THE PERFECT BOOK

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IN WHAT does the perfect book consist? Some men seek books with an intellectual yearning for truth. Erasmus, although in want and need, spent what little money he could secure on books; then, if any remained, he purchased the material necessities of life. When the number of human friends had dwindled and sight had failed his eyes, Southey continued to love his friends on the library shelves. He would take down the books, one by one, to kiss and caress them. The scholarly Erasmus found intellectual delights in the dictionary and encyclopedia, but the warm blood of Southey flowed away from such technical books. The ordinary book had for Southey, as it has for most men, an appeal not only to the mind but also to the heart. It is upon this dual appeal that the perfection of books is based.

What should first recommend a book to us is the author's thought. A book does not necessarily need to be new and sheeny in its appearance. It does not have to bear the signature of a great author or hail from a renowned and well accredited publishing house, or carry a preface by an eminent personage. No, none of these. The first appraisal of a book coming to our notice rests on something more fundamental; namely, the author's thought and that alone.

Secondarily, however, the means employed in interpreting the author's thoughts in the printed medium command our attention. Such subsidiary matters as type, illustration, decoration, paper and binding come in for close scrutiny. Since always some and sometimes all of these are employed, they ought to bear some definite relationship to the book; and since the book is preeminently a manifestation of the mind of the writer, the means ought to help in some way to delineate the content of that mind. This is the psychology behind all good publishing.

The ordinary book, as a book, will be perfect if it exemplifies a harmony between the means of printing and the thought printed, in order that a single impression be made in the mind of the reader. Analogously, we might say that a beef steak dinner, as a dinner, will be perfect if it is served upon beautifully decorated plate resting on fine linen with a liberal supply of artistic silver. Just as the relish of

the beef steak is enhanced and increased by the surroundings in which it is served, so the import of the author's ideas is attained with greater facility and clarity, when the publisher, through the proper application of his equipment to the author's work, produces a volume which renders a singleness of impression to its reader. Neither the texture of the paper, the gracefulness of the type, nor any other mechanical means should at first attract attention; but only subconsciously should this beauty of gracefulness bring more fully before the reader the writer's sentiments.

The most fundamental of the mechanical means is type. The selection of the face of type to portray the thought content is of such importance that it demands the skill of a master. This selection with the mind's eye which chooses Bodini, Clarendon, Didot or any other style of type to be the most apt interpreter of the copy, requires years of experience on the part of the printer.

William Morris, although he invented the chair which bears his name, designed wall paper, promoted social theories, was also the author of poems which are responsible for some of his fame; yet his keenest aspiration was to be renowned in the office of publisher. In this he did not fail. In the printing of the Kelmscott edition of Chaucer, which took four years and to complete which he refused the poet laureateship of England, we have an excellent example of the harmony that should exist between the thought of the material and the face of type in which it is printed. The Gothic face of the Kelmscott Chaucer immediately indicates the beauty of the poetry which it conveys. Were we to find doggerel in these elevated characters, how readily would we exclaim that the beggar had donned the king's pelisse. The very atmosphere of Chaucer's literary cameos is conjured up for the reader by the print itself. Such is the service that Morris, through type, rendered to Chaucer, that the reader unconsciously adjusts himself to the poetical theme of the author.

Nor is it sufficient merely to select a style of type. The publisher must be able to choose not only the face but also the size which is most fitting. An example apropos would be the length that *Gone With The Wind* would assume, if the publisher, failing to recognize the repelling effect upon the public of a two or three volume novel, had executed that already long work in twelve-point type, the size ordinarily used in prayer books for the poor-sighted.

So far only type, its face and size have been considered in reference to the support printing lends to the author's message. What about the decoration, which also aids in the production of the perfect book?

When the Vandals of the North had sacked literacy in Rome as in all Europe and had begun to extinguish the last flames of learning that still burned in Mediterranean Africa, the Celtic monk, Aidan, began to rekindle the scholarship of the world from the unquenched fires of his native, green isle. After converting to Christianity the population of Northumbria, Aidan founded the Abbey of Lindisfarne. Here, with his fellow monks, he produced some of the finest manuscript texts seen up to his day. It is from the works of this Abbey that we draw an outstanding example of decoration, *The Lindisfarne Gospels.* This manuscript aptly illustrates the interrelation between decoration and the author's purpose. The initial page of this volume, which is reproduced in colors in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* is twelve and a half by ten inches and the entire length of the page is employed in printing the letter *I.* More than the whole left hand top quarter is devoted to completing the first word with the letter *n* and capitalizing the second word *principio.*

Eleven words constitute the entire first page of the Gospel according to Saint John. Shall we say that the monks were prodigal when the first two words alone have served as subject matter for lengthy discussions by exegetes; when the true importance of the opening passage, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," is understood to have such profound and fundamental meaning? We can hardly answer in the affirmative. The time consumed and the talent exercised on this first page give to the reader an extrinsic aid to fathoming its relative importance. This page has been aptly described as "made up of interlaced ribbons, interlaced and entangled zoomorphic creatures, intricate knots, spirals, zig-zag ornaments and delicate interwoven patterns, together with all kinds of designs worked out in red dots." But the artists, who arouse pictorially their readers' interest not only in the gravity of the idea itself but likewise in the majesty of its Author, were spiritual men, learned monks, servants consecrated to divine labor. How could they do this, if they thought it a waste of time? Who can look on this beauty and not be elevated? Even the most illiterate on viewing this page would conclude that the idea or thought commanding such intricate expression and such colorful array must be of sublime origin. Truly may we say that decoration, though the printing press has done it great injustice, is one of the ablest means for transmitting mental concepts to the reading public.

For a moment, let us examine the Psalter's first page in the Gillet edition of the Dominican Breviary. David, the royal author of many holy songs, kneeling with psaltery in hand, appears to be sing-

ing those glorious words printed on the scroll which, like a ribbon fallen to the ground, gracefully intertwines itself to form the background of this decoration. *Deus in adjutorium meum intende. Domine ad adjuvandum me festina. Gloria Patri.* . . . "Incline unto my aid, O God. O Lord make haste to help me. Glory be to the Father. . . ." This is exactly the proem to David's psalter; for thus chants the friar before commencing Matins, which on Sunday is the beginning of the weekly recitation of the Psalms. How apt the decoration, both reminding the reader of David's instrumental authorship and picturing the reverence, the solemnity of that regal person in his own praising of the Godhead. So the present-day friar in viewing this artistic decoration is inspired to follow such a noble example in lifting his mind and heart and voice to God.

Can the perfect book be found? Just as the philosopher must hunt his metaphysical definitions, exactly as Pierre and Marie Curie ferretted radium for years, so also must the seeker of the perfect book hunt long and ferret anxiously. As a stimulant to his courage he is to remember that there are some few perfect books. They are to be judged first by the truth that they tell, and secondly by the manner in which everything about them aids the readers in compassing that truth. To come across these books is to realize to the full the eulogy of Bishop Spalding in his delightful essay on *Books.* "They are opportunities for spiritual growth. In them we discover not gold and precious stones, but ourselves lifted into the light and warmth of all that man knows and God has revealed. To read the best books it is not enough to be attentive. We must linger in meditation over their pages, as in studying a work of art or a beautiful landscape, we love to stand before it, that so, if possible, we may drink its life and spirit."