

Desiderius Erasmus, Humanist, Restorer of the New Testament in Greek

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On July 12, 1536, Erasmus died. The four hundredth anniversary of that event was made the occasion, throughout the Western world, for commemorating his contribution to civilization. Late though it is, we of the Royal Society of Canada should not fail to recognize the life and work of "the first of modern Europeans". I venture, therefore, to recall this outstanding figure, but I will confine my review to his most far-reaching accomplishment.

I have united in the title the two attributions, in order to emphasize the fact that, while Erasmus was the first scholar to make the New Testament in Greek available for the modern educated world, he did so not as a theologian, but as a humanist, who desired that the essential truths of the Christian religion should thereby win wider acceptance among his contemporaries.

For the average well-informed person, Erasmus stands out as the irresolute scholar who wrote devastating satires, but who himself was guilty of a great renunciation; whereas the heroic Luther transformed the world by his mighty faith. But Erasmus has not lacked, nor will he fail to find, competent defenders. The scholar is more likely to understand him than the emotional reformer. A man of powerful convictions and strong feeling may see clearly one aspect of human life, perhaps even the noblest, but it is improbable that he will realize that in this aspect he has not seen it steadily or seen it whole. Such an one is not content to let the idea agitate and fulfil its perfect work in patience; he is ever urging action; he is querulous at the hesitation of a better balanced judgment to cut vigorously at the roots of some growth with the sharp edge of the idea, to the detriment of healthy tissue. But there are times when drastic remedies are needed; and Erasmus was the cautious—perhaps over-cautions—physician, while in the abuses of his day a resolute surgeon was called for. Moreover, he was limited in his sympathies. Practising toleration and demanding freedom for himself, he did not see that sometimes intolerance is a step to higher freedom. In the clear light of his own intellect, also, he was insensitive to that quality of truth which persuades others by irradiated intuition.

The mere man of letters, however, may understand Erasmus less really than the scholar. He was of course a master of style, indeed the creator of a style of his own, but he was much more than an artist; he

took no exclusive delight in the picture itself. Finding interest in all things human, he designed his vivid delineations of the follies and ignorance of mankind to effect improvement in manners and morals. The central luminary in the firmament of polite learning, he was neither a literary man pure and simple nor a philosopher; he was a moralist.

It was in the decline of the Italian Renaissance that Erasmus, more than any one else, distilled its spirit into northern Europe. He was the clearest herald of the New Learning in lands which Italians condemned as shrouded in darkness. The essence of the Italian Renaissance was the recovery of the literature and art of Greece and Rome. Antiquity was welcomed as "giving unfettered scope to the play of human feelings, to the sense of beauty, and to all the activities of the intellect". These studies ushered in a new day for the freedom of the individual; the "lay" mind, as in ancient Greece, venturing on "the application of a clear and fearless intellect to every domain of life" (S. H. Butcher), asserted itself anew in resistance to established authority. That Revival was, notwithstanding its patronage by the great Leo X and other ecclesiastical dignitaries, tinged with paganism, but much less so in the North than in Italy. Like modern men of letters, the humanists of the sixteenth century differed greatly in their attitude towards morals and religion. Some found what suited their tastes and desires in the mundane glory of classical literature and art; they rejoiced in the range of human thought unaided by revelation; they exulted in the rebirth of culture. Canons of judgment, established on re-discovered human capacity, became the standards of the true, the beautiful, and the good. Morals were given a different sanction; their quality and significance were changed; their value was estimated solely in terms of the life that now is. The fruits of the Christian spirit, often shrivelled and insipid, because for long the tillage had been poor, were distasteful to many who had no desire to recover their best flavour by improved cultivation.

Alongside these neo-pagan humanists, however, were very many who, though gladly conscious of the riches of the legacy of Greece and Rome, did not renounce their Christian faith. They did not believe that the quest for the true, the beautiful, and the good in the present life excluded that for the blessedness of the life to come. They believed in fact that the genuine virtues and beauty of the present would be for them an eternal possession. These two types are distinguished not by their intellect but by their spirit.

It was to the latter class that Erasmus belonged. With his insatiable curiosity, his passion for learning and for its diffusion, his contempt

for ignorance, his irony, and his use of an incisive style in pricking pretension, he would have been at home in Athens when it flourished. But he was neither a cynic nor an epicurean. He was at heart a moralist, and a Christian moralist. The refined paganism of Italians made no appeal to him: "I am afraid," he writes to Fabritius Capito, "that under cover of a revival of ancient literature paganism may attempt to rear its head." His controlling purpose, to which he deemed himself appointed by God, was to dispel ignorance through the diffusion of Christian humanism. From this nothing could swerve him. When nearly forty years of age he writes to Colet, a humanist of kindred spirit and a deeply loved friend, "My sails are spread and I am hastening after sacred learning as fast as the winds will carry me". But he was a true humanist; he had imbibed the Greek spirit of *sophrosyne*, reasonableness, moderation; he reacted from the extravagant and the emotional, from overbearing force: "let us avoid heated contention, the bane of peace and concord"; yet he himself often wielded a sharp and bitter pen.

The quality of his mind appears in his choice of classical authors. He did not busy himself with Plato, Aristotle, or the great tragedians; he was not a philosopher, nor did he ponder deeply the problems of human existence and destiny. He admired Euripides, Plutarch, Terence, Horace, Seneca, all congenial moralists; and especially did he delight in the irony of Lucian, whom he read with his friend Sir Thomas More. The voice of Lucian was heard again in his *Praise of Folly*, the title of which was a play on the name of his wise friend, in whose house it was written. In sketches of vivid but often profound irony he holds up the follies and wickedness of every rank of society; but he advises his readers: "Remember the applicableness of the Greek proverb, A fool oft speaks a seasonable truth"; at times salutary folly is true wisdom. This was one of the books which made history. Froude remarks that it "flew over western Christendom" . . . "Like an explosion of spiritual dynamite it left monks and clergy in wreck and confusion. It was delicate and witty, running through the heart like a polished rapier and killing dead in the politest manner in the world."

Erasmus fashioned dialogue into an instrument of great effectiveness, especially in the *Colloquies*. Feigning innocence he speeds his keen shaft of wit at some abuse or imposture and makes deadly hits, but his purpose is to rid society of their corrupting influence. One gets glimpses beneath sparkling surfaces of encrusted ideals from better days some of which, he hopes, may still be salvaged. In the *Adagia* also,

a collection of proverbs constantly augmented in successive editions, he disseminated an appreciation for classical sententiousness and allowed his wit to play upon contemporary customs. But his humanism comes out most seriously in his *Letters*, in which "he created for the world light reading more familiar than anything that had appeared since Cicero" (P. S. Allen). Though many were dashed off for friends, some were meant for wider circles. Eight volumes had appeared in the edition by the late Dr. P. S. Allen, that prince of Erasmian scholars, before his work was cut short by his untimely death.

Erasmus wrote and spoke in Latin. His influence, therefore, was confined to the comparatively few; but the avidity with which his books were purchased and read indicates that it was intensive on those who belonged to the educated world. Goldwin Smith observed that Latin was a "neutral" language in that it belonged exclusively to no one modern people. For more than a millenium it had been the medium of intercourse between men of cultivation in the west; but under the schoolmen it had become ossified into lifeless formulae, and under the rhetoricians it had degenerated into turgid pedantry in imitation of Cicero. Erasmus created for himself a new style, which he used perhaps not with classical elegance, but with remarkable precision. There were greater Latin scholars than he; he was "a learned man of letters rather than a critical specialist" (R. C. Jebb); but far more than greater scholars he diffused an appreciation of the ancients. Of Greek also there were greater masters than Erasmus, such as his friend William Budé of Paris, and the Spaniard Antonio Lebrixa ("Nebrissensis"), not to mention Italians and contemporary Greeks; though the study of it was on the decline in Italy. It is one of the intelligible curiosities of learning that Erasmus was made a protagonist, Reuchlin being the other, in the famous controversy which arose nearly fifty years after his death as to the correct manner of pronouncing Latin and Greek. Reuchlin accepted the pronunciation of those Greek teachers from whom he and the men of the Renaissance had learned it, as being closer to that of the ancients. The differences between them were confined to the letters and diphthongs η , υ , ω ; ai , ei , oi , av , ev , vi ; β , δ , γ . The Reuchlinians, who pronounced the η like the Greek *iota* or the English *e* in "be", were called "itacists", the Erasmians "etacists". It was perhaps unjust that Erasmus had fastened upon him the responsibility for perpetuating a method of pronunciation which modern scholarship as a whole regrets; but it was due to his witty Dialogue (1528) on the correct pronunciation of Latin and Greek, between a clever bear and