

THE SIGNIFICANCE TO YALE OF THE GIFT OF THE GUTENBERG BIBLE

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THE SIGNIFICANCE TO YALE OF THE GIFT OF THE GUTENBERG BIBLE.



I am confident that you will not expect or desire me to deliver a discourse this afternoon on the significance and value of Holy Scripture; or to discuss the relation of the Vulgate Bible, of which the Gutenberg Bible is a specimen, to the versions of Wicklif and Tyndale, or to that of the translators of 1611. It would be a little from the point even to discuss the significance of this book at the moment of its publication. It would indeed be possible to say a great deal about the changes and movements of which its publication was symptomatic, changes in the fabric of European society which were destined to extend to its very foundations. Printed in the middle of a great century of transition, this book was as richly fraught with meaning as the Fall of Constantinople or the voyage of Columbus. The maker of the volume himself could have had no conception of the new forces which he had released. How could he have guessed that

the publication of the book was to have its influence in hastening the decay of Gothic architecture? How could he have known that the multiplication of printed books among the people would mean that their eye would be led from the painted window to the printed page, that the reading of Holy Scripture, hitherto in large measure a public function of a teaching Church, was presently to become the devotional act of an individual in the closet, an individual who would claim the right of private judgment in interpreting it? His book was destined to rise like a vast screen in front of the altar, to hide from the sight of men, at least of men in the north, the celebration of the Christian mysteries, and to furnish a battle-cry, 'The Bible & the Bible only the religion of Protestants!' How, in a word, could the printer have known that the Bible of Gutenberg was to replace the Bible of Amiens? All this and much more I should delight to analyse, but

even if I had the skill to do so, we should be led very far afield and become involved in religious controversies—which, however important they may be, are not considered proper subjects of inquiry in universities to-day. Moreover to move along that path would be to treat the volumes before us as a mere symbol; and this I am unwilling to do because it is my conviction that it has a value in itself quite independent of the mighty themes to which the Word of God introduces us. The significance of it is not exhausted when it has served to remind us of the importance of the Holy Bible in English civilisation, the development of Protestantism, or any similarly historical subject. We are not here to inspect a document of interest to the antiquary or to examine the importance of fossil remains.

Latent in the minds of all who have come here this afternoon is a question which ought to be faced with courage and which, with a touch of that cynicism which prevails in academic circles, has

already been asked with some asperity. Of what use is this book now that we have received it? What can be done with it, except to put it under glass and exhibit it as the most valuable book in our library?

In the first place, then, I suppose that we should all agree that such books ought to be preserved somewhere. Such great monuments as this must receive somewhere a loving and professional care. They must all sooner or later find a resting-place in the great libraries of the world. If so, why not at Yale? Are you unaware that, in spite of its architectural insignificance, our library is one of the great collections of books? It is our duty to act, on behalf of posterity, as the custodians of precious books. The Gutenberg Bible represents a mere tithe of such responsibilities as we must assume. We must expect an ever-increasing flow of gifts of this sort. A great university is known for its books. You may have a seat of learning without pupils, but you cannot conduct one

without books. No book is too precious or too costly to find its place in that storehouse of the past to which universities invite the attention of scholars.

Shall we, then, embalm the book, and lay it away, richly coffined, to sleep in its own dust unto eternity? Why should it ever be disturbed, except by curiosity-seekers and our week-end visitors? It has illuminated capital letters and floral decoration on the margins, but even these have been reproduced in facsimile editions of the book. The most important works in English Literature from *Beowulf* to *Leaves of Grass* have been thus reproduced, and certain people believe that the library of the future is to consist of autotypes, photostats and tabloid books to be read with a magnifying glass. The original volumes from which all these modern reproductions have been made may then be locked up in vaults, like the standard metre-stick somewhere in France.

I wish I could explain, even to my own satisfaction,

why such a library, filled with facsimiles, existing in the midst of a world equipped with all modern conveniences, comforts and short-cuts, would be a vapid place. I should be the last to deny the value of photostats, of which I have perhaps made larger use than most, but I cannot deny that they are dull things to work with. They have everything about them but the spark of life. They are like a tailor-made man, authentic and impeccable in every detail, but somehow unconvincing in good company. Nor is this mere sentimentality. We have all, for example, been familiar since childhood with certain masterpieces of painting. But no student or critic is content with mere reproductions of them. He remains unsatisfied until he has seen the original. I saw, last summer, for the first time the *Sistine Madonna*, a picture whose acquaintance I had made long before I knew my letters. As I grew older, I had looked at fine photographs and at excellent copies. Slowly I had come to

feel a bit superior to Raphael and his masterpiece; and I walked towards the room in which it is exhibited without great excitement. And then the veil was drawn and I beheld with my eyes the canvas to which mankind has pledged its allegiance now for some centuries. This is not the place to expatiate on my emotions, for I could not trust myself to speak without exaggeration nor you to hear me with patience; but this I will say that I decided then and there to revise my estimate of Raphael. And all this was the result, not of study or respect, for I had known and, in a way, had loved the picture through long years. I now saw with open eyes because of that arrested attention and that elevation of mind which are experienced when we come in contact with the masterpieces of our race.

An arrested attention & an elevation of mind. Without these the artist cannot work; without them the student of art is but as a man that looketh downward all the day. It will be the peculiar func-

tion of the venerable book before us to arrest the attention of men and to exalt their conception of the function of printing. It may be said already to have begun its work in our midst, as our very presence here to-day may serve to show.

The Gutenberg Bible, therefore, is more than a standard book, important as the source from which more practically useful books may be derived. Nor is it significant merely for its rarity or its bibliographical significance. The second quarto of Hamlet, for example, of which only three copies are known and one of which is in our possession, is a much rarer book than this. But though of interest typographically, the Elizabethan quarto is, in no strict sense, a work of art, whereas the Gutenberg Bible is a supreme one. You cannot indicate its unique value by the sentence so dear to the booksellers, 'First impression of the first edition—Fine copy.' Those words signify much to an expert collector of books, but they do not tell the whole story.

In the Gutenberg Bible we confront the work of a genius expressing itself through the new art of printing, a genius who was inspired by his proximity to scribes, professional illuminators and painters in miniature. It must have seemed to him that this new art of his was almost to be counted as a plastic art. It had not yet become a mere craft, much less sunk to the foul level of mechanism. It has the touch of a master in it, and is radiant with his personality. Hence the specimens before us might find a fitting home in our new Museum of Fine Arts, were it not triumphantly claimed by the Librarian as a mere book. And I think it a happy coincidence that the gift of it should synchronise with the announcement regarding the opening of a gallery for the proper display of the Jarves and Trumbull Collections, of which we have so long been the somewhat indifferent possessors.

Some years ago I heard Mr. Cram, in addressing a small group of people interested in needlework, assert with his

customary vigour that there was no such thing as a minor art. All the arts, from the modelling of cups and saucers to the building of cathedrals, are interrelated, and in their inmost character, are one. It is not our superior insight that leads us to make distinctions respecting the importance and significance of the various arts, but rather our greater indifference—our careless tendency to judge and dogmatise before we have considered. To one with the eye to see, this book is a thing of beauty, capable of ministering to the lasting joy of mankind.

But to be in possession of a great work of art is to incur responsibilities; and the most important of them is the duty of bringing it into vital and productive contact with men. Unfortunately, it is not true that the mere existence in our midst of splendid works of art automatically educates the community. Were that hypothesis true, the Jarves Collection would long ago have made New Haven the centre of an important aesthetic movement.

Art cannot become a redemption from our meanness and ugliness unless we exert ourselves to make it so.

What, then, may we expect if a proper use is made of this masterpiece? Although quite unfitted to answer the question because of my ignorance of typography, I will yet endeavour to tell you what I, as a lover of books and a friend of the arts, should like to have it mean. The moment is, I believe, propitious for a swift advance in the fine art of making books, and I believe it possible that New Haven may have its share in that forward movement. There are now excellent printers in our midst. There have come into existence great University Presses which have made it possible to issue books that aspire to artistic significance and eloquence. There is a public, a growing public, who are disposed to be interested in the endeavours of Mr. Bruce Rogers, Mr. Updike, Mr. Rollins, and Mr. Nash to print good books. Here is a movement to which our own University has long

since acted as a patron. If the gift we celebrate to-day were to stimulate the already revived interest in book-making as a fine art, we should have vindicated our right to possess it.

In the productive ages of the world, the fine arts are living forces, not merely a series of exhibits in a museum. They are a record of the achievement of the past, but they point forwards to a goal to be reached in future. Every true artist is in an apostolic succession. He perpetuates a lineage and preserves a tradition; but he does not copy slavishly, and does not produce glorified photostats. He knows that if he is in the stream of development, his work cannot fail to show new & important impulses, but he does not therefore feel it necessary to forget the rock whence he was hewn and the pit whence he was digged. For his inspiration he must inevitably turn to the great libraries and museums where the models and masterpieces may be seen in their perfection, and he, more than any other, comes to realise that a

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university is a vast storehouse,  
of which he will wish to say  
in words first set up in type by  
Johannes Gutenberg, 'Et af-  
ferent gloriam et honorem

gentium in illam.' And they  
shall bring the glory and the  
honour of the nations into it.  
Chauncey Brewster Tinker,  
April 23, 1926.