ERASMUS: A STUDY IN CHARACTER

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TWO books on the subject of the great humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, have recently appeared. They serve to recall to the attention of the English-speaking world the personality and work of a remarkable man. One of these is by Dr. J. Huizinga, of the University of Leyden, and forms the initial volume of the "Great Hollanders" series now being issued by Charles Scribner's Sons: the other is by Professor Preserved Smith, of Cornell University. Both contain much important material that was not available when James Anthony Froude, more than thirty years ago, wrote his well-known biography.

The historical importance of Erasmus it is hard to overestimate. With singular clearness his figure stands before us as typical of the intellectual life of that most interesting epoch when the stream of the Renaissance, which had sprung up in and flowed through Italy, crossed the Alps and spread in ever widening circles through Northern Europe till checked and overwhelmed by the torrent of the Protestant Reformation. If, on the one hand, his delicately shaded and highly complex character can be understood only when studied in relation to the conditions under which he lived, thought and wrote, it is also true that the study of his life and work throws a flood of light on the civilization of his time and the problems—social, religious and intellectual — which confronted the men of his age. But besides the importance that he thus has for the historian, we may claim for Erasmus a special interest in our own century, because in several respects he anticipated currents of feeling which are running strong at the present day. Ideas that we now associate with "Modernism", "Pacifism", "Internationalism" and "Feminism" are all to be found in germ in his thought. It may therefore not be inopportune to refresh our memory of the man and his opinions.

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There is still some uncertainty concerning the circumstances of his birth. His own references, from which Charles Reade

elaborated the story of *The Cloister and the Hearth*, are certainly not wholly in accordance with the facts. That he was extremely sensitive to the stain of illegitimacy, and especially to the circumstance that his father was a priest, was only natural in a man of his character; but indeed we cannot claim for him that he was scrupulously truthful in the assertions he made from time to time about his own life. The most probable date of his birth is 1466, though some of his biographers place it three years later. His father seems to have been a somewhat unusual man: he had travelled in Italy, knew Greek, and owned a library. The liaison between the parents of Erasmus must have lasted a considerable time, as he had a brother three years older than himself. He attended school at Gouda at the age of four, and later was sent to a large well-known school at Deventer. Of his school-days he retained no pleasant memories. In his work *In Praise of Folly*, schoolmasters are described as "taking a great pride and delight in frowning and looking big upon the trembling urchins, in boxing, slashing, striking with the ferula, and in the exercise of all their other methods of tyranny." At Deventer the Latin taught was of a barbarous type. Erasmus was not a precocious student, and it was only a short time before he left that a new master and excellent scholar, John Sintheim, recognized the lad's exceptional abilities. Both his parents died while he was still a boy.

His father had made some provision for his two sons, but the guardians he had appointed proved indifferent to their welfare and were probably dishonest. As the readiest way of disposing of their charges, they urged them to become monks. The elder somewhat unwillingly accepted the plan, but Erasmus was strongly averse and resisted for a time. Finally, perhaps because no other career was available, he yielded, and entered the Augustinian monastery at Steyn near Gouda, taking the vows in 1488. In after life, when his original distaste for monasticism had grown into intense detestation, he looked back upon this period as one almost of martyrdom, but from his letters written at the time we get an impression by no means so unfavourable. The monastery seems to have been free from the worst of the abuses that were then too common; and Erasmus, who all his life had a genius for friendship, became warmly attached to some of the other monks. Moreover, there must have been good opportunities for study, and no undue restrictions as to the direction it should take. In his correspondence he mentions as his favourite authors Vergil, Horace, Ovid, Juvenal and Tibullus; of prose writers, Cicero, Quintilian, and Sallust. He also now became familiar with the

writings of some of the Italian humanists, being specially influenced by Lorenzo Valla, whose thought partly anticipated that of the Protestant Reformers, but whose services on behalf of a purer Latinity were probably what first attracted the young monk. We also find him giving much attention to the writing of Latin verse, and he tried painting,—a picture from his brush is still in existence. It is hard to believe that such a life as these facts suggest was quite without compensations. But Erasmus was of a nature that hated all restraint. He had a restless disposition, and seldom willingly remained long in one place; moreover, he had no real vocation for the religious life. Indeed during his stay in Steyn there is no evidence in his letters that he had any personal interest in religion at all. It is therefore with something like surprise that we find him being ordained to the priesthood in 1492. Dr. Huizinga in his biography suggests that he may have taken this step as a means for obtaining permission to leave the monastery at least for a time. In fact, shortly after his ordination Erasmus with the consent of his superiors accepted the post of secretary to the Bishop of Cambray:—and his monastic life was over.

His new career disappointed him as offering too few opportunities for study, although it was at this period that he familiarized himself with the works of Augustine, and prepared for the press his *Antibarbari*, a dialogue in favour of the New Learning. Before long, with the bishop's permission and the promise of some financial assistance, he went to Paris. Here he entered the university as a student. But even when enrolled in the most celebrated of existing universities, troubles awaited him. His stay, which lasted for several years, was embittered by his poverty. At the College of Montagu, to which he was attached, the conditions were squalid and the food bad. Under the strain his health broke down, and he contracted the painful disease from which he suffered at intervals till his death. But he worked indefatigably, and wrote much that he published at a later date. The position of a poor man of letters was most difficult. A patron was essential, and could usually be secured only by the most barefaced and extravagant flattery. The Bishop of Cambray did not prove generous, and though Erasmus tried to make a subsistence by tutoring young students, he was often forced to somewhat undignified methods of obtaining financial support. The most friendly and liberal of his patrons was a young Englishman, Lord Mountjoy, to whom it was owing that he was able to pay that first visit to England which marks an important stage in his intellectual development. From there he writes with cheerfulness of

pleasant companions and social amenities. "Here in England we have indeed progressed somewhat. The Erasmus whom you knew is almost a good hunter already, not too bad a horseman, a not unpractised courtier. He salutes a little more courteously, he smiles more kindly." He mentions with approval the English custom of frequent kisses to the ladies. But more serious influences were at work, due in great measure to two of the many friends he made in England, John Colet and Thomas More. Colet was a man of wide learning, social in his habits, and of a ready wit; but he also had high ideals and strong religious convictions. The companionship of such a man could not but have its effect upon Erasmus, and it seems probable that the gradual change in his inner life, by which his main interest was transferred from secular to theological learning, was largely due to this friendship. Between himself and More there was a warm affection which lasted till the tragic close of that great Englishman's life.

After his return to the Continent, Erasmus—in spite of poverty and ill health—pursued his studies with unabated enthusiasm. He eagerly taught himself Greek, though at that period the want of grammars and lexicons made the student's task a hard one. Of Homer he says in writing to a friend,—"I so burn with love for this author that I feast my eyes and recreate my mind with looking at him." But at the end of two years he could both read and write Greek with ease. Meanwhile his interest in religion was growing. In 1504 he published his *Encheiridion*, a short tractate which had for its purpose the showing to a soldier how he might become a true and devout Christian,—the title meaning both a poniard and a manual. In this book Erasmus defines for the first time his attitude toward religion and morals. He reprobates all superstition, and the merely conventional observance of ceremonies. "The right way to worship the saints is to imitate their virtues, and they care more for this than for a hundred candles." He would not wholly reject rites and formulae, but they had value, he thought, only as they help the Christian to a purer and higher life. Moreover, that was a poor religion which did not care for the good of others. "Throwing dice cost you a thousand goldpieces in one night, and meanwhile some wretched girl, compelled by poverty, sold her modesty; and a soul was lost for whom Christ gave his own. You say, 'What is that to me? I mind my own business according to my lights.' And yet you, holding such opinions, consider yourself a Christian who are not even a man." The *Encheiridion* was widely circulated, and was translated into many languages. It is possible that Dürer, who was familiar

with it, got from it the inspiration for his magnificent print "The Knight, Death and the Devil."

In 1500 had appeared the *Adagia*, a collection of extracts from Latin authors, which was greatly enlarged in later editions. But the chief ambition of Erasmus now was to restore the New Testament as nearly as possible to its original purity, the text of the Vulgate being hopelessly corrupt. Another visit to England was followed by a journey to Italy. To Venice he was attracted by the fame of the great Aldine publishing house, and there he remained for many months, not only engaged with his own writings but assisting Aldus with his editions of classical authors. Meanwhile his fame spread through Italy, where he was recognized as the foremost scholar of the day. It was while returning from this Italian journey that he began the book by which he is probably best known at the present time,—*Moriae Encomium*, "The Praise of Folly." Like all his other works, it was written in Latin, but before long it was translated into almost every European language, and its popularity was enormous. It is indeed a remarkable book. The scheme is simple but effective. Folly, *Stultitia*, who is a sort of antithesis of the "Wisdom" of the Book of Proverbs, "utters her voice" as an orator, claiming for herself omnipresence and unlimited power in this crazy world of ours. She shows how all actions of men, from the cradle to the grave, are inspired and directed by herself; and that this is well, since without folly life would not be bearable. Passion, which is folly as motive, is essential to human existence. Sometimes we can see that it is the wise Erasmus himself who speaks through the mouth of *Stultitia*. The foolishness of superstition, of wrong methods of education, and of war, are severely lashed. But for the most part the scheme is consistently adhered to, and Folly justifies herself as the constant instigator of human actions and the mainstay of existing society. This satire, which is serious in purpose, is witty in execution. The author's irony has not the terrible bitterness of Swift's pessimism, nor do we find in it the contemptuous scorn with which Carlyle adjudged his fellow mortals to be "mostly fools." He exposes mankind's unreason, but he can smile at it, and he does not forget that he too is a subject in *Stultitia's* domain. He is thought to have been influenced by Lucian, whose *Dialogues* he had translated, but perhaps his next of kin as a satirist appears to us now to be his younger contemporary Rabelais, though in style the two writers differ widely.

It is not necessary to trace Erasmus in his many journeys and changes of residence during the years that followed. Works

from his pen succeeded one another rapidly. In 1516 appeared his great edition of St. Jerome, in which he had the co-operation of other scholars. In the same year was published his Greek New Testament, with his notes and his translation of it into Latin,—works which he regarded as the most important of his life. He was now at the height of his fame, and occupied a supreme place among the scholars of Europe. He corresponded with popes and cardinals and many of the sovereigns, princes, and leading statesmen of the day. From all countries learned men came as pilgrims to see and converse with him, and a letter from him was an honour of which to boast. But dangerous and difficult times were before him. Lutheranism was on its way, and European civilization was to suffer a rude shock in the struggle it inaugurated. The world was out of joint, and Erasmus alas! was himself too Hamlet-like to set it right.

His relation to the Protestant Reformation is a very complex one, and judgments upon it have not unnaturally been coloured by religious predilections. To the average Protestant who has noted his often bitter and always severe condemnation of superstitions, vain ceremonies, monkish ignorance and obscurantism, and his pleas for a sound knowledge of Scripture for the laity as well as the clergy, it seems evident that Erasmus was at heart in full sympathy with Lutheranism, and that it was cowardice alone that made him draw back and end by condemning a movement which he had himself helped to inaugurate. To a member of the older communion, on the other hand, the great humanist appears as the traitor who admitted the enemy into the sacred citadel, and whose late repentance was ineffectual to undo the mischief he had wrought. It is certainly true that during his lifetime many of his intimates in both camps held him to be an unsatisfactory and half-hearted ally, brilliant and influential, but erratic and unreliable. But to obtain a true view of his conduct during this momentous crisis it is necessary to consider rather closely both his opinions and his character. The whole outlook of Erasmus was dominated throughout his life by two feelings,—his distaste for obscurantism in things intellectual, with its correlate, superstition in things religious,—and an intense and almost passionate love of peace. He might, like Matthew Arnold, have taken "Sweetness and Light" as his watchword, though as with the nineteenth century littérateur the sweetness was sometimes flavoured with irony, and the light was not always unobscured by personal prejudice. These two governing motives led at times in contrary directions. He hated to be involved in acrimonious controversies, yet he could not forbear from attacking

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with pungent satire those who seemed to love darkness rather than light. The disorders and scandals in the Church shocked and disgusted him, so that he welcomed at its first appearance the zeal of those who demanded far-reaching reforms; but schism, quarrels within the Church, and war between States on account of religion were all detestable to him. Erasmus had in fact what has been called "a cross-bench mind"; toward the close of his life he said, "On no other account do I congratulate myself more than on the fact that I never attached myself to any party." It is little wonder that he made for himself bitter enemies in both parties.

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Here it may be well to glance at one of his most characteristic works—his *Colloquies*. Begun in his youth merely to serve as studies in conversational Latin for the use of his pupils, they grew in numbers and were enlarged in scope in successive editions, becoming an effective medium for the spread of his own views and the discomfiture of his opponents. They were immensely popular, and were reprinted all over Europe. And the success was deserved. Witty, dramatic, and full of matter for thought, they show a command of the dialogue form, second only to that of Plato. They are, moreover, invaluable to the present-day student of the sixteenth century for the light they cast upon the social life of that time. In the quaint translation of a selection of the *Colloquies* by Sir Roger L'Estrange the English reader can still enjoy their delicate humour without loss of an old-world flavour. Especially charming is "The Religious Treat", where a group of serious-minded friends meet in a beautiful garden and afterwards enjoy together an excellent dinner, to the accompaniment of passages of Scripture which they discuss at length. In "The Abbot and the Learned Lady" the Abbot is, as Dr. Huizinga says, a figure worthy of Molière. "The Apotheosis of Copnio," a vision of Reuchlin, the Biblical critic and friend of Erasmus, being conveyed to Paradise by St. Jerome, is like one of Fra Angelico's naive and lovely paintings. But while the *Colloquies* pleased the public at large, they made bitter enemies for their author. For Erasmus introduced into them many ironic portraits, often easily recognized, of those whose characters or doctrine he disliked or disapproved. To be thus publicly pilloried in a book that was read all over Europe, naturally caused deep resentment. Nor did it help Erasmus to play that rôle of peacemaker which he sincerely desired.

The great humanist was no maker of systems, and we should look in vain in his writings for any definite plan of such reforms

as he regarded as essential for the welfare of the Church and the progress of Christendom. Yet it is not difficult to detect, at least in its more general features, what his ideal was. That far-reaching changes were in his view needed, there can be no doubt. He combated persistently and earnestly the gross superstition and formalism which he found in the religious observances of the time, and he vehemently attacked the monastic Orders, which as then existing he regarded as the main supporters of these evils. Further, he believed the establishment of sound scholarship to be essential for the return of the Church and its members to a genuine and uncorrupted Christianity. Hence the study of the earlier Church Fathers and especially of the New Testament should be restored to its rightful place; while the barren chop-logic of the schoolmen must be set aside as unprofitable and misleading. It is therefore easy to see how the earlier of Luther's activities would commend themselves to him. But to the great German Reformer the essential and vital issue was dogmatic. Even as early as 1516 he complained through a friend that Erasmus in his notes on the New Testament had not laid emphasis on the doctrine of justification by faith. Now dogma in itself interested our humanist but little; he would gladly have accepted as good Christians men holding the most diverse views on doctrinal points, so long as their lives were according to the Scriptural precepts. Controversies about religious mysteries he held to be undesirable. In a characteristic passage he says:

> The essentials of our religion are peace and uniformity. These can hardly exist unless we make definitions about as few points as possible, and leave many questions to individual judgment. Numerous problems are now postponed till the ecumenical council. It would be much better to put off such questions till the time when the glass shall be removed and the darkness cleared away, and we shall see God face to face.

To Luther, on the other hand, theological doctrine was of infinite importance, and the most bitter controversy was sanctified if employed in its defence. Erasmus, moreover, looked for the much needed reforms to be inaugurated within the boundaries of the Catholic Church, though he would have had these boundaries much extended, while Luther seems to have early realized that definite separation was inevitable. Thus the two men differed in their aims as much as in their characters, though for a short time they appeared to be journeying along the same road.

From 1517, when Luther stirred all Europe by nailing his *Theses* to the Wittenberg church door, to 1521 when he appeared

before the Diet of Worms, Erasmus was striving earnestly, though with ever decreasing confidence, to adjust the differences between the two irreconcilable parties. At first his sympathies are certainly with Luther; yet he is strictly non-commital as to Luther's doctrinal teaching, and often states to his correspondents that he has not read his writings. But he lays stress on the urgent need for reform, and praises Luther's personal character. To him and to his adherents he repeatedly insists on the duty of moderation and patience. The increasing intolerance of both sides distresses him more and more; yet even in 1521 he is still urging peaceful measures, and drawing up a series of "Axioms" as a basis for compromise. In these he respectfully deprecates the Pope's action in issuing the Bull against Luther, and begs for him a fair trial before impartial and competent judges. But this was practically the last effort he was destined to make on the Reformer's behalf. The paper on the "The Babylonish Captivity", in which Luther attacked the sacramental system of the Church, seems to have convinced him that he could no longer defend his cause. Even earlier, the language of the fiery Reformer had shocked and disgusted the peace-loving scholar. In a tract issued in July, 1520, Luther had written: "If we punish thieves with the gallows, robbers with the sword, and heretics with fire, why should we not rather attack with all arms these masters of perdition, these cardinals, these popes, and all the offscourings of the Roman Sodom, who eternally corrupt the Church of God, and why should we not wash our hands in their blood?" With the spirit that animated such words Erasmus could have nothing in common.

Yet it would be idle to deny that personal motives played their part in determining his final attitude toward the Reformation movement. From his character and the position he held in the general estimation, he was open to attack from both sides. It does not seem probable that he would ever have been in actual danger of loss of life or liberty even if he had taken a more decisive stand in the dispute than he did; he was too valuable as a possible asset to be injured or destroyed. But, nervous, high-strung and self-conscious, Erasmus was aware that his enemies were powerful and vindictive, and in many ways could embitter his life and injure his reputation. Mental independence, freedom from anxiety, a certain degree of congeniality in his environment, were essential for that literary work which was so dear to him. Worst of all, as sometimes happens with men of delicate and supersensitive fibre, he was afraid of his own fear. Though in some sort an egoist, he had but little vanity, and saw but too keenly the flaws in his

own character. In a letter to an intimate friend he reveals with pathetic clearness the weakness of which he was conscious. Referring to Luther, he says: "Many of his writings and admonitions were splendid, but would that he had not vitiated these good things by mixing intolerable evils! If he had written all things piously, yet I should not have courage to risk my life for the truth. I fear lest, if any tumult should arise, I should imitate Peter." It may be noted that, greatly though Erasmus deprecated the Reformer's violence, yet his growing opposition to his actions and his doctrines never led him into such virulence and bitterness as Luther felt against himself. Professor Preserved Smith in his work on Erasmus gives some extracts from Luther's *Table Talk* which sufficiently indicate the latter's animus:—"All who pray curse. Thus when I say 'Hallowed be Thy Name', I curse Erasmus and all who think contrary to the Word." "Erasmus is worthy of great hatred. I warn you all to regard him as God's enemy." When the old scholar was gone, Luther said that he died without light and without the Cross. Apparently the German Reformer did not believe, with the Apostle to the Gentiles, that charity is greater than faith. With the gentler spirit of Melancthon, however, Erasmus was more in harmony, and their relations remained tolerably friendly.

By slow degrees and only very reluctantly Erasmus was led to take sides against the Reformers. The natural tendency of increasing years is towards conservatism, and where this is strengthened by a constitutional timidity, it is seldom resisted. In his case the reaction was the greater from his disappointment with the attitude of the reforming party toward the *bonae literae* which meant so much to himself. In truth, he sometimes seemed to feel that the whole ecclesiastical dispute was mainly an attack upon the cause of sound learning. Nor was his instinct altogether at fault; the Reformation was fatal to the Renaissance, and the terrible wars of religion which were its outcome marred and stunted the culture of half Europe for centuries. It was in 1524 that he published his treatise on Free Will, in which he definitely sided against Luther, but it was his doctrine on this obscure theological question alone that he attacked. Naturally, new and more exasperated controversies resulted, in which neither side could fairly claim the victory. Worried by these wordy discussions, enfeebled by illness and saddened by the growth of intolerance and rancour which he was powerless to mitigate, he must in his last years have realized that his influence was declining and that his best work was done. Yet to the end he was the indefatigable student, and book after book came from his busy pen. He was still the foremost

scholar of the day, and he received and wrote innumerable letters. But the frail body was ever less able to support the weight of years. In 1535 he learned of the martyrdom of More and Fisher, two of his best loved friends. "In More", he writes, "I seem to have died, so much did we have one soul." On the night of July 11th came the end. His last words were "Dear God", spoken in that Low Dutch dialect which was his mother-tongue, but which he had never used since his childhood.

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It is not easy to determine the precise value of his life-work, or to trace the influence that it has exerted. To himself it must have seemed largely a failure. Yet, in many unseen ways and by circuitous paths, the ideas that were peculiarly Erasmian have now in great measure come to be accepted by broadminded thinkers as sound and fruitful. His character can never satisfy those who judge men by well defined moral formulae, and expect from them conduct based on absolute rules of right. His faults were of the kind that "go before unto judgment." But behind his shortcomings and his failings there can be detected qualities that are both fine and lovable. Perhaps what he accomplished for the progress of humanity a more saintly man could not have achieved.

The art of the portrait painter had a great flowering-time at the close of the fifteenth and the opening of the sixteenth century, and the appearance of the leading men of that generation is well known to us. In the Uffizi Gallery at Florence we find Raphael's splendid portrait of Pope Leo the Tenth between two Cardinals. The Medicean pontiff is seated at a table on which rests a beautifully illuminated missal, which he has been examining with a reading-glass. His face is not lacking in force, but it looks gross and heavy; how altered from the boyish one which Botticelli long years before had idealized into a youthful angel attendant upon the Madonna! As we gaze at it, we think of the words he uttered when he succeeded to the chair of St. Peter; "Let us enjoy the papacy, since God has given it to us." Luther's portrait was the work of his friend and follower, Lucas Cranach. In it we see the coarse peasant-features lit up by the energy, strength of will, and tenacity of purpose that bespeak the leader of men. From those lips might well come the sentence with which the Reformer faced his accusers: "Here I stand, I can do no otherwise." Holbein painted Erasmus many times, with all his incomparable skill. In the picture now in the Louvre the humanist sits at his desk, clad in a furred cloak and with a velvet cap on his head; an embroidered curtain is drawn

behind him as if to protect the delicate body from draughts. The head is bowed over the paper as he writes; the features are sharp and clean-cut, the complexion pale, the mouth thin and finely moulded. The expression is grave and absorbed. Yet as we look, we can imagine how the keen blue eyes would shine and the smile, half genial, half ironic, would illuminate his countenance should he turn to greet a friend. Is he writing, we wonder, that characteristic Erasmian sentence in the *Hiperaspistes,*—"He does not sail badly who steers a middle course between two several evils"? It is not the least interesting of the three portraits.