

CONTRIBUTION TO A QUESTIONNAIRE ON READING - (1907)

You ask me to name 'ten good books' for you, and refrain from adding to this any word of explanation. Thus you leave to me not only the choice of the books but also the interpretation of your request. Accustomed to paying attention to small signs, I must then trust the wording in which you couch your enigmatical demand. You did not say: 'the ten most magnificent works (of world literature)', in which case I should have been obliged to reply, with so many others: Homer, the tragedies of Sophocles, Goethe's Faust, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Macbeth, etc. Nor did you say the 'ten most significant books', among which scientific achievements like those of Copernicus, of the old physician Johann Weier on the belief in witches, Darwin's Descent of Man, and others, would then have found a place. You did not even ask for 'favourite books', among which I should not have forgotten Milton's Paradise Lost and Heine's Lazarus. I think, therefore, that a particular stress falls on the 'good' in your phrase, and that with this predicate you intend to designate books to which one stands in rather the same relationship as to 'good' friends, to whom one owes a part of one's knowledge of life and view of the world - books which one has enjoyed oneself and gladly commends to others, but in connection with which the element of timid reverence, the feeling of one's own smallness in the face of their greatness, is not particularly prominent.

I will therefore name ten such 'good' books for you which have come to my mind without a great deal of reflection.

Multatuli, Letters and Works.

Kipling, Jungle Book.

Anatole France, Sur la pierre blanche.

Zola, Fécondité.

Merezhkovsky, Leonardo da Vinci.

G. Keller, Leute von Seldwyla.

C. F. Meyer, Huttens letzte Tage.

Macaulay, Essays.

Gomperz, Griechische Denker.

Mark Twain, Sketches.2

I do not know what you intend to do with this list. It seems a most peculiar one even to me; I really cannot let it go without comment. The problem of why precisely these and not other equally 'good' books I will not begin to tackle; I merely wish to throw light on the relation between the author and his work. The connection is not in every case as firm as it is, for instance, with Kipling's Jungle Book. For the most part I could just as well have singled out another work by the same author - for instance, in the case of Zola, Docteur Pascal - and the like. The same man who

has given us one good book has often presented us with several good books. In the case of Multatuli I felt in two minds whether to reject the private letters in favour of the 'Love Letters' or the latter in favour of the former, and for that reason wrote: 'Letters and Works'. Genuinely creative writing of purely, poetical value has been excluded from this list, probably because your charge - good books - did not seem exactly aimed at such; for in the case of C. F. Meyer's Hutten I must set its 'goodness' far above its beauty: 'edification' above aesthetic enjoyment.

You have touched on something, with your request to name for you 'ten good books', on which an immeasurable amount could be said. And so I will conclude, in order not to become even more informative.

Yours sincerely,

FREUD.