POEMS FROM THE SILVA CARMINVM

INTRODUCTION

The poems written by Erasmus at Steyn after he had made his profession are for the most part characterized by a tone of greater piety than is to be found in his earlier work. Though purely classical in form, they are conventionally Christian in thought. The young humanist undoubtedly took his religious vows more seriously than he was willing to admit at a later date; and his ideas at that time were probably in fair harmony with the monastic piety about him. With the exception of the verses against the „barbarians“ who opposed the study of classic letters, almost all the poems he wrote in the monastery after the year of probation dealt with moral or religious themes. Such a choice of subject was to have been expected from a monk who must please his superiors; yet, as Mestwerdt has pointed out in connection with the Epistola de Contemptu Mundi, the condemnation of the cares, passions and vices of the world expressed in these works of the conventual period probably represented the real thought of their author 1). If this be true, the Satires from the Silua Carminum are of considerable value to the biographer of Erasmus — a safer indication of the nature of his youthful piety than his later and biased comments at a time when his ideas had developed in a direction at variance with the monastery and all its works.

This tendency to choose moral and religious subjects for the practice of his pen was strengthened by the influence of a fellow monk in the neighbouring convent of the Windesheim congrega-

tion at Lopsen, with whom he formed a close friendship shortly after taking his final vows. Cornelius Gerard of Gouda 1) (sometimes called Aurelius or Aurotinus) was older than Erasmus, and was a relative of the latter's intimate friend at Deventer and Steyn, the promising young poet William Herman 2). Like Erasmus, Cornelius had been trained under the influence of the Brethren of the Common Life. At once scholar, poet and ardent exponent of the Devotio Moderna 3), he was one of the fine products of the Christian Renaissance in the Netherlands. He sympathized heartily with his young friend's love of classical literature and his hatred of the "barbarians"; but at the same time he impressed upon both Erasmus and Herman the importance of combining piety with learning and warned them against writing unspiritual poems. In reply to his admonition, Erasmus promised that thereafter he would write nothing that did not savor of sanctity 4). That Cornelius did influence Erasmus' choice of subjects for his work is shown by the fact that the Oratio de Pace, about contemporaneous with the Satires, was written at his request 5).

The poems published in the Silua Carminum are not dated, but, with the possible exception of the De Nummo, they were in all probability written after Erasmus had made his profession in the monastery in 1488 and before the end of the following year. There is considerable evidence to indicate that they were contemporary with the letters to and from Cornelius Gerard dated by Allen

---

4) Veruntamen nihil posthac (quandoquidem id me tam benigne mones) condere statui, quod non aut sanctorum praeconia aut sanctitatem ipsam redoleat." Ep. 28, 8—10; cf. Mestwerdt, p. 213 f; Herman to Cornelius in Nederlandsch Arch. v. kerk. Gesch., IV, 1905, p. 67.