

## DESIDERIUS ERASMUS.

AND HIS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE REFORMATION.

BY C. K. OGDEN.

IT is a great tribute to a writer's intellectual insight that the twentieth century should be able to forget an intervening five hundred years and recognize him as a "modern." Our way of looking at things is so radically different from that of our predecessors that we often seem debarred from communion with them. In science, as Dr. Carus has pointed out, "a genuine truth (i. e., a formula describing the genuine features of a definite set of facts) if once proved to be true, will remain true for ever. We may see old truths in a new light, we may better and ever better learn to understand their significance and also the relation between several truths; but a truth will always remain true." Of the truths of science as recognized to-day the vast majority have been established in comparatively recent times, moreover we now see a great number of older scientific truths "in a new light." But in matters of human nature, where science is less at home, the reverse is often true. It is we who are led to see our own problems in "a new light" when we study those great masters of bygone days whose works are for all time. Among those who help us to understand ourselves as they speak to us out of the past, if Plato is one, Erasmus is assuredly another.

"Plato," Erasmus remarks somewhere, "wrote with a diamond upon marble": and his own words might well be applied to the profoundest thinker of the age of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Over and over again, as we turn over the pages of the serried volumes of the *Opera*, we are aware of the flashes of insight which annihilate the centuries that separate his *floruit* from ours. There were divines in Erasmus's day no less than in ours: They

fence themselves in with so many surrounders of magisterial definitions, conclusions, corollaries, propositions explicit and implicit, that there is no falling in with them; or if they do chance to be urged to a seeming *non-plus*, yet they find out so many evasions that all the art of man can never bind them so fast but that an easy distinction shall give them a starting-hole to escape the scandal of being baffled. . . . They are exquisitely dexterous in unfolding the most intricate mysteries: they will tell you to a tittle all the successive proceedings of Omnipotence in the creation of the universe; they will explain the precise manner of original sin being derived from our first parents; they will satisfy you in what manner, by what degrees, and in how long a time, our Saviour was conceived in the Virgin's womb, and demonstrate in the consecrated wafer how accidents may subsist without a subject. Nay, these are accounted trivial, easy questions; they have yet far greater difficulties behind, which notwithstanding they solve with as much expedition as the former; as namely, whether supernatural generation requires any instant of time for its acting? whether Christ, as a son, bears a specifically distinct relation to God the Father, and his virgin mother? whether this proposition can be true, that the first person of the Trinity hated the second? whether God, who took our nature upon him in the form of a man, could as well have become a woman, a devil, a beast, a herb, or a stone? and were it so possible that the Godhead has appeared in any shape of an inanimate substance, how he should then have preached his gospel? or how have been nailed to the cross? whether, if St. Peter had celebrated the eucharist at the same time our Saviour was hanging on the cross, the consecrated bread would have been transubstantiated into the same body that remained on the tree? whether in Christ's corporeal presence in the sacramental wafer his humanity be not abstracted from his Godhead? whether after the resurrection we shall carnally eat and drink as we do in this life? There are a thousand other more sublimated and refined niceties of notions, relations, quantities, formalities, quiddities, haecceities, and such like abstrusities as one would think no one could pry into except he had not only such cat's eyes as to see best in the dark but even such a piercing faculty as to see through an inch-board and spy out what really never had any being."<sup>1</sup>

Thus in a few words has Erasmus characterized the professional

<sup>1</sup> *In Praise of Folly*, 1509, pp. 130-132. I quote from the very convenient shilling reprint issued with Holbein's designs by Allen & Unwin in their "Sesame" Library.

theologians of all ages, and the passage also serves to introduce us to his significance as the great literary precursor of the Reformation. Erasmus was the humanist *par excellence*. He hated the barren verbalism which had barred intellectual progress on every side, the spirit of medievalism weighing heavily on true learning. With equal indignation he loathed the hypocritical ceremonialism which was its monastic counterpart,—“Can anything be more witless than the practice of attending the things without, things that have no bearing on your soul at all, while you ignore completely the working of your own heart and the things that vitally concern you?” Of the monks themselves Erasmus makes Folly say: “While men of this class are so execrated by every one that the casual meeting of them is considered a bad omen, I yet cause them to stand very high in their own estimation and to be fond admirers of their own happiness. First, they think they give a very plain proof of their piety by having nothing to do with learning, so that they can scarcely ever read. Next, while in their churches they bray out like asses the psalms which they count indeed, but do not understand, they think that God listens, well pleased, to their melody.” Reference is made to the filthy condition of mendicant friars—“very delightful men who are remarkable only for their dirt, their ignorance, their clownish manners and their impudence” and pretend that they are the genuine successors of the Apostles. “What gives them greater pleasure than to regulate their actions by weight and measure, as if their religion depended on the omission of the least point?” Small wonder then if Luther and the Reformers thought they had in Erasmus a champion after their own heart.

In March, 1519, we find Luther writing in terms of warm approval to Erasmus, who is regarded as reigning in the hearts of all who love literature. Erasmus in reply advises the *via media*, and attacks not on persons but on abuses. But a very short time afterward we find mistrust arising, and Erasmus writes to Wolsey full of grave fears that the progress of learning may be impeded by injudicious agitators: “As to Luther he is altogether unknown to me, and I have read nothing of his except two or three pages—not because I dislike him but because my own studies and occupations do not give me leisure to do so. But yet as I hear, some persons say that I have assisted him. If he has written well, the praise must not be given to me, and if he has written ill I ought not to be blamed, since in all his writings there is not a line which came from me. His life is universally commended; and it is an argument in his favor that his character is unblamable. I was once against

Luther because I was afraid that he would bring an odium upon literature, which is already too much suspected of evil; for I know full well how invidious it is to oppose those opinions which bring so plentiful a harvest of gain to the priests and monks."

The earlier letters of Luther to and about Erasmus are full of hope and admiration, but he was to be sadly disappointed. And in order to understand more clearly why the disappointment was inevitable let us turn to the life of Luther's critic and see what manner of man he was. And first of all we must note that this Desiderius Erasmus who was born at Rotterdam in 1467 and was not less at home in England, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland than in his native country, was not the creature of any ordinary conditions or environment. That he was born out of wedlock is only one of the features which distinguished his earliest days from those of other mortals, and his very name tells a literary tale. In an age of classical revival children were thus afflicted by turgid appellations. His father's simple name, Gerhard ("beloved"), was translated by a cumbersome combination of tautologous solecisms. Against the pedantry and ignorance here typified it was the great scholar's mission to struggle for the rest of his life. At the age of thirteen, when he lost both his parents, he had already lived in Rotterdam, Gouda, Utrecht and Deventer. As in the case of so many other great minds it is doubtful whether the loss was not without its advantages; for to judge by the action of the three guardians into whose hands he now fell, his father must have been a man in some ways singularly devoid of judgment and discretion. Like nearly all highly-strung persons Erasmus always looks back upon his early years, his schooldays and his guardians with a shudder. After wasting three years at a seminary in Bois-le-Duc subsequent to his removal from the Deventer school, he came for the first time into conflict with organized religion in the shape of a conspiracy to force him into the monastic life. To this affair we owe one of the most delightful pieces of autobiographical reminiscence, in the form of a letter to his friend Grunnius. Erasmus and his brother are beset by their guardians who visit them in turn. The first hears their refusal in a spirit very far from Christian—"He became red with anger, as if a blow with the fist had been given to him; so that although he always seemed to be a man of somewhat gentle disposition, now he had no power to control his anger, and shame alone prevented him from striking him. Regarding Florentius with a look of utter scorn, he called him an idle, spiritless rascal; resigned his guardianship; refused any longer to guarantee them the means

of subsistence; told them that nothing was left, and that they must provide for themselves. With these and many other cruel and bitter reproaches he loaded the younger of the two, which drew from him a few childish tears but did not cause him to alter his purpose. 'We accept,' he said, 'your resignation of the guardianship, and release you from your charge.' Thus they separated. When the guardian saw that he had gained nothing by threats and reproaches he summoned to his aid his brother guardian, a man of wonderfully insinuating manner and pleasing address. The meeting took place in a summer-house; the boys were told to sit down; and wine-glasses were produced. After some agreeable conversation they proceeded to business more carefully and in a different manner. They were very bland, told many lies; held out to them great expectations from it; and added entreaties. The elder brother, worked upon in this manner, found his resolution giving way and forgot the oath which he had taken more than once to be firm. The younger adhered to his determination. In short, the faithless Antonius, betraying his brother, took the yoke upon him, having first stolen whatever he could lay his hands upon—not at all a new proceeding with him. With him indeed everything went prosperously. For he was a man of sluggish mind, of a strong constitution, careful about his worldly interests, cunning, a hard drinker, much given to fornication; in short, so unlike the younger that he almost seemed like a supposititious child."

There is not a little conceit here, but Erasmus was too great a man not to be as conscious of it as his readers. The sequel gives further autobiographical details of the greatest interest, and we see how early and how well Erasmus came to understand the religious practices against which he inveighs. At length he succumbed to pressure and entered the monastery of Stein where he "acted like those who are shut up in prison." He solaced himself as far as possible with his studies. This work he "must do privately though he might be intoxicated openly." In another letter he reiterates his dislike—"I never liked the monastic life, and I liked it less than ever after I had tried it; but I was ensnared in the way I have mentioned."

It is instructive to note the lines which his objection takes. It is always that of the cultured scholar, the man of taste who cannot bear to have his interests cramped, and whose soul rebels against boorishness, formality and narrowness. There is none of the fire of the iconoclast. Given freedom to complete his intellectual development, one feels that Erasmus would perhaps have been ready



to condone the moral failings of the church against which Luther rose in arms. Indeed a story told of this period of his life by Le Clerc has a decided ring of reality about it. The scene is laid in the garden of the monastery, in which the Superior reserved to himself the luscious fruit of a pear tree which was a special temptation to monkish palates. Some of the pears, having found their way to the interior of Erasmus, were duly missed. The Superior rose early and Erasmus was up the tree. His intellect saved him at the expense of his morals: for, nimbly descending, he imitated the limp of a lame lay brother in the monastery, and, well aware that he was being observed from a distance, thus gained safety for himself and a severe penance for the innocent owner of the limp.

At length relief came in his twenty-ninth year, when the bishop of Cambrai provided him with the means of prosecuting his studies at the Montaigu College at Paris. Here insanitary conditions told on his health: "Some sleeping apartments," he says, "were on the ground floor, having mouldy plaster walls, near pestilential latrinae. All who lodged in them were sure to die or to have a bad illness." Erasmus contracted the latter, though apparently not before he had had time to make the acquaintance of the allurements of the Latin Quarter. Moreover the bishop's support could no longer be relied upon. A fresh patron had to be found, and in the quest there was nothing to which Erasmus would not stoop. In one letter his friend James Battus, who was endeavoring to round up the Marchioness de Veere for this purpose, is reminded that Erasmus has bad eyesight. "Coax her with the neatest words you can command into sending me a sapphire or some other gem that is good for weak eyes." Fortunately for Erasmus sapphires and other gems, or their monetary equivalent, were forthcoming; not always from the lady in question, but eventually from one who enabled him to visit England, his pupil Lord Mountjoy.

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The visit of Erasmus to England in 1499 was a turning point in his career and of the deepest significance for his relations to the Reformers. The story of his life at Oxford and his friendship with Colet, More, and other liberal-minded Englishmen is too well known to require further mention here. England pleased him greatly: "Besides, there is a custom here in vogue which cannot be overpraised. Visitors are greeted with a kiss. It is thus you are saluted on arrival, it is thus leave is taken of you at your going: should you return kisses and go where you may find kisses—kisses

everywhere." Again, "The climate is agreeable and healthful, and this scholarship of its learned men is not in the least peddling or shallow." In 1500 Erasmus left this delightful isle for Paris, Orleans, Brussels and Tournemens, improving his style and his knowledge of Greek and publishing voluminously. Of these earlier efforts the *Adagia* and the *Enchiridion* were an immediate success.

In 1505 Erasmus paid a brief visit to Cambridge, and the next three years, 1506-1509, he spent in the midst of the humanistic revival in Italy, and satisfied himself as to the predominantly temporal ambitions of the pope. Italy was in a state of military turmoil, and Erasmus makes the shrewd comment: "When princes purpose to exhaust a commonwealth they speak of a 'just war.'" In Humanism itself Erasmus opened a new period. The generations which had discovered and classified the new materials had passed away. Gone too were the giants who congregated round Cosmo de Medici, and gone the more academic stylists like Ficino and Poliziano. To Erasmus it was left to cull the choicest fruits of humanism and hand them to a wider literary public than had as yet been reached. To him it was left to battle with the supreme enemy, ignorance. This was his mission, and on its fulfilment he set his heart. The Reformers misunderstood his ideals and claimed him too eagerly as one of themselves. A reaction was inevitable, but before we pass to this later phase let us record that in 1510 Erasmus acceded to Mountjoy's request that he should return to England. The *Encomium Moriae*, written in More's house, was an immediate literary result, and Erasmus then proceeded to Cambridge to undertake his great work, the collation of the Greek text of the New Testament.

But there is another reason why Erasmus's sojourn in Cambridge may be considered in greater detail, for these words are written scarcely a hundred yards from the turret of red brick at the southeast angle of the small court in Queens' College known as the court of Erasmus. In a lecture delivered in Cambridge in 1890 by Sir Richard Jebb, then Regius Professor of Greek, occurs the following passage: "His study was probably a good-sized room which is now used as a lecture room; on the floor above this was his bedroom, with an adjoining attic for his servant. . . . [Not far from the rooms there is a walk on the west side of the river known still as the walk of Erasmus, though the locality has undergone many changes since the early sixteenth century, when it was probably not even laid out.] . . . His first letter from Cambridge is dated December, 1510, and this date must be right, or nearly so. He says

himself that he taught Greek here before he lectured on theology, and also that after his arrival the commencement of his Greek teaching was delayed by ill health. . . . It is interesting to think of him—now a man of forty-four, but prematurely old in appearance—moving about the narrow streets or quiet courts of that medieval Cambridge which was just about to become the modern—a transformation due in no small measure to the influence of his own labors. Eleven of our colleges existed. Peterhouse was in the third century of its life; others were also of a venerable age.”<sup>2</sup>

Erasmus was elected Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1511, a chair now filled by Dr. Bethune-Baker as successor to Dean Inge. The mutual influence of Erasmus and Cambridge is of great importance; for then, as now, Cambridge took pride in being in the van of intellectual progress. In 1516 his pupil Bullock wrote: “People here are devoting themselves eagerly to Greek literature.” In 1520 Erasmus himself declared: “Theology is flourishing at Paris and at Cambridge and nowhere else, and why? Because they are adapting themselves to the tendencies of the age, because the new studies, which are ready if need be to storm an entrance, are not repelled by them as foes but received as welcome guests.”

Erasmus tells a story in the *Colloquies* which probably belongs to this period and which is of special interest to-day in view of its bearing on the Angels of Mons. With his friend Pole and others he was riding one day to Richmond. Among the party, says Erasmus, “there were some whom you would call discreet men. The sky was wonderfully serene; there was not the appearance of a cloud upon it. Pole, looking with fixed eyes upwards, made the sign of the cross on his face and shoulders; and composing his features so as to express the feeling uppermost in his mind, uttered an exclamation of wonder. When those who rode next to him asked him what he saw, again marking himself with a larger cross, he exclaimed, ‘May a most merciful God avert from us this prodigy.’ When they pressed upon him, eager to know what was the matter, fixing his eyes upon the sky, and pointing to a particular part of it, he said, ‘Do you not see there a large dragon, armed with fiery horns, having his tail twisted into a circle?’ When they told him that they could not see it he told them to look fixedly toward it and often showed them the exact place. At length one of them, fearing that he should seem to be short-sighted, declared that he also saw it. His example was followed first by one, then by another;

<sup>2</sup> Jebb, *Erasmus*, p. 24.



for they were ashamed not to see what was so very plain. In short, within three days the report was spread all over England that this wonderful sight had been seen. It is surprising how much popular report added to the story. Some gave a serious interpretation to this prodigy. He who had invented it laughed heartily at their folly."

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Certainly Erasmus did not share the superstitions of his age, and he gives an amusing account of a visit made in the autumn of 1513 from Cambridge to the shrine of our Lady of Walsingham. Menedemus and Ogygius are conversing:

"*Men.*—Where then does she reside?

"*Og.*—In the church which I have described as unfinished there is a narrow wooden chapel, with a narrow wicket on each side for the admission and departure of the pilgrims. There is scarcely any light in it excepting from wax tapers. A fragrant odor is diffused through it.

"*Men.*—All this harmonizes well with religious worship.

"*Og.*—If, Menedemus, you look inside, you will say that it is an abode worthy of the saints; for it is resplendent with jewels, gold and silver. . . . In the innermost chapel, which I have called the shrine of the Blessed Virgin, a canon stands near the altar.

"*Men.*—For what purpose?

"*Og.*—To receive and guard the offerings.

"*Men.*—Do those give who are unwilling to do so?

"*Og.*—Certainly not. A kind of pious modesty actuates some, who will give if any one be near, or will give rather more than they intended, but who will give nothing if there is no one to see them.

"*Men.*—That is a natural feeling, and one not altogether unknown to me.

"*Og.*—Nay, there are some so devoted to the most holy Virgin, that while they pretend to put an offering on the altar, they take away with wonderful dexterity what some one else has placed upon it. . . . We are told that the fountain is sacred to the blessed Virgin. The water is very cold, and is of service for the headache and stomach-ache.

"*Men.*—If cold water should serve as a cure for pains of this description we may hereafter expect oil to extinguish fire.

"*Og.*—You are hearing of a miracle, my good man. If this cold water could only quench our thirst, there would be nothing

miraculous in it; and this is only one part of the story. . . . The fountain is said to have suddenly sprung forth from the earth at the command of the most holy Virgin. As I was carefully looking round at everything, I asked how many years ago that little house had been brought to that place. The answer was, 'Several centuries.' 'But the walls,' I said, 'do not show any signs of age.' He did not deny it. 'Nor,' I continued, 'do these wooden posts.' He admitted that they had been lately placed there, and indeed the thing spoke for itself. 'Then this roof and thatch seem to be new.' He agreed with me. 'Even these cross-beams, too, and the rafters on which the straws rest, seem to have been fixed not many years ago.' He nodded assent. When I had thus disposed of every part of the house, I asked him, 'How does it appear that the house has been brought from a great distance?'

*Men.*—Oh, tell me how he got out of this difficulty.

*Og.*—Why, he showed us a very old bear-skin fixed to the rafters and almost laughed at our dulness because we did not see this convincing proof of the truth of what he said. Convinced in this manner, and admitting that we were dull indeed, we turned to the heavenly milk of the blessed Virgin.

*Men.*—The mother in truth seems to be exactly like the Son. He left a large quantity of His blood in the world; she has left far more milk than you could suppose that a woman who has brought forth one child could produce, even if the infant had drunk none of it.

*Og.*—They make the same pretense respecting the wood of the cross, which is shown in public and private in so many places. If all the fragments were brought together they would seem a proper load for a merchant ship, and yet our Lord carried the whole of His cross.

*Men.*—Does not this appear strange to you?

*Og.*—It may be said to be something new, but scarcely strange, since the Lord, who increases it at His pleasure, is omnipotent.

*Men.*—You give a pious explanation of the matter, but I fear that many of these things are invented for gain.

*Og.*—I do not think that God will allow any one to mock Him in this manner. . . . But now hear what I have to say to you besides. That milk is kept on the high altar in the middle of which is Christ, with His mother on the right hand, at the post of honor. For the milk represents the Virgin Mother.

*Men.*—It can, then, be seen?

*Og.*—Yes, in a crystal vessel.

*Men.*—It is, then, liquid?

*Og.*—How can you suppose it to be liquid when it is more than 1500 years old? It is concrete, and looks like beaten chalk tempered with the white of an egg.”

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We have touched on the main influences in the life of Erasmus up to the year 1514, when he left England, aged forty-seven, at the height of his powers and of his influence. From this time onward we may date that later period of his life which is agitated more particularly by the problems of the Reformation. His departure from Cambridge was hastened by an outbreak of plague in 1513 which altered the life of the university hardly less than the present war. Silence reigned in the cloisters; and by the end of the year Erasmus had decided for this and other reasons to leave the place. In February, 1514, there are still references to the danger, in a letter to Gunnell. “In England just now to change one’s locality is only to vary the danger, and not to escape it.” But an even more alarming disaster was impending, and Erasmus is threatened by the economic effects of war itself. We possess an extraordinarily interesting letter in which his personal views on war are set forth for the benefit of Antony of Bergen, Abbot of St. Bertin. England begins to disappoint him. Preparations for war are quickly changing the genius of the island. Prices are rising every day, and liberality is decreasing. “It is only natural that men so frequently taxed should be sparing in their gifts. And not long ago, in consequence of the scarcity of wine, I was nearly killed by stone, contracted out of the wretched liquor that I was forced to drink. Moreover, while every island is in some degree a place of banishment, we are now confined more closely than ever by war, insomuch that it is difficult even to get a letter sent out. And I see that some great disturbances are arising, the issues of which are uncertain. I trust it may please God mercifully to allay this tempest in the Christian world.”

And then with wonderful power he declares his belief in the incompatibility of Christianity and war: “I often wonder what thing it is that drives, I will not say Christians, but men, to such a degree of madness as to rush with so much pains, so much cost, so much risk, to the destruction of one another. For what are we doing all our lives but making war? The brute beasts do not all engage in war, but only some wild kinds; and those do not fight among themselves, but with animals of a different species. They fight too with their natural arms, and not like us with machines,

upon which we expand an ingenuity worthy of devils. For us, who glory in the name of Christ, of a master who taught and exhibited nothing but gentleness, who are members of one body, and are one flesh, quickened by the same spirit, fed by the same sacraments, attached to the same Head, called to the same immortality, hoping for that highest communion, that as Christ and the Father are one, so we may be one with Him,—can anything in the world be of so great concern as to provoke us to war, a thing so calamitous and so hateful that even when it is most righteous no truly good man can approve it. Think, I beseech you, who are those employed in it. Cut-throats, gamblers, whoremongers, the meanest hireling soldiers, to whom a little gain is dearer than life,—these are your best warriors when what they once did at their peril they do now for gain and with applause. This scum of mankind must be received into your fields and into your cities in order that you may wage war; in fact you make yourself a slave to them in your anxiety to be revenged on others.”

Then Erasmus comes to the full indictment of the horrors of war: “Consider too,” he bursts out, “how many crimes are committed under pretext of war, when, as they say, In the midst of arms, laws are silent; how many thefts, how many acts of sacrilege, how many rapes, how many other abuses which one is ashamed even to name; and this moral contagion cannot but last for many years, even when the war is over. And if you count the cost you will see how even if you conquer you lose much more than gain. What kingdom can you set against the lives and blood of so many thousand men? And yet the greatest amount of the mischief affects those who have no part in the fighting. The advantages of peace reach everybody; while in war for the most part even the conqueror weeps; and it is followed by such a train of calamities that there is good reason in the fiction of poets that War comes to us from Hell and is sent by the Furies. I say nothing of the revolution of states, which cannot take place without the most disastrous results.”

Why then do men slaughter one another? For the phantom of glory? “If the desire of glory tempts us to war,—that is no true glory which is mainly sought by wrongful acts. It is much more glorious to found than to overthrow, states; but in these days it is the people that builds and maintains cities, and the folly of princes that destroys them. If gain is our object, no war has ended so happily as not to have brought more evil than good to those engaged in it; and no sovereign damages his enemy in war without first doing a great deal of mischief to his own subjects. And



finally, when we see human affairs always changing and confused, like the ebb and flow of Euripus, what is the use of such great efforts to raise an empire, which must presently by some revolution pass to others? With how much blood was the Roman empire raised, and how soon did it begin to fall. But you will say that the rights of sovereigns must be maintained. It is not for me to speak unadvisedly about the acts of princes. I only know this, that *summum jus*,—extreme right, is often *summa injuria*,—extreme wrong; there are princes who first decide what they want, and then look out for a title with which to cloak their proceedings. And in such great changes of human affairs, among so many treaties, that have been made and abandoned, who, I ask you, need lack a title?"

Who will stop the folly? Who will arbitrate? "There are popes, there are bishops." Julius had power enough to raise the tempest—"Will not Leo, a learned, honest and pious pontiff, be able to calm it?" To-day we are asking a somewhat similar question. And he concludes on an even more effective note: "If you look a little closely you will find that it is generally the private interests of princes that give occasion to war. And I would ask you, do you consider it consistent with humanity that the world should be at any moment disturbed by war when this or that sovereign has some cause of complaint against another, or perhaps pretends to have one?"<sup>3</sup> It is truly wonderful that Erasmus, for centuries almost alone in his far-sighted detestation of war, should have stated the problem so clearly.

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Here we may pause for a moment to consider Erasmus in the flesh, for with the aid of tradition and Holbein's famous portrait we are able in some measure to realize his personal characteristics. It would be hard to improve on Sir Richard Jebb's delineation: "Erasmus was a rather small man, slight, but well built; he had, as became a Teuton, blue eyes, yellowish or light brown hair, and a fair complexion. The face is a remarkable one. It has two chief characteristics—quiet, watchful sagacity, and humor, half playful, half sarcastic. The eyes are calm, critical, steadily ob-

<sup>3</sup> Nichols, *The Epistles of Erasmus*, 1904, Vol. II, p. 125. This excellent translation is invaluable to all who wish to go behind the meagre indications of the personality of Erasmus to which even the best biographies are confined. They enable the English reader to estimate the truth of Luther's judgment: "In the epistles of Erasmus you find nothing of any account except praise for his friends, scolding and abuse for his enemies, and that's all there is to it." For the complete works the Basel edition of 1540 or the Leyden edition of 1703 must still be consulted.

servant, with a half-latent twinkle in them; the nose is straight, rather long and pointed; the rippling curves of the large mouth indicate a certain energetic vivacity of temperament and tenacity of purpose; while the pose of the head suggests vigilant caution, almost timidity. As we continue to study the features they speak more and more clearly of insight and refinement; of a worldly yet very gentle shrewdness; of cheerful self-mastery; and of a mind which has its weapons ready at every instant. But there is no suggestion of enthusiasm—unless it be the literary enthusiasm of a student. It is difficult to imagine those cool eyes kindled by any flow of passion, or that genial serenity broken by a spiritual struggle. This man, we feel, would be an intellectual champion of truth and reason; his wit might be as the spear of Ithuriel, and his satire as the sword of Gideon; but he has not the face of a hero or a martyr.”

And the message of the face is a true one in this last respect, for it was essentially here that Erasmus differed from the zealots who led the Reformation movement. By training and by temperament, as we have already seen, Erasmus was the advocate of other methods than those adopted by the men who took up the work he had so largely inaugurated. To disperse the mists of ignorance, not to do battle with the ecclesiastics of his own generation, was the task he had set himself. To this end alone he published his Greek Testament at a time when to know Greek was the next thing to heresy. His earlier works, such as the *Enchiridion*, were aimed at corruption in the church—but corruption always as the enemy of true knowledge and literary development. Like many other polemical writings however it was only after the monks had anathematized his efforts that a ready sale was secured for them. Erasmus indeed was the first “higher critic” and one of the few “higher critics” who have been anxious for his conclusions to reach the multitudes: He desired the Scriptures to be in the hands of all: “I long,” he says, “that the husbandman should sing them to himself as he follows the plough.” Here however he speaks as a Christian, for he never really swerved from his allegiance to Rome, though an able French critic, M. Amiel, has rightly found sufficient toleration and liberality in his utterances to justify the title *Erasmus un libre penseur du XVIIe siècle*. Though some of his writings are certainly pious enough, he has succeeded in incurring the displeasure of not a few representatives of orthodoxy. “He thought it unnecessary,” says a clerical biographer<sup>4</sup> whose attitude on the subject is typical,

<sup>4</sup> *The Life and Character of Erasmus*, by the Rev. A. R. Pennington, with a preface by the Bishop of Lincoln, London, 1875, p. 373. This is an

"to attribute everything in the Apostles to miraculous teaching. Christ, he said, suffered the Apostles to err, and that, too, after the descent of the Paraclete; but not so as to endanger the faith. He remarks that the Epistle to the Hebrews is not entirely in the style of the Apostle Paul. He doubts whether St. John the Apostle wrote the Apocalypse. He often accuses the Evangelists of lapses of memory, and I regret to say that a rationalistic spirit constantly appears in his writings."

At this point our ecclesiastic waxes reflective—"It is scarcely possible not to observe that the mind of Erasmus was essentially sceptical. He had doubts about almost everything except the existence of God and the obligation of the moral law." Some people would consider that this was going a good long way; but the Rev. gentleman rightly opines that Erasmus wished the articles of faith to be brought within a very narrow compass, and shows that in the introduction to his edition of St. Hilary occurs the following passage: "The sum of our religion is peace, which cannot easily be preserved unless we define very few points; and in most matters leave every one to form his own judgment." For the most part it is the views Erasmus expressed on the Trinity which provoke his biographer's displeasure. The Arian heresy is scented: "We cannot fail to come to the conclusion, notwithstanding his assertion to the contrary, that, with the church's consent, he would gladly have professed that creed which nullifies Christianity, by denying our Lord's consubstantiality with the Father."

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As regards orthodox Christianity, then, Erasmus was and is a heretic. We have already seen how he regarded the superstitions of his age, and in writing to Andreas Critius he says: "They tell horrid stories of saints who, in many instances, punished persons for using profane expressions; insomuch that I cannot but wonder that not one out of so many should revenge himself on the authors of this prodigious devastation. As to the mildness of Christ and the Blessed Virgin, I am not at all surprised at it." In general however his particular concern was for the progress of knowledge and the spirit of free inquiry. "I am reminded that the ancient

interesting and painstaking estimate of which I have been able to make use on several occasions above. The Lives by Jortin (3 vols., 1808) and Drummond (2 vols., 1873) contain most of the available material. Froude has given us a characteristic picture-study (1894). Knight (1726), like Jebb, is concerned largely with the Cambridge period. Of recent studies, that in the Little Biographies (Capey), and Dr. Emerton's able account in Putnam's Heroes of the Reformation series, can be recommended.

translators were men of learning and that their version is sufficient for all practical purposes. I answer that I have eyes of my own and choose to use them in preference to borrowing the spectacles of others, and further, that much yet remains to be done when the gains of scholarship have been reckoned up at their highest figure." This attitude—so natural to the scholar, the book-lover, the stylist, the intellectual—the Reformers with their burning indignation and righteous zeal could not understand. In all ages the contrast has been the same between the two spirits—the advocate of revolution and the believer in peaceful penetration—between the champions of direct action and the adherents of adjustment and mutual concession. We do but witness other forms of the divergence of temperament in the distinction between Atheist and Agnostic (Haeckel and Huxley), Marxist and Fabian, Syndicalist and State-Socialist. Erasmus was the man who thought that all things should be done decently and in order. At first he had hopes of Luther; but he soon saw that the methods of the revivalist could not be his own methods. He was not charitable in his judgments, and he certainly saw all Luther's weak points. The directness and courage of the Reformers seem however to have made little impression. Nevertheless Erasmus on several occasions went out of his way to defend Luther. In 1519 he wrote to the Archbishop of Mainz: "I was sorry when Luther's books were published; and when they began showing about some of his writings I made every effort to prevent their publication lest they should become the cause of any disturbance. Luther had written to me in a very Christian tone, as I thought; and I replied, advising him incidentally not to write anything of a factious or insulting nature against the Roman pontiff, nor to encourage a proud or intolerant spirit, but to preach the gospel out of a pure heart with all meekness. I did this in gentle language in order to make the more impression; and I added that there were some here who sympathized with him, which has been very foolishly explained to mean that *I* sympathize with him; although my object evidently was to induce him to consult the judgment of others, and I am the only person who has written to give him advice. I am neither Luther's accuser, nor advocate, nor judge; his heart I would not presume to judge—for that is always a matter of extreme difficulty—still less would I condemn."

"It cannot be denied," he goes on, "that the most odious clamor has been raised against him here by persons who have never read a word he has written. It is certain that some have condemned what they did not understand. For example Luther had written that



we are not bound to confess mortal sins, unless they are manifest, meaning by that known to us when we confess. Some one interpreting that as if manifest meant openly perpetrated, raised a most astounding outcry, simply from not understanding the question. It is certain that some things have been condemned in the books of Luther as heretical, which in those of Bernard or Augustine are regarded as orthodox, if not as truly religious. I advised these men at the first to abstain from such clamors, and to proceed rather by writings and by arguments. I urged in the first place that they should not publicly condemn that which they had not read—nay which they had not considered—for I will not say they did not understand; secondly, that it was unbecoming to divines, whose judgment ought ever to be most grave, to attempt to carry anything by tumult; finally, that one whose conduct was universally admitted to be blameless was no fit object for blind denunciation."

Fair though he endeavored to be, Erasmus was clearly ill at ease. He feared that the cause he had at heart might suffer in the eyes of thinking men if in any way contaminated by attacks on individuals or violence of propaganda. "I would," we read in another letter, "that Luther had followed my advice and abstained from those violent and opprobrious writings. More would have been gained and with less odium. The death of one man would be a small matter; but if the monks should succeed in this attempt there will be no bearing their insolence. They will never rest till they have utterly abolished linguistic studies and all polite literature."

He steered the course which he calculated would best preserve the ship of Christian humanism whose helmsman he rightly conceived himself to be. And in his letters, as we have already seen in the case of that to Cardinal Wolsey, he usually began by carefully explaining that his knowledge of Luther and his doings was the vaguest. He was busy; he had not read the book. . . . "I have no acquaintance with Luther," he declared in an epistle to the pope written from Louvain in 1520, "nor have I ever read his books, except perhaps ten or twelve pages, and that only by snatches. From what I then saw I judged him to be well qualified for expounding the Scriptures in the manner of the Fathers—a work greatly needed in an age like this, which is so excessively given to mere subtleties, to the neglect of really important questions. Accordingly I have favored his good, but not his bad qualities, or rather I have favored Christ's glory in him. I was among the first to foresee the danger there was of this matter ending in violence,

and no one ever hated violence more than I do. Indeed I even went so far as to threaten John Froben the printer, to prevent him printing his books."

A curious sentence occurs later in the same letter: "...If any one has ever heard me defending Luther's dogmas even over the bottle, I shall not object to be called a Lutheran." Erasmus is only too anxious to wash his hands of the whole business. He foresaw that his name would be coupled with Luther's by ignorant enemies. This indeed came to pass when the bull was issued. Luther, it was said, was a pestilent fellow, but Erasmus was far worse, for it was from his breasts that Luther has sucked all the poison of his composition. "Erasmus," cried others, "laid the egg, and Luther has hatched it." Everywhere they were preached against and prayed for. Prayers were offered that as Paul from a persecutor had become a teacher of the church, even so Luther and Erasmus might be converted. At Bruges a drunken Franciscan, in a public harangue, bellowed for hours against Luther and Erasmus, calling them beasts, asses, cranes and clods.<sup>5</sup>

Erasmus was miserable. The honor was one he had not coveted! His mistrust of the Reformers, developed into dislike. Naturally the blunt honesty of the men of action was shocked. Erasmus seemed to them a timorous hypocrite. Luther did not make his disappointment public; but Ulrich von Hutten could not contain his fury. With the instinct of a soldier he rushed his *Expostulatio* into print: "Your insatiable ambition for fame, your greed for glory which makes it impossible for you to bear the growing powers of any one else; and then the lack of steadiness in your mind, which has always displeased me in you as unworthy of your greatness and led me to believe that you were terror-stricken by the threats of these men." These, he tells Erasmus, are the weaknesses which have caused his backsliding—"Finally I explain it to myself by the pettiness of your mind, which makes you afraid of everything and easily thrown into despair, for you had so little faith in the progress of our cause, especially when you saw that some of the chief princes of Germany were conspiring against us, that straightway you thought you must not only desert us but must also seek their goodwill by every possible means."

Erasmus was thoroughly roused and published his *Spongia* to wipe off the mud whereby he had been bespattered. His defense is a monument of linguistic skill. It is typical of the literary man with a love for legal niceties, and with no really vital interest in

<sup>5</sup> Drummond, *Erasmus*, II, 51.

the problem he is discussing. But even more typical of the academic temperament is the choice of *casus belli* with Luther. He embarks on the eternally barren speculation concerning the freedom of the will. With great ceremony and learning he inveighs against the Augustinian doctrine of predestination—only to decide, as Dr. Emerton has well put it, “that the question has two sides to it, but without giving that kind of decided utterance which the critical moment demanded.” Luther replied with a defense of commotion and violence, and a frank and vigorous statement of his exact belief. The Lutherans continued the battle with the weapons Erasmus had put into their hands; Erasmus stood aside, feeling, as he wrote to Bishop Fisher in 1524, that he was encircled by three groups of foes—the pagan humanists, the obscurantists, and the Lutheran fanatics. Luther in his *Table Talk* even went so far as to describe his opponent as “the vilest miscreant that ever disgraced the earth.” Picturesque vituperation was however a failing of Erasmus also, and Luther was generally repaid in his own coin.

Sir Richard Jebb has selected as typical of the difference between the two men the story of Luther being awakened in the night by a noise in his room. He lit a candle but could find nothing; then he became certain that the invisible Enemy of his soul was present—and yet he lay down and went calmly to sleep. “There is the essence of the man—the intensely vivid sense of the supernatural, and the instinctive recourse to it as an explanation—and the absolute faith. Erasmus was once in a town where a powder-magazine exploded and destroyed a house which had harbored evil-doers: some one remarked that this showed the divine anger against guilt; Erasmus quietly answered that, if such anger was indeed there, it was rather against the folly which had built a powder-magazine so near a town. The man who said that could never have fought at Luther’s side.”

Yet the part played by Erasmus in the struggles which allowed the successful culmination of the Lutheran agitation was a very important one. No one, in an age of earnest men, did more to call the world to the serious study of fundamental problems; few in any age have done so much to advance the cause of enlightenment and to instil a reverence for sincerity and truth. His untiring energy from boyhood to a ripe old age was incredibly productive, in spite of his weak constitution and continuous illness. A curious glimpse of the private troubles of Erasmus, and of the sprightly vigor which distinguishes all his correspondence, is found in the

following letter written from Cambridge to his benefactor, Archbishop Warham.

“Your Erasmus,” he says, “has a dangerous and terrible fit of the stone, which has cast him into the hands of doctors and apothecaries, that is, of butchers and harpies. I am still in labor; I feel the pangs within me. . . . I think that this pain is owing to the drinking of beer which for several days I have been forced to use instead of wine. These are the unhappy fruits of a war with France.” To this the archbishop whimsically rejoined: “I hope that you are purged of your gravel and stones, the rather because the Feast of the Purgation of the Virgin Mary is lately over. What mean these stones in your body? What is it you would build upon this rock? I cannot think that you design a noble house or any edifice of this kind. And therefore, since you have no occasion for your stones, pray part with them as soon as you can and give any money to carry them off. I would gladly give money to bring them to my buildings. That you may do so more easily, and not be wanting to yourself, I have sent you by a London goldsmith’s son thirty nobles, which I would have you change into ten legions, to help to drive away the distemper. Gold is a good medicine and has a great deal of virtue in it. Apply it to the recovery of your health which I would be glad to purchase for you at a higher price. For I know that you have a great many excellent works to publish which cannot be finished without health and strength.” Though in many respects, as the reader will infer, they bear the marks of the age in which they were written, the letters of Erasmus are among the most interesting correspondence extant. Erasmus has an epistolary style which is all his own, combining the quaintness and charm of the eighteenth century with the freshness and breadth of outlook which forms so pleasing a feature of the age of awakening and discovery.

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Let us conclude by returning to the one great topic of to-day as an appropriate theme for the “modernity” of Erasmus—here so modern that he may still be regarded as many years ahead of the times. Erasmus, as we have already seen, was one of the most eloquent opponents of the folly of war. His “What, is cross pitted against cross, Christ at war with Christ?” might well serve as a text for Christian princes to-day. Yet he makes an appeal not to Christians alone but to humanity.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century a conference of



potentates had been planned—to consist of Maximilian, Francis I, Henry VIII and Charles. They were to enter in the most solemn manner “into mutual and indissoluble engagements to preserve peace with each other and consequently peace throughout Europe,” but, says Erasmus, “certain persons who get nothing by peace and a great deal by war, threw obstacles in the way and prevented this truly kingly purpose from being carried into execution.” Full of indignation he penned the *Querela Pacis*.<sup>6</sup> Peace is made to speak in her own person: “If I, Peace, am extolled at one and the same time by God and man, as the fountain, the source, the nurse, the patroness, the guardian of every good thing in heaven and earth, if apart from me nothing anywhere prospers, nothing is safe, nothing is pure or holy, nothing is either delightful to man or well-pleasing to God; if on the other hand war is briefly a veritable ocean containing evils of any and every kind; if at its coming things that were flourishing began to wither, things that were developing are arrested by decay, things that were established totter to the fall, things that were made to endure utterly perish, and things sweet at length become bitter; if war is an unhallowed thing to the extent that it is the deadliest bane to all piety and religion; if there is nothing more deleterious to men or more abhorrent to heaven, I ask in the name of the ever-living God, who can believe that those rational creatures possess any soundness of mind at all who expend such vast wealth, waste such enthusiasm, enter upon undertakings so great, expose themselves to so many perils in the endeavor to drive me away from them and to purchase at so high a price so appalling an array of sorrows?” If dumb creatures regarded her as an object of hatred, Peace could pardon their ignorance seeing that they are denied the powers of mind necessary to the recognition of her unique gifts. “But it is a fact at once shameful and marvelous that though Nature has formed only one animal endowed with reason, capable of the thought of God, one that is innately benevolent and sympathetic, yet I can more readily find tolerance among the wildest of wild beasts and the most brutal of brutes than among men.”

More than five years previously, in 1511, Erasmus had written of war as “a thing so fierce and cruel as to be more suitable to wild beasts than to men, so impious that it cannot at all be reconciled with Christianity.” Nevertheless even the Christian pontiffs make it the one business to which they give their attention: “Among them

<sup>6</sup> *Querela Pacis undique gentium ejectae profligataeque*; 1516. An English translation by T. Paynell was published in London in 1559, and again in 1802.

you may see decrepit old men display the energy of a youthful spirit, deterred by no cost, fatigued by no labors, if so they can turn laws, religion, peace and all human affairs upside down. Nor are there wanting learned flatterers who to this plain insanity give the name of zeal, of piety and of fortitude, having devised a way in which a man may draw his sword and sheath it in his brother's body without any violation of Christian charity." And in the remarkable letter to Antony of Bergen, which we have already quoted in part, he asks pointedly, "What do you suppose the Turks think when they hear that Christian princes are raging with so much fury against each other."

To-day we can no longer appeal even to the Turks. But one day the humanist ideal for which Erasmus stood, will triumph, and we shall regard him not only as the protagonist of the conflict between the new knowledge and the old, between formalism and life; but as the symbol of a practical internationalism which the men whose civilization had still a bond of union in the Latin language could perhaps envisage more clearly than the warring nations of to-day.