

Gutenberggalaxens Nova

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This is a book about Erasmus of Rotterdam. He serves as the most distinguished representative for the breakthrough for Humanism in Europe in the early 16th century. Supporting roles are played by artists such as Dürer and Holbein, publishers such as Froben and fellow writers such as Luther, Montaigne and Thomas Moore. The book is the fruit of ten years of reading the secondary sources, which according to the bibliography at the end, make up close to two hundred items. The book does not come with an index, which is unforgivable but admittedly the responsibility of the publisher rather than the author. The author is a poet, writer of essays, and with a doctorate in the history of literature, and must in spite of some of her qualifications, be classed as an amateur, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

It all started with a visit to an antiquarian bookstore in Basel some ten years ago. Books, at least as physical objects, are supposed to be obsolete in this modern digital world. They usurp space as well as valuable resources such as paper we are told. Still to us who grew up with books, physical books, they are irreplaceable. It is not just a matter of reading on a screen versus leafing the pages of a book, with digitization the notion of the personal library disappears. Books are furniture, as the Swedish writer Hjalmar Sderberg noted, albeit in a rather dismissive vein, and as such they make a home a home. A home without books is sterile and impersonal, and to dwell in such an abode, you could as well reside in an airport lounge. Books have not changed much since the 15th century when Gutenberg introduced movable types into Europe. As far as I know the invention may have occurred earlier in China, but China had little or nothing to do with Europe at the time. Books existed before Gutenberg of course, but they were very different, not so much as physical objects, but as to accessibility, which is what makes the difference between a printed book and a handwritten manuscript. Books as such has existed for a very long time, but they were rare as individuals and could only be reproduced painstakingly by copying, a task mostly performed by monks as the Christian era entered Europe. Being rare they were thought of as precious objects, but no more precious than they at times were overwritten, so called palimpsest¹, as parchment as they were usually written on, was dear. Books were accessible only to a few, and if so only through monasteries, universities and royal courts, as far as they cared for such things, and quite a few did at the end of the Medieval centuries. As the result of the cloistered existence of books literacy was very limited, what was there to read? Of course people could communicate via letters and handwritten notices ever since the invention of the script, but it was unusual. Gutenberg changed all that.

Printing predates Gutenberg by centuries. Woodcuts and engravings have an older

¹ A notorious example being the overwritten book by Archimedes which was found by a Danish historian at the turn of the century

history, and the technology worked also for the reproduction of books as for illustrations, but it was impractical. To set a page of a book was a cumbersome process, much more so than copying, and also an investment, when done the page was only good for one thing and could not be used for other purposes. Of course it could be printed in many copies but each book would be very expensive, as expensive as the corresponding number of art-prints. Who could afford it? Only a few, so it would not be economically feasible. Inventions need to fit into the infrastructure of a society in order to be practical. People are clever and can invent the most ingenious things, but if there is no infra structure in society to welcome them they are literally stillborn. The standard expression is 'to be ahead of your times' or although a more accurate one would be 'to be out of cinch of the times'. The clever idea of Gutenberg was the movable type, meaning prefabricated types, which could be reused in principle indefinitely. It made the setting of the page much simpler, and as its components could be reused, it did not mean an investment. After a book was printed its set pages could be disassemble and reassembled. From this we have the expression of a book 'being out of print'. The time was ripe for such an invention, had it appeared earlier in Europe, it might not have been realized. As noted above, and which deserves repetition, an invention by itself is nothing, it has no impact, as opposed to possible retroactive appreciation. This does not only apply to material inventions but also immaterial ones such as mathematical theorems and ideas. The movable type, in retrospect so inevitable, can be compared to the programmable computer, in both cases it is a question of universality. The programmable computer incidentally was invented before there were computers, and many of the ideas behind the computer revolution can be traced back to Leibniz. With Gutenberg books became much cheaper to produce and hence far more affordable and accessible. But they were not that cheap, the printing process still required resources, of which paper, which at the time was of good quality². This meant that books were still valuable and could not be printed in excess, thus what had to be published had to still be selective, and thus there were no inundation of information, which is the plague of the digital age. A book was valuable, to be the author of a book conferred prestige, and if the book sold well, it conferred fame as well. In short the printed word carried a lot of weight. Something that would still be in effect until the digital age. The production of a book was an investment not to be entered lightly.

There was of course a big market for books and publishers were hungry for books to be written and published, and Erasmus did come to the world at an auspicious time. True, most writers of the time are forgotten enough, but Erasmus had what it took. Being the illegitimate son of a wealthy and influential burgher, he had been farmed off as a monk. This had given him the opportunity to get in touch with books and becoming an avid reader. His skills were recognized and he was taken on as a secretary and given the opportunity to travel along and meeting people. An opportunity the gift of which is almost always an accident, but a gift you need to know to exploit. Erasmus knew. He was engaged as a private tutor and wrote down a list of ancient sayings with some comments, which very much appealed to his charges. And from then on the step to publication was

² Based mainly on old cloth not wood and thus impervious to rapid oxidization, a fate that the books of the 19th century have suffered. The best medium for preservation is the ancient clay tablets, in principle printable as well, which when burnt become permanent bricks.

not long. And there was general market for books to feed a populace eager to read, and in particular small compendia of ancient wisdom. During the years of renewed editions the humble beginnings would be greatly enlarged, as not only the list of quotations would extend but his commentaries would expand greatly as well, and more and more of the author's personality would intrude and attract attention. And this leads to the question of style, which is a bit hard to pinpoint, but essential to any work. Style is not only a matter of choosing words and expressions, although those are the most tangible things to point at, but a way of conveying through the written word your personality. And it is this what makes people return to your books, because to revisit an author is very much akin to revisit a friend. You know what to expect in general, but be sure to be delighted by endless variations of it. Erasmus had style and that was the secret of his success.

The most important book had been, and still was, the Bible. For Christianity, this in particular meant the New Testament for obvious reasons. Translations of it into the vernacular had of course been done during the Medieval centuries, one by Tynefeld, being quite known, but only with the printing press could such translations reach the multitudes for which they were intended. And there was indeed a demand for it, and such translations could make a lot of money for the printers. A translation of the New Testament was hurried by Erasmus working for printers in Basel. It did contain mistakes of course, that was surely unavoidable, but speed was at a premium. Erasmus was versant in Greek, but hardly in Hebrew, so a translation of the Old Testament would hardly have been feasible to him, at least not at the same speed, and besides, as noted above, it was the New Testament that was really in demand.

Luther too had predecessors, some of them coming to grief, one thinks in particular of the Czech Huis, but what made the phenomenon of Luther possible, was again the printing press. It is true that he hammered his theses on the church door in Wittemberg, but the sound of this hammer was only transmitted across Europe metaphorically, it was the printed version of those theses that reached the eyes, and hence the ears, of the multitudes, not the actual ones on the door. Luther became an instant hit and he set in motion something he was unable to stop let alone control. The fact was that Luther had the support of some powerful princes, which enabled him to stand up to and even defy the Pope, which earned him a reputation for heroism. But when the peasant revolution he had set going was threatening to topple society, he got cold feet and sided with his protectors, not his supporters. Luther had a very different temperament than Erasmus. While Erasmus was cautious and wanting to see both sides of an issue, Luther was much more polemic and verbally radical. He tried to enlist Erasmus' unqualified support and when getting it he vilified him. Luther does not come well off in this book, especially as when matters got to hot he backed down. His associate Melanchton, a professor of Greek, was much more a man in Erasmus taste. Now while Erasmus translation (1516) of the New Testament had been to Latin, thus really not intended for the masses but the educated, it was really a matter of a new interpretation and hence a contribution to theology, Luther's of 1522 was very different. It really was intended for the (literate) masses and in the process he vitalized the German language (and not only German, Dutch and Scandinavian languages were effected as well) as a means of literary expression, and thus through it, he made a lasting contribution.

Come on appearances are made by Montaigne, the French essayist, and a man and humanist very much in the spirit of Erasmus, as well as the artists Dürer and Holbein the younger, the latter based in Basel as Erasmus was for an important part of his life. There are also digressions on a medical man, half genius and half charlatan, as the author somehow manages to put this under the humanist umbrella. This is of course more far-fetched as the medical profession would hardly nowadays be classified as a humanistic one, but the rationale is that this was all part of the general phenomenon of the Renaissance, in which man became the focus of his attention, physically as well as mentally.

Finally there are some remarks to be made. She refers to Erasmus in his forties and that this was the average life expectancy at the time and that must have increased his awareness of death. I doubt that anyone was aware of life expectancies at the time, regardless of age there was a substantial risk of death, not necessarily out of old age. In fact people did not grow old faster at the time than they do now. Even back then people reaching their eighties were not that unusual, and certainly people in their forties did not look as if they were in the eighties. Furthermore Copernicus did not prove that the Earth revolved around the Sun, matters are much more subtle than that. And there is a reference to Prussia which makes you suspect that the author refers to the German kingdom of Prussia, which did not come into existence until the early 18th century, and the old territory of what was then referred to as Prussia would not have been relevant to continental affairs in the 16th century.

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