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Stephan Füssel. *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*. Trans. Douglas Martin. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003. 216p.

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In his “Foreword” to *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*, the German scholar Stephan Füssel announces that the fifteenth-century German printer Johann Gutenberg (1400?-1468), by virtue of fostering the revolutionary changes in Western culture that precipitated from his invention of moveable-type printing, may be considered the single most influential human being to have lived on earth during the past millennium. Assessing the justification for Füssel’s grand claim may provide students, scholars, and general readers alike with sufficient reason for examining *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*. And most readers will likely find that Füssel well enough makes his case for the transformative significance of Gutenberg’s impact.

Füssel devotes only about a quarter of his book to the presentation of biographical and historical information relating specifically to Gutenberg. Many readers may be intrigued by the fact that the person credited with inventing printing most probably went by the appellation “Johann Gensfleisch”—the surname “Gutenberg” was not adopted by his family’s descendents until the early 1520s—and the suggestion that despite the relative veneration with which Gutenberg may be regarded today, he was, in his own time, considered not to have been entirely above reproach in his business and legal dealings. Füssel is illuminating in his discussion of how Gutenberg drew upon his apparently good monastic school education, his apprentice training as a goldsmith, his association with the production of lead and tin-alloy mirrors for the Christian relic trade, his familiarity with paper production methods, and his practical knowledge of wine presses in effecting the eventual technological breakthrough that created moveable-type printing in Mainz, Germany circa 1450. As must be expected, Füssel provides a detailed and authoritative discussion of the production and history of the Gutenberg Bible, known also as the “42-Line Bible” and the most famous and precious book in the world. Still and all, Füssel’s work may not add much that is new to the basic historical or biographical accounts accepted by scholars about Gutenberg’s life and times and about the initial development of printing technology during the late fifteenth century.

While Gutenberg may himself be an intriguing figure and while examining Gutenberg may be essential to his work, Füssel is more concerned to track the repercussions of Gutenberg’s invention. *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing* is especially successful in presenting a succinct but instructive overview of the changes in Western culture that the advent of printing wrought. Füssel eagerly discusses other early printers who learned about, mastered and almost immediately spread Gutenberg’s transformative

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invention across the face of Europe. He identifies forgotten yet in the grand scheme of things highly influential figures—almost all of them German—such as Gutenberg’s partner Johann Fust and successor Peter Schoeffer in Mainz, Albrecht Pfister and Johann Mentelin in Bamberg, Ulrich Zell in Cologne, Konrad Sweynheym and Arnold Pannartz in Rome, Johann von Speyer and Nicholas Jenson in Venice, and on and on, who were responsible for disseminating Gutenberg’s technological innovations. Füssel fixes the geographic and historical focus of his discussion largely upon Germany, but he also provides information about the advent of printing in Italy, France, the Low Countries, England, and even Turkey. He devotes major portions of his book to tracking the evolution of printing throughout the fifteenth century. He effectively suggests the symbiotic relationship that developed between printing and Renaissance humanism, and the complex interconnections that evolved between printing and Reformation cultural developments. Füssel’s book, which provides a brief, select bibliography of source materials, may serve as a good starting place for a more through study of Renaissance and Reformation-era issues.

What most obviously sets Füssel’s account of Gutenberg’s influence apart from a typical scholarly treatment is the inclusion of 64 full pages of color reproductions of sample pages from incunabula (printed texts produced before 1501) and early fifteenth-century texts. Of its approximately 200 total pages, 64 pages of *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing* are devoted to color reproductions of a strategically diverse selection of illustrative pages, which range in content from the biblical to the religious, classical, humanistic, scientific, pedagogical, and journalistic. The inclusion of these beautiful color pages provides significant insight into the formal and aesthetic character of the earliest printed texts, most of which were designed to imitate the richly florid, illuminated manuscript traditions from which they emerged.

Reading the English-language edition of *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing* also offers valuable, if by the author unintended, instruction regarding the nature and challenges of translation. Füssel wrote his book in German; the text was translated into English by the accomplished translator Douglas Martin. But of course Latin was the language of most of the earliest printed texts and Füssel devotes portions of his book to discussing translation issues, most importantly to examining Martin Luther’s translations of the Latin Vulgate into early modern German. Füssel demonstrates with line-by-line and phrase-by-phrase comparisons how Luther gradually adopted a style of translating that departed from the literal to embrace the idiomatic. Martin is faced with the challenge of translating Füssel’s examples of Latin passages being restated in “literal” and then “idiomatic” German, and then demonstrating these comparisons at twice remove in “literal” and then “idiomatic” English. Martin accomplishes this exercise in multi-level translation with insight

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and good nature, thereby elucidating the complexity and some of the inadequacy of any translation.

In *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*, Füssel offers a lucidly presented, reliable, detailed, carefully vetted, scholarly account of Gutenberg's life and of the inception of printing with moveable type. Additionally, Füssel allows his intellectual enthusiasm for discussing Gutenberg's invention and his excitement about relating the history of printing's impact to be apparent throughout the book. It may come as something of a surprise, then, to read Füssel's pronouncement in his concluding remarks that the time has manifestly arrived to accept the fact that Gutenberg's world-altering technological innovation of printing with moveable type has been thoroughly and irrevocably superseded by more effective, present-day, electronic and virtual publication methods. Such a conclusion may not content those bibliophilic readers who enjoy holding and perusing such a well-presented and beautifully illustrated book as *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*, obsolete or not, is. ✱