Erasmus' Ideas of his Rôle as a Social Critic ca. 1480-1500

Robert P. Adams

Renaissance News, Vol. 11, No. 1. (Spring, 1958), pp. 11-16.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0277-903X%28195821%2911%3A1%3C11%3AEIOHRA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-3

Renaissance News is currently published by Renaissance Society of America.

Erasmus' Ideas of his Rôle as a Social Critic ca. 1480–1500

by ROBERT P. ADAMS

A DISTINCTIVE feature of early Tudor humanism, with St. Thomas More, Erasmus, John Colet, and John Lewis Vives, was a trenchant critique of war's place in the social pattern, coupled with sustained efforts to effect peaceful reforms in England. This criticism of society not only marks their kind of humanism but was indeed destined to help shape the modern mind.[1] On the English record, Colet appears as the pioneer, beginning with his Oxford lectures on St. Paul (1496), in which he broke with the main traditional concept of 'just' and 'unjust' war, reaching a conclusion that it is impossible for evil and war to produce good or to be a Christian thing.[2] The means Colet used to reach this view is itself notable. Breaking away from still-strong medievalist modes of thought, he employed a rather radical and unexpected critical method. The result was inauguration of a new movement in literary appreciation, for Colet seems first to have used in England 'the historical method of interpretation, in advance of [his] own and many later generations'.[3]

The extent and nature of the intellectual leadership exerted by Colet upon the youthful Erasmus has long been debated. Indeed argument has been made, against Erasmus' own testimony, purporting to show that on the one hand the English humanists had generally rather slight influence upon him and, on the other, seeking also to demolish the idea that 'Erasmus had a great deal to do with the development of English humanism'.[4] As far as social criticism is concerned, both these

[1] Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago, 1942), I, 168–194 *passim*. An over-all view of this social criticism is given in Robert P. Adams, 'Literary Thought on War and Peace in English Literature of the Renaissance', *Year Book of the American Philosophical Society* (1955) (Philadelphia, 1956), pp. 272–277.

[2] John Colet, *An Exposition of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, tr. J. H. Lupton (London, 1873), esp. pp. 86–89, 91.

[3] J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: the Renascence* (London, 1947), pp. 34-65 *passim*; Douglas Bush, *Classical Influences in Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), pp. 13–15; P. A. Duhamel, 'The Oxford Lectures of John Colet . . . ', *JHI*, XIV (1953), 493–510 *passim*; P. O. Kristeller, *The Classics and Renaissance Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p. 82.

[4] Albert Hyma, 'The Continental Origins of English Humanism', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, IV (1940), 4, 22.

points seem dubious. My aim here is twofold: first, to consider the ideas on war and on his rôle as a social critic which Erasmus had developed *before* he first met Colet and More in October 1499–January 1500;[5] second, to inquire whether this youthful Erasmus had so far crystallized both his thought and sense of purpose that any hypothesis of Colet's leadership should be dismissed, perhaps permanently.

Unquestionably Erasmus' youthful environment stirred him to pity the sufferers from the aimless, exhausting civil wars then persisting in the Netherlands.[6] Perhaps as early as 1484 he wrote to a friend that the time's bitterness made it utterly unsuitable for humane studies: '. . . Are the gentle studies of humanity adapted to this bitter time? Truly Poetry . . . is a glad occupation and one that requires peace of mind. Where now is gladness, where tranquillity of heart? Everything is full of bitterness and trouble; wherever I turn my eyes, I see nothing but what is melancholy and cruel.'[7] This reaction seems that of a sensitive spectator, certainly not that of one who had, as yet, found ways and the desire to adapt humanistic ideas to the need of a bitter time. A similar bent of mind appeared in his essay on the theme of contempt of the world (ca. 1487). This piece, written after his entrance into the monastery at Steyn, aimed ostensibly to prove that the monastic career was the most pleasant and 'epicurean'. Its somewhat incidental reflections of the contemporary scene confirm his earlier recoil from the evil conditions of civil wars.[8] Erasmus' ideas on war at

[5] Biographers of Erasmus tend to offer scattered, rather incidental notes on his thought concerning war: see, e.g., Preserved Smith, *Erasmus* (New York, 1923), pp. 108, 194–196; A. Hyma, *The Youth of Erasmus* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1930), pp. 216–217. Political historians usually do not relate his ideas on war closely to Tudor humanism: see, e.g., P. S. Allen, *The Age of Erasmus* (Oxford, 1914), pp. 164–166; C. L. Lange, *Histoire de l'internationalisme* (New York, 1919), pp. 146–176 *passim*; A. Renaudet, *Érasme* (Paris, 1926), p. 29; W. K. Ferguson, 'The Attitude of Erasmus toward Toleration', *Persecution and Liberty* (New York, 1931), pp. 171–181; L. K. Born, 'Erasmus on Political Ethics . . . ', *Political Science Quarterly*, XLIII (1928), 520–543 *passim*; A. Renaudet, *Machiavel* (Paris, 1942), pp. 75–79; M. Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance* (London, 1949), pp. 123–149 *passim*; A. Renaudet, *Érasme et l'Italie* (Genève, 1954), pp. 178–186. But see, in contrast, Fritz Caspari, 'Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism', *JHI*, VIII (1947), 78–106 *passim*, and Caspari, *Humanism and the Social Order in Tudor England* (Chicago, 1954), pp. 28–49 *passim*.

[6] P. S. Allen, *The Age of Erasmus*, p. 164.

[7] *The Epistles of Erasmus*, tr. F. M. Nichols (London, 1901–18), I, 82 (referred to below as Nichols); *Opvs epistolarvm Des. Erasmi*, ed. P. S. and H. M. Allen (Oxonii, 1906–47), 39.125–138.

[8] Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, ed. J. Clericus (Lvgdvni, 1703–06), V, 1239–1262; cf. P. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

this stage appear to be like those of his friends: aloof from the struggles, they deplored them. Thus his friend Herman, at about the same time as Erasmus contemned the world (1488–92), composed an Ode to lament the miseries of the country, overwhelmed by war, poverty, and the plague.[9]

To this point Erasmus appears not only as intellectually detached from practical social criticism but scarcely aware that his humanism might be set to work to find a 'working ideal for the civilization of the present and the future'.[10] Consider the aim of a 1489 letter in which he wrote that '. . . for my part . . . there is nothing I hate so much as civil war, to which I prefer peace on the hardest conditions.' The stern Ciceronian sentiment was used merely to point up a cheerful debate on literary criticism—treated as a witty diversion which included parody of the cynicisms of contemporary diplomacy: 'Wherefore, if you also prefer peace to war, you will find me indulgent enough provided you accept the terms my heralds will offer you.'[11] Here Erasmus glanced knowingly at tyrannous statecraft, perhaps, but he aimed at no target in particular—in contrast to his frequent practice in the great satires written in England after 1505–6 when his association with More and Colet was close and creative.

The 'Oration on Peace and Discord Against the Seditious' (composed at Steyn about 1490), if we at first disregard some of the context, seems to show that Erasmus by then had made a long stride toward achievement of a humanist social criticism at least aimed toward the resolution of practical problems in society. The essay is saturated with ideas either echoed or reworked from Lucretius and Seneca, intended apparently to illuminate the contemporary scene. 'I do not find', he wrote, 'any subject on which it can now be more useful or opportune to speak . . .' than the necessity for 'cultivating peace . . . considering the conditions of our times.' He argued that it was not only wicked but a great folly for men to war for temporal possessions. Indeed, as the human body is made, peace and tranquillity are necessities if sanity itself is to last. He advanced the favorite humanist analogy between the hu-

[9] *Epistles*, 39.35–50; Hyma, *Youth of Erasmus*, pp. 207–209, 214–217. See also *Epistles* 20.109 (Nichols, I, 65).

[10] Douglas Bush, *Classical Influences in Renaissance Literature*, p. 7.

[11] *Epistles*, 29.35–38 (Nichols, I, 71); cf. *The Letters of Cicero*, tr. E. S. Shuckburgh (London, 1904), I, 102.

man body and the social community: in both, inevitably, injury (disease, war) in one part creates danger to the whole structure. And he at least touched what was later to become one of his great themes—the idea of the dignity of man—when he wrote: 'No man can maintain his dignity by fighting, not even a heathen, a savage, a barbarian, an idolatrous person, much less a Christian, a member of the clergy, a monk!'[12] The context of the 'Oration', however, has the effect of reducing sharply the idea that it was written as practical social criticism. Not only (as Hyma observed) are conventional sentiments prominent in the essay as a whole, but in it Erasmus wrote as an experienced monk who was ostensibly contented with his lot.[13] The piece is actually a highly rhetorical essay, an exercise, as it were, addressed to no wider audience than a fellow-monk. It is also, I think, revealing that Erasmus did not find a printer for it until 1513—but by then, living and working in England, he was deeply engaged with More and Colet in a humanist social criticism which was strongly focused upon the needs of contemporary society.

Presumably in their letters to him Erasmus' friends expanded upon their common interests. One of them suggested to him the idea that the cause of Holland's wars was almost entirely the private jealousies and power-lusts of princes.[14] As far as I know, Erasmus was to make no use of this idea himself until, in England and in More's association (1505–6), he made some translations from Lucian, most particularly from the satires on tyrants, conquerors, and pompous generals, and upon the trifling pretexts so often used for starting wars and for the pursuit of military 'glory'.[15]

Observation of Erasmus' early reading tends to confirm the view that, before he met Colet, he was not moved to develop a coherent and purposeful form of social criticism. The early correspondence is of course filled with warm enthusiasm for the great Latin writers. Perhaps typical is his praise of Ovid, for instance, because 'his pen is nowhere dipped in blood'[16]—that is, he does not delight in bloody

[12] *Opera omnia*, VIII, 545E–552B; tr. Hyma, *Youth of Erasmus*, pp. 216–217.

[13] Hyma, *ibid.*, pp. 216–217.

[14] *Epistles*, 35.50–51.

[15] See C. R. Thompson, *The Translations of Lucian by Erasmus and St. Thomas More* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1940) and Pierre Mesnard, *L'Essor de la philosophie politique au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1936), pp. 128 ff.

[16] '. . . quod illius stylus nullius unquam cruore maduisset . . . ', *Opera omnia*, III, 1257BC.

tales. There was nothing unusual in his reading of such a popular ancient writer on military strategy as Vegetius,[17] but the use to which he put his knowledge hardly suggests that he had developed, before meeting Colet, an understanding of the historical method of literary criticism.[18] Later, after working with Colet and More in England, he commonly used that method and interpreted the classics in terms of the humanist criticism which Colet had begun.[19]

Before meeting Colet (to sum things up), Erasmus had reflected upon man's inhumanity to man, evident in the civil wars in the country nearby. His horizon was not yet much broader than the Netherlands. He had not found either a clear sense of purpose as a humanist or the literary means through which he might set forward publicly a working ideal of a peaceful social order for the Renaissance. Quite clearly he had not discovered the historical method of literary criticism. In short, the record suggests that he had not yet found a sense of vocation as a social critic and satirist. Not surprisingly, his early writing which touched on war and contemporary society was tentative and experimental. It is probably symptomatic of all this that his letters from the Steyn period were 'markedly rhetorical, and were perhaps rather exercises in composition than actual letters'.[20]

Confirmation of these conclusions is perhaps evident in Erasmus' first book of adages, the *Adagiorum Collectanea*, published soon after his first visit to England (1500). The adage *Dulce bellum inexpertis* (sweet is war to those who know it not) appeared in this first edition, but Erasmus' comment upon it was of a brief, commonplace quality, giving no hint of the impassioned essay, running to some fifteen folio

[17] *Epistles*, Ep. 57 (Nichols, I, 149).

[18] *Epistles*, Ep. 55 (Nichols, I, 112). He played a practical joke on a Paris landlady.

[19] E.g., in his preface (November 4, 1517) to an edition of Quintus Curtius' *De rebus gestis Alexandri Magni* (in *Epistles*, 704.22–35; in Nichols, III, 129–130). Here Erasmus attacked the idealization of imperial tyrants by flattering historians. Far from seeing Alexander as admirable, the humanist critic viewed him as on the whole a frightful example of a 'world-robber', 'drunk with ambition', a 'disaster to humanity', like Achilles. He asked, what good was it to 'this solid globe' to be thrown into bloody confusion 'to please one young madman'? See similarly his preface (June 5, 1517) to his edition of Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* (*Epistles*, 586.194–197). How sharply these humanists in England were turning against dominant medieval traditions can be seen by comparing George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (New York, 1956), pp. 95–98, 227.

[20] Allen, *The Young Erasmus*, p. 28.

pages, which he was to write while in England and was to add to the definitive 1515 edition.[21] My inference is that if Erasmus had absorbed from Colet a new idea of humanist social responsibility, he had not yet learned how to use it. In contrast, after the 1505–6 work on Lucian with More, we may see an Erasmus who had well begun to find both his vocation as a social critic and practical literary instruments (irony and satire) through which these humanists' ideal of social reform could be advanced.

In John Colet, however, Erasmus met one who already understood something of the use and necessity of a new humanist social criticism. As of 1500, the idea that Erasmus would have led Colet and More with him (had they chosen to follow) 'on his way to the humanistic paradise'[22] seems doubly unsound. For one thing, Colet appears unmistakably to have been the leader of the humanist social criticism at this early stage. For another (in the light of their subsequent careers, it is true), these men were setting out, not on the way to some intellectual's escapist paradise, but rather on a daring effort to help build, on Christian humanist lines, a new and workable social order in England.[23]

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SEATTLE

[21] Cf. J. W. Mackail, *Erasmus Against War* (Boston, 1907), p. xxiii; T. C. Appelt, *Studies in the Contents and Sources of Erasmus' 'Adagia'* (Chicago, 1942), pp. 48–64 *passim*. As late as the 1513 edition, Erasmus' remarks occupied only four lines: see *Adagiorvm chiliades tres* (Basileae, August, 1513), p. 150; a copy is in the Huntington Library.

[22] Hyma, *op. cit.* (1940), p. 11.

[23] See Robert P. Adams, 'Designs by More and Erasmus for a New Social Order', *SP*, XLII (1945), 131–145.

Reviews

C. Reedijk, ed. *The Poems of Desiderius Erasmus*. Leiden: Brill, 1956. xii+424 pp. 36 gulders.

'There are a few unimportant poems', remarked P. S. Allen when separating Erasmus' 'pure literature' from his other and far more voluminous writings. Most of the poems were collected in the *Opera Omnia* of 1540 and 1703–06; additional ones appeared in Smith's *Erasmus* (1923), Hyma's *Youth of Erasmus* (1930), and Ferguson's *Erasmi*

[Footnotes]

[5] **Erasmus on Political Ethics: The Institutio Principis Christiani**
Lester K. Born
Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 43, No. 4. (Dec., 1928), pp. 520-543.
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0032-3195%28192812%2943%3A4%3C520%3AEOPETI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L