

Erasmus, and the Dubious Legacy of Renaissance Humanism

Post by "Joshua" of December 4, 2019 at 11:14 PM

Rome is a crime scene.

This is the feeling that was building in me by degrees, as I was led from one crumbling monument to another. To the Forum, laid in ruins; to the Colloseum, quarried for stone or stripped of marble to make lime; to the Pantheon, where the bronze ceiling of the portico was pillaged to be melted down for cannon by a warlike imperialist pope. And in the Sistine Chapel, where a guide explained that a fervor over nudity arising from the Council of Trent resulted in a commission for the painter Daniele da Volterra, who in 1565 scraped away the work of Michelangelo and painted loincloths where there had been genitals.

I have not been to Rome in years; but I thought of da Volterra again today, as I was reading a dialogue by the Dutch Humanist Erasmus called "The Epicurean".

Quote

[...] If they are Epicureans that live pleasantly, none are more truly Epicureans, than those that live holily and religiously. And if we are taken with Names, no Body more deserves the Name of an Epicurean, than that adorable Prince of Christian Philosophers; for Ἐπίκουρος in Greek signifies as much as an Helper. Therefor when the Law of Nature was almost erased by Vice; and the Law of Moses rather incited than cured Lusts, when the Tyrant Satan ruled without Controul in the World, he alone afforded present Help to perishing Mankind. So that they are mightily mistaken that foolishly represent Christ, as by Nature, to be a rigid melancholick Person, and that he invited us to an unpleasant Life; when he alone show'd the Way to the most comfortable Life in the World [...].

You can almost *hear* the paint-scraper as you read. It is Epicurean philosophy neutered of its physics. Gouged of its decisive rejection of religion and fear of death. Excised, and painted over again with an implausible and alien veneer of "Natural Law" and ridiculous, childish fable.

And yet for all that, Erasmus and the learned men like him were essential to the birth of modernity. He argued against the death penalty for heretics. He subtly questioned many Catholic traditions that had no basis in scripture. He and his fellow Humanists were scholars of the antiquities, and provided a crucial link in the chain of textual preservation and criticism that allowed these books to survive.

In our ongoing project of fostering an authentic Epicurean tradition, we're going to continue to encounter these scholars. I don't have any feelings about them that aren't mixed; all I can do is remain wary of the paint-scraper.