

Gutenberg and Erasmus

From the letter to the spirit

ISTVÁN MONOK

Today, their names are associated with ambitious intellectual and scientific programmes. Johannes Gutenberg and Desiderius Erasmus embody the historical values of humanism and universal learning that Europe seeks to reflect.

Johannes Gutenberg (before 1400–68) and Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (ca. 1469–1536) are each, in their own way, iconic figures in European history. The former owes his fame to his ‘invention’ (still disputed in academic circles) of printing with movable type. One of its advantages was that it enabled the written heritage to be reproduced and circulated at a lower cost. The latter is renowned for his intellectual treatises, disseminated thanks to the introduction of those very same printing techniques, just as the European discovery of the New World and the division in the Christian Church was broadening and transforming traditional horizons. While Gutenberg was declared ‘Man of the Millennium’ by American newspapers in 1998, his name is now associated with a vast programme involving the digitization of copyright-free literary works (the Gutenberg Project). And Erasmus gave his name to the best-known European university exchange scheme, the renowned Erasmus Programme, created in 1987. These exchanges provide experiences and promote intercultural mobility, as well as creating personal memories, as seen in Cédric Klapisch’s Franco-Spanish comedy *Pot Luck (L’Auberge espagnole, 2002)*.

How have Gutenberg and Erasmus been able to imprint themselves so deeply into the collective European memory, where they remain the objects of more or less consistent and unvarying admiration? This is also true of its ideological variations, such as classical Marxism, which sees them as paving the way for the fight against feudalism.

GUTENBERG: THE POWER OF THE BOOK

The first answer lies in their relationship with tradition. At a time when the fabric of Christianity was being torn apart (in Gutenberg’s era, the fifteenth century, various councils sought to resolve the Papal Schism of 1378, while that of Erasmus was

beset by the conflict between different branches of Christianity triggered by the Reformation in the sixteenth century), the rise in the practice of private reading, the promotion of vernacular literature and the growing importance of personal piety gave rise to the *devotio moderna* characteristic of erudite humanism. Gutenberg, from a middle-class family and apparently extremely devout, was able to capitalize on this moment. He had attended a school attached to a religious brotherhood, the Sankt Viktor Bruderschaft, near Mainz. His invention, a movable-type printing system, was developed thanks to his knowledge of goldsmithing, financial assistance from a printer friend, Johann Fust, and the collaboration of the theologian Peter Schöffer. It was rapidly (but not exclusively) used for the purpose of critiquing the institutional Church and for fostering a personal piety based on private reading. In this way, the ‘Gutenberg Bible’, as it is called, combines the aims of Apologetics with the dissemination of knowledge and speculation; this was also the case, in a broader sense, with the ‘book’ – the new product described by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin in *L’Apparition du livre* (1958) as a ‘Commodity’ and a ‘Force for Change’. Although historians are aware of the financial difficulties that Gutenberg was originally obliged to battle, only the ‘Gutenberg revolution’ brought about through his invention has gone down in history, having led to a change of era. Initially honoured at the local, and later the social level (by middle-class city dwellers), he was recognized as a figure of national importance when the city of his birth, Mainz, erected a statue in his honour in 1837. Frankfurt, Hamburg and Vienna followed suit. His renown subsequently spread throughout Europe and later the world, during a period that also witnessed Stuttgart honouring Schiller, Frankfurt commemorating Goethe and Nuremberg venerating Dürer. If, as one often reads, Europe is the civilization of the book, then Gutenberg is its ultimate iconic figure. His legacy, which has long reigned supreme, is now being revisited in the context of issues relating to the computer and digital revolution.

ERASMUS: THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

The homage paid to Erasmus in Rotterdam dates back still further; there is mention of a wooden statue of him in the city when it was visited by the future King Philip II in 1549. This was later replaced by a stone version and then, in 1620, by one of bronze, which was hidden when the Nazis occupied the city. Erasmus, who is portrayed in famous paintings by Hans Holbein, Albrecht Dürer and Quentin Metsys as the ideal image of a cleric and a scholar, likewise attended a school run by a religious brotherhood (the *Canonici Regulares Sancti Augustini Fratrum a Vita Communi* at Deventer). He was not only an ordained priest but also a trained theologian. His numerous travels (in the Netherlands, France, England, Italy and Switzerland) and his encounters with diverse groups of people – clerics, prelates, members of the middle class, scholars and aristocrats – motivated him to draw inspiration from the experiences of others and from history. Furthermore, he was convinced that it was impossible for a single individual to produce a perfect book. One of the earliest examples of efficient networking was the publication of a critical

work on the principal Fathers of the Church; this was the result of a collaboration between Erasmus and Johannes Frobenius, who produced the book at his printing office in Basel.

A prolific letter writer with a verbose style, Erasmus conducted written exchanges with over six hundred correspondents throughout Europe. Although he was undeniably a Christian philosopher, the dogmatic thinking that characterized the representatives of a distorted tradition and the arrogance of power were regular targets of his mordant irony. This was the case, for instance, with *Antibarbari* (which he composed before 1500) and *In Praise of Folly* (1511). Norbert Elias drew extensively on Erasmus's work *On Civility in Children* (1530) when writing *The Civilizing Process* (1939).

The fact that Erasmus had such a broad network of acquaintances – transcending political, linguistic and religious boundaries – indicates an open-mindedness on his part that commands respect. It has endowed him with the aura of 'European-ness' that he possesses today, as the quintessential embodiment of the humanist movement and of the ideal represented by the 'Republic of Letters'. One of the most vibrant tributes paid to that emancipatory, utopian ideal was offered by Stefan Zweig in his *Erasmus, Grandeur and Decadence of an Idea* (1935).

Gutenberg and Erasmus are therefore not only men of modernity but, above all, men in modernity. One introduced printing with movable type, the other demonstrated and shared the intellectual's potential for self-reflexivity. These legacies represent knowledge in circulation; being open in character, it is always unsettled, and always unsettling.

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