RHETORIC OF INNOVATION AND RE COURSE TO TRADITION IN HUMANIST PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSE

Bert Roest

Introduction: the humanist claim to novelty

Though I am not a specialist in humanist thought and learning, my current research on late medieval and early modern pedagogical ideals and specimens of religious instruction literature time and again confronts me with the issue of humanism as a programme of educational and moral reform, and with the humanist pedagogical discourse as a competitor to those associated with the medieval period.

Both fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century humanist pedagogical works and related humanist instruction manuals exude a strong sense of novelty. Almost without exception, humanist reformers present their works as unprecedented, and filling a void. A case in point is Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1469–1536). In his general pedagogical works, such as De Civilitate Morum Puerilium, Declamatio de Pueris Institutandis, De Ratione Studii, as well as in his various works of religious instruction, such as his Enchiridion Militis Christiani, Erasmus laments the decline of learning and true piety since antiquity. Thus, the Enchiridion, which amounts to a catechistic handbook, presents a ‘new’ model of moral and religious civility, exploring the correspondence between exterior and interior man. Both exterior and interior man are disciplined through the appropriation of manners (creating civility), through the studia humanitatis (leading to a proper eruditio) and the cultivation of true piety, three elements that are considered to be mutually dependent. In this text Erasmus at several points declares that he is departing from tradition and dealing with issues that have been dolefully neglected for a long time. Hence, the prefatory letter to the Enchiridion edition of 1518 contrasts Erasmus’ own programme of religious instruction with the ‘useless’ production of Sentences commentaries and summae of his theological predecessors and contemporaries. As Erasmus tells us: ‘There are almost as many commentaries on the Sentences as you can name theologians. Of makers of summaries there is no end, one cannot count them,’ to continue somewhat further
on: 'How can a mass of such volumes ever teach us how to live, when a whole lifetime would not suffice to read them.'

Many of Erasmus' humanist colleagues harbouring comparable reform programmes also implied that they were departing from established tradition, initiating a new era in form and content: an era in which man could come into his own. This sense of novelty had found its first strong formulation in the writings of Petrarch (1304–1374). Petrarch saw a large gap between a golden antiquity and the darkness of his own time, and tried to reach back to this lost world, an urge seemingly absent in earlier medieval authors. After Petrarch, this same opinion was voiced by a long chain of humanist-inclined authors of writings on education and the nature of scholarship, who lamented the depravity of the more recent past, and who hailed the accomplishments of the ancients. Famous in this regard are treatises by Pietro Paolo Vergerio (ca. 1370–1444), Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) and Flavio Biondo (1392–1462), Maffeo Vegio of Lodi (1407–1458), Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (1405–1464), and Battista Guarino (fl. c. 1450).

Without exception, these authors exhibited a tendency to lament the loss of learning during the 'dark ages,' and to present the total time span between the fall of the Roman Empire in the West in the fifth and the appearance of Petrarch in the fourteenth century as a long and bleak period of decline in learning and in morals. They contrasted this tragic epoch of ignorance with the rejuvenation of the arts and sciences in their own time, which resulted from the recovery of ancient learning.

---

1 Erasmus, Collected Works LXVI, 9.
2 Notably in his treatise De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia; English translation by Hans Nachod, in: The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, 47–133. Müller, Bildung und Erziehung, 23.
3 Many of whom would, of course, lament the general decline of the world, with recourse to the well-established senectudo mundi topos.
4 His De Ingeniis Moribus et Liberalibus Studiis Adolescentiae (1404) has been hailed by historians from Burckhardt to P.O. Kristeller as the first truly pedagogical treatise. See also Robey, 'Humanism and Education', 27–58. Vergerio was associated with the school of Vittorino da Feltre. His De Ingeniis Moribus deals with the necessity of liberal studies; these include history (assigned the most important place), moral philosophy and rhetoric.
5 De Educatione Liberorum et Eorum Claris Moribus.
6 Tractatus de Liberorum Educatione.
7 He held the chair of rhetoric and poetics at the University of Bologna. Among his writings, we can single out De Ordine Docendi et Studendi (1459).
8 For more information on the humanist lament on medieval ignorance, see: Weisinger, 'Who began the Revival of Learning', 625–638 & Weisinger, 'Renaissance Accounts', 105–118.