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OF ST PAUL'S SCHOOL IN AD 1509**

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## HUMANISM, ERASMUS, AND THE FOUNDING OF ST PAUL'S SCHOOL IN AD 1509

It is nowadays axiomatic that in Renaissance humanism there ran a strong current of Hellenic thought. Yet the laborious stages by which Greek entered the European mainstream can easily be overlooked. In north west Europe it could perhaps never have made the headway that it did without the personal involvement of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, the scholar with the sensibility, alertness of understanding, and breadth of acquaintance that were needed to achieve the breakthrough. It was Erasmus who piloted Dutch printers among the difficulties of setting up texts in puzzling Greek type; Erasmus who softened the shock of an unfamiliar cultural paradigm impacting on the Latin modes to which Church and ruling classes were habituated; Erasmus who introduced new standards of content, quality of reasoning, and verbal elegance, all very different what Europe had come to expect from the Constantinopolitan diplomats and the Aegean seamen who turned up *in partibus Francorum*. It was Erasmus, too, who activated an astonishing network of contacts throughout Western Europe – astonishing both for its geographical coverage and for its access to those in high places – by writing letter after

letter, composed of course in Latin, to discuss, enlighten, recommend, and where necessary, prod. And all this was done in a graceful and conciliatory style very far from the peremptory manner of Erasmus' contemporary Martin Luther. Well might Erasmus be praised, by the Oxford historian A.L.Rowse, for his 'humane, intelligent, middle-of-the-road tolerance', and summed up as 'the sharpest intellect of them all – without dogma and with little use for doctrine, except for the simple following of Christ's message'. Had he not been there to guide, humanism in northern Europe in the earlier sixteenth century might well have become more machiavellian, more of a crusade.

Education, for Erasmus, was almost bound to be a main vehicle of ideas. The *studia humanitatis* were an analogue of Greek *paideia*, passed through the prism of Latin *humanitas*, 'an educational and political ideal that was the intellectual basis of the whole [humanist] movement'. The discipline of *litterae humaniores*, as for example at Oxford, was 'that literature of humankind which makes one more human'. So far from being merely ornamental, these studies were preparation for membership of the City of God. And since the animal nature of the human being was inescapable, Erasmus fashioned the concept of 'educative reason', to bridge between fallible body and precious soul.

Erasmus himself, as Jean-Claude Margolin points out, had been strictly brought up in the ways of Dutch *devotio moderna*. This localized movement, which began at the turn of the fourteenth century, flourished throughout the fifteenth, and faded in the first half of the sixteenth, had as its aim the training of ordinary people into Christian virtue by making it second nature with them to imitate the humbleness of Christ's own conduct. That Erasmus never refers directly to *devotio moderna*, and that his own Christian humanism of self-awareness and independent thought differed entirely from it, suggests that if anything it was a background, one that he reacted against. His subsequent formal training was bound up with intensive study of the Latin classics, his exceptional ability ensuring that in the Netherlands he was, by the age of thirty, firmly established as public speaker and 'poet', a term which then meant simply 'man of letters'. He was not, at this or any time, a religious campaigner or the founder of any school or system of philosophy.

Educational progress became (if I may borrow EU imagery) one of the 'pillars' of Erasmus' mission, the others being, since he had a true vocation for universality, the unity of the Christian Church, and peace between nations. His views on how education should be carried out in practice are to be found in two treatises: the highly concentrated *De ratione studii* [Reasoned study], published

in 1512 but roughed out when he was in Paris in his late twenties; and the *De pueris statim et liberaliter instituendis* [Why we should give boys a liberal education at an early age], a more discursive work, composed in Italy, where he was from 1506 to 1509, that is, in the period immediately preceding the founding of St Paul's School in London.

The *De ratione studii*, admired and approved of by John Colet, is, as its title implies, a discarding of the mindless traditional methods of learning by rote, with memorizing and reciting of formulae, a procedure that can still be seen in full swing in an Islamic *medrese*. These methods were as standard in England (where teaching of Greek was almost unknown before 1500) as anywhere else in Latin Europe. In their place, Erasmus invokes the superior effectiveness of sweet reason. As he writes, 'While Nature has her own *efficacitas* [way of getting things done], this is trumped by Reason, which is still more efficacious.' Along with rationality goes respect for the freedom of the pupil and for his individual talent. ('To thine own self be true'). That Erasmus' own mindset was marked by finesse and flexibility is evident from his writings about the spiritual life and the Bible. His education was thus not prescriptive, but developmental. What he wanted above all was to avoid stereotyped models (no matter how 'respectable' – Cicero was not exempt) and the cult of one



particular writer or civilization, should this tend to warp the pupil's intellect. In the *De ratione studii* the learner is encouraged to get down to actual practice, in charitable works and in what was Erasmus' ultimate objective, following Christ's teaching. This practical learning ought not to be in the nature of erratic experiment, however, but needed – in a phrase borrowed from Plautus – to 'go with the flow'.

Erasmus the passionate lover of language, the 'Christian hedonist', as he has been called, privileges philology over philosophy. Elegance and decorum of style are to be cultivated because – for him as for classical Greek and Roman rhetoricians – they are the path to elegance and decorum of conduct. Children should be taught their grammar at the earliest viable age, in a double form, *Greek* as well as Latin. (Here Erasmus recommends Greek textbooks published in Italy by two refugees from the Ottoman advance, Theodoros Gazas and Konstantinos Laskaris.)

The bulk of the treatise is devoted to methodology. Education should be in small groups, as was the custom of Colet in Oxford and Jean Vitrier in Paris, not in large classes. The teacher must do all he can to give his pupils the best of knowledge; if he cannot be omniscient, at least he should be very widely-read. Even if there is not much time available, or there are not enough books to go round, the pupils should be given the opportunity to 'taste' as

many classics as possible: Greek authors named by Erasmus in this connection include Theophrastus and Plotinus, a far cry from Harry Potter.

Learning to speak and learning one's alphabet should be approached as fun, as a game. Acquiring a foreign language is best done at an early age, but Erasmus is enough of a realist to know that this is impossible in a large class; a home tutor is needed. For his actual texts he goes to the Roman rhetoricians, but adds, what was a 'special subject' of his, learning through proverbial sayings.

Noteworthy also are his view that translating from Greek (into, of course, Latin) is the most useful method of all, and the three reasons he gives for this: by discovering the equivalent of a phrase, the pupil exercises the mind; he looks in depth at the meaning and the properties of both the source language and the target language; and he finds out what we have in common with the Greeks (the classical Greeks, that is) and also what separates us from them. This element of discovery or rediscovery, in lieu of mechanical imitation, is what makes his system potentially so effective. But the rediscovery of ancient culture also had, Erasmus believed, a broader application; it was the best hedge against conflict between national identities. Culture now became a 'third

force' in addition to the two forces that had in medieval theory ruled the world: the power temporal and the power spiritual.

The *De pueris instituendis*, a much longer and still more 'modern' treatise, once again rests on the principle that to teach is to humanize: *homo non nascitur homo*, 'the human being is not born such'. Learning should be, to use the contemporary adjective, 'interactive', and the teacher should play to the *Affekt* and intellectual curiosity of his pupils. In the curriculum Erasmus proposes here, cultivation of the intellect goes hand in hand with moral and religious education, while dogmatism is avoided like the plague.

I should also mention a third work, the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* [The Christian Warrior's Vade Mecum], published in 1504, the fruit of Erasmus' friendship with the Franciscan mystic and reformer Jean Vitrier. This captures the essentials of the Apostle Paul's teaching, as transmitted to Erasmus by John Colet and by Vitrier himself.

At what point in his life did Erasmus first become sharply conscious of classical Greece, the classical Greek language, and the Greeks themselves, whether as ancient writers or as modern traders and men of letters?

We can only speculate; but quite a powerful stimulus seems to have been his *Adagiorum Collectanea*, a compilation of eight

hundred miscellaneous proverbs, on which he had been working in the last years of the fifteenth century and which was published in Paris in 1500. There is mention, for example, of Thales as the type of the genuine philosopher, the classical banqueting custom of circulating a floral crown along with the wine, the term ‘Acarnanian porker’ for the portly inhabitants of the south-western Greek mainland, and reference to Aesop and to Stentor.

But the real trigger was surely Erasmus’ maiden visit to England in the summer of 1499, at the age of thirty-two, when he realized that the English knew some Greek and he did not. (It was Rabelais who later wrote that without knowing Greek, nobody could call himself a scholar.) He accordingly set himself, two summers later, to learn ‘Greek for classical purposes’, not of course on his own, but with coaching by a native speaker, the standard method for modern Greek until the 1950s. The instructor was an émigré named Georgios Hermogenes; and Erasmus, who appreciated elegant word play, must have been tickled by the fact that the latter shared a surname with a famous classical rhetorician. Georgios was apparently not a very good teacher, and – since the phonology of medieval Greek had evolved considerably from that of classical Greek – there were difficulties about how to actually read the texts. (The ‘Erasmian pronunciation’, which became canonical at St Paul’s School,

London, is still an object of derision to the Athenian intelligentsia.) Erasmus also limited his reading to two authors only, Homer and Plato. For all that, he felt (and is this not what counts in language learning?) that he was making rapid and spectacular progress in what he called his 'heroic' task. By the autumn of 1502 he was hard at work on his very first translation from Greek into Latin.

What was now needed was to broaden his knowledge of Hellenism closer to the source. This the busy Erasmus was not free to do until October 1507, when he travelled to that great centre of Hellenic studies, Venice. Here, as a guest in the house of the celebrated printer of Greek texts Aldo Manuzio, Erasmus became a member of his host's *Accademia*, and fast improved his Greek, since not only was speaking this language compulsory in the Academy, but there was a fine for making any linguistic mistake, and Erasmus was always highly sensitive about even quite small sums of money. A sidelight on his motives for learning Greek, and an indication of his increased proficiency, is his forthright criticism of New Testament Greek as coarse, irregular, and riddled with solecisms and Hebraisms. What he looked for from his authors was finesse, suggestive power, and precision.