'LIBERATION FROM THE TRIVIAL YOKE': DUTCH RENAISSANCE EDUCATORS AND THEIR CULTURAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL OBJECTIVES\textsuperscript{1}

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Then, though I can only leave you a very small legacy, you owe me, your father, very much, since until now I have brought you up not only honest and decent, but for your education in both learning and morals I have committed you to educated men. Now death stands at my door, I wish to show you, my child, the right course of life: may you continue your way on this path under God’s guidance. I close with a few remarks which should always be in your mind: concentrate with all the zeal you have on the arts which are called free and give more concern to your spirit than to your body. Since engagement in learning puts spurs to a youth and offers amusement in old age, it adorns times of happiness and during unhappiness it gives shelter and consolation. And because the spirit is far more excellent than the body, you must take care of it and evade ignorance, which is death to the spirit.\textsuperscript{2}

These memorable words of his dying father were recalled by the Dutch schoolmaster Johannes Murmellius (c.1480-1517) in the preface of his Didascalici libri duo, a pedagogical introduction dating from the year 1510. The tone of this preface is very characteristic of Dutch humanism, which generally stressed the relation between learning and individual happiness as much as between learning and the well-being of society in general. The present article is a sociocultural survey, by means of a selection of case studies, of the connection between humanism, the success of humanism, and the professionalisation of education on both a secondary school level as well as university level in the northeastern parts of the Late Medieval and Early Modern Netherlands. In this paper the internal aspects of the

\textsuperscript{1} Quotation from a poem addressed to Alexander Hegius or the Münster teacher Fredericus Moorman, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 528 f. 206v: Eiusdem ad ludi-magistrum/Solve tugum pueris trivio quicumque magister/Apta doces Musis hoc tribuisse licet./ Langius hoc suadei, magnusque Ulsenius orat/ Hoc magne exsuscit ex hylecone de.

northern Dutch educational system will only be touched upon lightly. The essence is to show what points the teachers tried to make outside—or, to be more specific, beyond the limits of—their classrooms.

Subject and range have also to be defined in a geographical sense. The focus here will be upon schoolmasters who were mainly active in the northeastern parts of the present-day Netherlands. This area is formed by the most northerly of the territories controlled by the Burgundian duke (which in the late fifteenth century passed into the possession of the Hapsburgs) together with the adjacent German regions with which linguistically and culturally they formed a unit. These territories were prospering with respect to both economy and culture, and that explains why towns such as Zwolle, Groningen, Deventer and Münster could afford to maintain very good and advanced Latin schools and employed well-educated men for professional jobs such as school teacher, town physician or town clerk. Consequently, it is not surprising that many humanists earned their living in these northern areas.

Information on schools and education in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Netherlands is very meagre. Concrete facts concerning town administration are known only from a relatively late date, a problem which may explain why studies in the history of teaching have concentrated upon more recent periods. For our period there are only two comprehensive surveys of the educational system available. One on medieval schools by R.R. Post, and one on the humanistic-inspired educational reforms of the sixteenth century by Post’s pupil P.N.M. Bot. Both studies stem from the 1950s, while most of the existing biographical studies of Dutch educationalists are even older. The Nijmegen historians Post and Bot were very positive about the quality and quantity of Dutch schools in those days. Post tracked down educational institutions in all Dutch towns and in almost every significant village. Subsequently, he concluded that from the fourteenth century on, town authorities took care of the school buildings, determined the school order and appointed the rectores. In some cities the population of the Latin schools grew very large. During the decades after 1400, St Michael’s School at Zwolle counted, for instance, up to 1000 pupils. Later in the century, Zwolle’s leading position was taken over by Alexander Hegius’s

3 R.R. Post, Scholen en onderwijs in Nederland (Utrecht/Antwerpen 1954); P.N.M. Bot, Humanisme en onderwijs in Nederland (Utrecht/Antwerpen 1955).