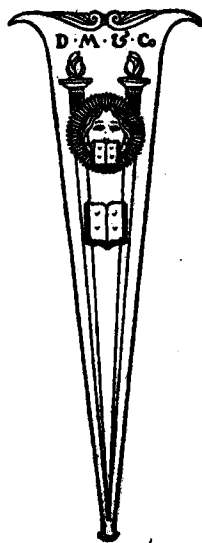


IMAGINARY
OBLIGATIONS

FRANK MOORE COLBY

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By
FRANK MOORE COLBY



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PREFACE

I PRESUME it will not be denied that the Anglo-Saxon conscience is apt to encroach on the zone of moral indifference. We are a hortatory people, forever laying down the law in a region where diversity is most desirable. Apparently we would rather teach than live; we count votes even in our dreams; and we suppress nine-tenths of our thoughts for fear of seeming incorrect. We are sometimes frank in private, but *coram populo* our souls are not our own. In proof whereof see any magazine or newspaper or almost any current book or play, and mark especially the amazing difference between public speeches and private thoughts. There are the romantics of politics, and the self-concealment of debate, and the duty to the crowd, and the duty to the coterie, and the duty to the time of day, and the

PREFACE

constraint of success, and the fear of being misunderstood, and the care of the universe, and the hundred other anxieties that make up our chief imaginary obligation to seem something different from what we are—something wiser or more sententious or more brilliant or more reasonable and educational, something far less human and infinitely less absurd. We cannot even see a man with a book without worrying over the effect it may have on him, and we would turn every critic into a sort of literary legislator. We try to compel good taste and the harmless word "culture" has already acquired a grim and horrid sound. On the lightest of matters we lay the heaviest of hands. At every point our indefatigable instructors would substitute a formula for a vital process. Our fancied obligations to these little formulas are for the most part the subject of this book, which is made up of certain newspaper and magazine articles, edited and rearranged. The topics discussed are transitory, but they are bound to recur, and the writings quoted are evanescent but they are of a kind that

PREFACE

often return. I have written about them because I enjoyed their absurdity, but incidentally they may show why so many of us grow old rigidly or develop an alarming spiritual pomposity in our middle age.

CONTENTS

I

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

I	BOOKS WE HAVEN'T READ	1
II	A PROBLEM OF CULTURE	7
III	LITERARY BURROWING	13
IV	THE DIFFIDENCE OF PRINT	17
V	THE WRITER WHO DOES NOT CARE	25
VI	THE LITERARY TEMPERAMENT	33

II

THE CROWDED FORUM

I	THE NATIONAL ANGLE	40
II	"AMERICANISM"	49
III	CONCERNING HEROES	54
IV	A "REMARKABLE" MAN	60
V	OLD AND NEW DEBATERS	64
VI	ASPERITIES OF PEACEMAKING	70
VII	MEASURING AN AMERICAN REPUTA- TION	77
VIII	DEMOCRATIC GENTILITY	83

III

THE FRIGHTENED MINORITY

I	SETTING THE PACE	88
II	THE WALK UPTOWN	96

CONTENTS

III	THE READING PUBLIC	99
IV	REFORMERS AND BROOMSTICKS	109

IV

ADVENTURES OF A PLAYGOER

I	ON SEEING TEN BAD PLAYS	118
II	THE SPAN OF THE STAGE	128
III	ON CERTAIN "PROBLEM" PLAYS	134
IV	CONVENTIONAL PLAYS	145
V	PRIVATE TASTES AND PRINTED CRITICISM	151

V

RIGOURS OF EDUCATION

I	BACCALAUREATE SERMONS	167
II	THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FRESHMEN	172
III	THE CO-EDUCATION SCARE	178
IV	THE TRAINED WOMAN	182
V	EDUCATIONAL EMOTIONS	189
VI	INNER CIRCLES	194

VI

ON CERTAIN PEDANTRIES

I	THE DRIER CRITICISM	200
II	PAINSTAKING ILLITERACY	205
III	THE HAND OF PROVIDENCE	210
IV	NOTHING NEW	216
V	LITERARY ANALYSIS	221
VI	OUTDOOR PEDANTRY	226
VII	A POPULARIZER	234

CONTENTS

VII

MINOR OPPRESSIONS

I	THE SUMMER EXPERIMENT	239
II	THE PEOPLE NEXT DOOR	244
III	THE CHEERFUL GIVER	249
IV	THE SERIOUS WOMAN	254
V	MUSIC AT MEALS	260

VIII

THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

I	LITERARY REPUTATIONS	265
II	THE PRAISE OF MINOR AUTHORS	271
III	THE PHRASEMAKER	279
IV	THE PURSUIT OF HUMOR	284
V	THE TEMPTATION OF AUTHORS	289
VI	THE JOURNALIST AND HIS BETTERS	295
VII	RUNNING AN ORACLE	301
VIII	FOR WOMAN AND THE HOME	306
IX	ON BEHALF OF OBSCURE VERSE	315
X	IN DARKEST JAMES	321

PART I

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

I

BOOKS WE HAVEN'T READ

A WRITER on French literature contrasts the cultivated Frenchman's definite knowledge of his own classics with the miscellaneous reading of the Anglo-Saxon of the same class. In France there are certain things that people with a taste for reading are supposed to know, and do know. With us there is no safety in this assumption. The greater variety of our literature and the flexibility of our standards account in his opinion for the difference. It is a comfortable way of putting the thing, and we need the suggestion, for we are always setting up standards in this

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

matter and tormenting ourselves and others for non-conformity. The truth is there are nine and sixty ways of reading our tribal lays as well as of making them. There is no path in reading which we can safely advise another grown-up Anglo-Saxon person to follow, and there is no single book for not reading which he can deservedly be brought to shame. Yet, for certain neglects of this sort we actually persecute. It is a mild form of persecution, but it causes needless suffering and, what is worse, it begets lies.

Pride of reading is a terrible thing. There are certain literary sets in which the book is an instrument of tyranny. If you have not read it you are made to feel unspeakably abject, for the book you have not read is always the one book in the world that you should have read. It is the sole test of literary insight, good taste and mental worth. To confess that you have not read it is to expose yourself as an illiterate person. It is like admitting that you have never eaten with a fork. Now, when this social

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

pressure is brought to bear upon a man, what happens? This depends on his moral character. If there is a flaw in it anywhere, it breaks down. Weak, sensitive persons will invariably stammer out a lie. The temptation to escape the ignominy is irresistible. The have-reads are hard, insolent and cruelly triumphant. The haven't-reads feel that they must either tell lies or slink away. Then there are all sorts of miserable compromises. Without actually saying that he has read one of the obligatory books, a weak character will act as if he had. He ventures a few of those vague, universal comments which he knows are bound to be true of anything, anywhere. But it is a wretched piece of business, and most harrowing to the nerves. The awful fidgetiness of a poor baited unread man, when he thinks he is being cornered, is pitiful to see. Next comes the stage of involuntary deceit. By talking about books as if he had read them he comes to think that he has. He uses third-hand quotations as if they were his own. At this point humbug enters the heart;

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

the mind, as you might say, becomes encrusted with its own pretence. Finally, there is literary second childishness, oblivion and death. Some choose the more virtuous course by reading books just to say they have read them, thereby saving their souls, perhaps, but certainly swamping their intellects.

All this in a field where you can do and say exactly what you please, where there is even a premium on a whim. Where is the sanction for these grim obligations? How big a bibliography goes to make a man of culture? What course of summer reading would have been equally suitable for Carlyle and Charles Lamb? A list of our unread books torments some of us like a list of murders. Yet it is not they but the books we have read that will accuse us. Just here we find a consolation. Frankly confessed ignorance of a book never bores any one and does no harm. Ignorance of books is not infectious, but sham knowledge of them is. The real offence is reading in such a way that it leaves you the worse for it. One would rather hear some men talk about

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

the vegetables they had eaten than the books they had read. They put more real feeling into it. A small vitality may be smothered by much reading, and the book-talk of these people is the author's deadliest foe. The books we have not read may be another way of saying the authors we have not injured. The reader is so often unworthy of the book.

We need all the comfort we can get. Small literary ambitions trip up many of us every day. Many a man lives beyond his literary income from an absurd kind of book pride. Why should we not own up like Darwin—change the subject to earthworms if they interest us more? There was more "literary merit" in what he said of earthworms than in what most of us say about belles-lettres. It is not the topic that gives the literary quality. And we never can finish our course of reading. We shall all be tucked away in our graves with a long list of good things still unread. But if we have not lied about these or humbugged ourselves about the others or staled any good man's memory by

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

feeble-minded repetitions, we may be saved. Otherwise we shall be snubbed by every author across the Styx. And if the only thing a multitude of books have done for a man is to enable him to mention them and quote them and appear to be in the "literary swim," he is no fit person for the company of honest authors. He does not belong in Arcadia at all, but behind the counter in a retail book-shop, where there is a good business reason for plaguing other people about the books they haven't read. By these and kindred reflections we may console ourselves in part for our deficiencies and ward off the temptation of the sham.

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

II

A PROBLEM OF "CULTURE"

EVERY little while there appears an article on current American literature that takes all the hope and self-confidence out of you—that is, if you had any idea of keeping up with the times. There are so many authors that the writer knows and you do not. Sometimes you never heard their names at all. Sometimes you have heard their names and nothing more. Then comes this terribly well-informed person implying in everything he says that greatness in a dozen different fields has wholly escaped your notice. Poets piping the sweetest kind of things at your very doors, and you never hear them. Stupendous "local color" work going on at every railway junction, and you heed it not. I have been reading an article of this kind in one of our most serious magazines. It deals with the progress of literature in the southern states, and though the writer says he leaves out many names of equal importance with those mentioned, he goes far

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

enough to convince you that you must always remain illiterate. There is no chance of catching up now.

Here, for example, is a mere fraction of the literature that is waiting for you in the several states. In Kentucky there is a school of lyric poetry, "quite unique, with Mr. Lane, Mr. Cox, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Perkins as its chief lyrists." Do you know them all? Why not? "In Tennessee Mr. Withers and Mr. B. F. Boole are writing creditable verse." To skip Withers and Boole is to cut out the very heart of culture. Then there is Mr. Bowles of Arkansas, who is doing wonders for that state. Bowles of Arkansas has "a polish that suggests some subtle connection between cypress groves and the classics." Professor Slope is doing even more for North Carolina, where he is not only "publishing creditable poetry," but spreading fiction. And "passing softly over South Carolina (very softly, for fear of waking up J. Gordon Coogler of Columbia) we find Georgia illuminated by the talent of Mr. Hodges and Mr. Norris." Some of them

ON LITERARY COMPULSION

you will know, of course. It is not likely, for instance, that Professor Slope's work in North Carolina has been unnoticed, or that you are wholly ignorant of what Miss Beatrice Simmons is doing in Alabama. But did you know that Texas had its Bagby?

If the list were exhaustive one would not feel so much abashed at his ignorance of a part of it, but these are only a few of the very greatest names, and with these the writer feels it safe to assume that every educated person is familiar. He has a hundred others in reserve. A short time before this article was printed, a professor of literature had counted up contemporary American novelists, including only those whose work had real significance and was sure to live forever. There were sixty-six of them. In no other class of men do you find such indomitable energy as in these writers on American literature. It is a life of heroic sacrifice and incessant toil, for no man could possibly be so thorough in this field unless he confined himself strictly to it and labored day and night. With sixty-six American novelists