune*) in 1922, I thought it only fair to my readers to acquaint them with my limitations, my tastes and prejudices in literature and the other arts, in order that my readers would know "just how far they wish to go with me, how much they may take for truth and valid judgment and how much for personal shortcomings, deficiencies, and ignorance." In that act of laying my cards on the table, I gave a list of authors I had not read or had read only in part, as well as a list of authors I particularly cared for.

Among many books I have not read are Westermarck's "Human Marriage," Frazer's "Golden Bough" (except in the abridged edition), the last three volumes of Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," any of Thackeray except "Vanity Fair," Hawthorne's "House of Seven Gables," any of Melville except "Moby Dick" and "Pierre," Zola's "La Terre," any of Trollope, any of Bulwer Lytton, any of Bacon except two or three essays.

I could amplify this list enormously. It is never necessary to read all of any one author to learn the quality of his mind and see what he has to give. Yet there are writers, like Lucian and Robert Burton, for example, that I not only read thoroughly over and over again, regretting that there

is not more of them to read, but find new delights in each rereading.

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

1. Nine-tenths of Sir Walter Scott
2. The plays of Lope de Vega
3. Edgeworth in toto
4. Three-fourths of Macaulay
5. Romain Rolland
6. Three-fourths of Charles Lamb
7. One-half of Chaucer
8. One-half of Thackeray
9. Three-fourths of William Dean Howells
10. Nine-tenths of Pushkin

ELLEN GLASGOW

It is better, I think, to know a few books intimately than to boast of a casual acquaintance with the multitude. Yet my way, I confess, has been the enjoyment of the many. I seem to have read almost everything, and forgotten much, from all that has been translated of the "Upanishads" and the "Mahabharata" to the whole of Jowett's "Plato" (except the "Laws" and a part of one other volume) and the whole of Thomas Taylor's "Plotinus," and so on, obeying the downward curve of unreason, through Spinoza and Schopenhauer and the world of poets, to as much of Defoe as I could find, all of Richardson and Fielding, one novel by Mrs. Radcliffe, and ninety volumes of Anthony Trollope. This is the briefest of outlines. All it proves—for my ignorance is still vast—is that I could never have as many books as I need for my contentment. Since I have never read as a duty, I think of books not as an indispensable part of culture but as an indispensable part of living.

For me, at least, the classics are not dry and dusty. Those I enjoyed as a child, I still enjoy, though not in the same measure. Moreover, I am incapable of the tedious diligence with which Arnold Bennett (he was only twenty-nine!) assembled his masterpieces, as if he were piling stones on a monument to futility. I have read a part of the work of every author he names, though far indeed from the whole of Chaucer, Bacon, Spenser, Dryden, Pope, Johnson, and Carlyle. Of Susan Ferrier, I have read only "Marriage"; of Leigh Hunt, only the essays and the "Autobiography." But I have read many of the other authors completely and more than once. Gibbon I have read twice from cover to cover, and sighed for more. "The Ring and the Book" I have read twice. "War and Peace" I have read twice. To be sure, two of the books on the Drifter's list have escaped me. I have read neither "The Song of Roland" nor the "Novum Organum" as a whole. On the other hand, I have read both "The Symposium" and "Jude the Obscure" many times.

There follows a list of books, once popular or well thought of, which I have not read and cannot, even in the direct necessity, be persuaded to read. Aristophanes: "The Frogs"; Taylor: "Holy Living" and "Holy Dying"; Pope: "The Dunciad"; Rousseau: "Emile"; George Sand: all the novels after reading "Indiana"; Ruskin: "Sesame and Lilies" and "The Crown of Wild Olive"; Ward: "Robert Elsmere"; Wells: "Mr. Britling Sees It Through"; Horn and Lewis: "Trader Horn"; Hemingway: "Death in the Afternoon."