

On the Structure of Knowledge in Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs*

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Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (fig. 1) is a painting peculiarly situated in a no-man's land between words and images. Not only is the subject matter of the painting derived from verbal sources, from proverbs, but the proverbs themselves are curiously visual in nature. Generally metaphorical, proverbs tend to evoke strong mental images through startling juxtapositions and paradoxical turns of phrase. Such bizarre formulations as "two shitting through one hole" or "he carries daylight out in baskets" compel one to envision the scenarios they suggest¹. The curiosity of Bruegel's painting lies not so much in depicting proverbs – there were pictorial precedents for his work – but instead in his manner of deploying them².

The proverbs stand in definable relationships to each other, and it is this structure, this visual-syntax, which is the subject of this paper. Through an examination of Bruegel's painting and of analogous structures in verbal proverb collections contemporary with it, as well as a consideration of the sources from which these structures are derived, we can gain a new perspective on the functions proverbs served within the culture that collected and read them. The study which follows is a fragmentary reconstruction of the noetic context of these proverb collections, but the structures of thought which form that context have much broader ramifications for our understanding of sixteenth-century literature and art.

Bruegel was once seen as a proponent and an exponent of popular culture, as the representer and the representative of the indigenous Flemish peasant, "chosen by Nature from among the peasants to represent the peasants," as Carel van Mander introduces him³. By now this myth of the native and naive artist, the Boeren-Bruegel or Drolle Pieter engendered by Van Mander's biography and the subject matter of much of his art, has for the most part been laid to rest⁴. Historians of art now seek to discover insight into his art not in the fertile landscape of the Brabant countryside, but in the intellectual landscape of the humanists, the Neo-Stoicists, the secretive Family of Love, the arcane alchemists and hermeticists, the allegories of the rederijkers, in the company of Rabelais, Erasmus, Coornhert and Ortelius⁵. Nonetheless, Bruegel did concern himself predominantly with subjects drawn from contemporary life, frequently from what we term popular culture and would appear to have largely eschewed the then fashionable classicizing, Italianate style of artists such as Frans Floris or Maarten de Vos in favor of a deliberately 'vernacular' style of his own. In the *Netherlandish Proverbs* we are presented with a vast compendium of vernacular proverbs and popular expressions⁶. How do we reconcile the subject matter with the intellectual milieu Bruegel was known to have inhabited?

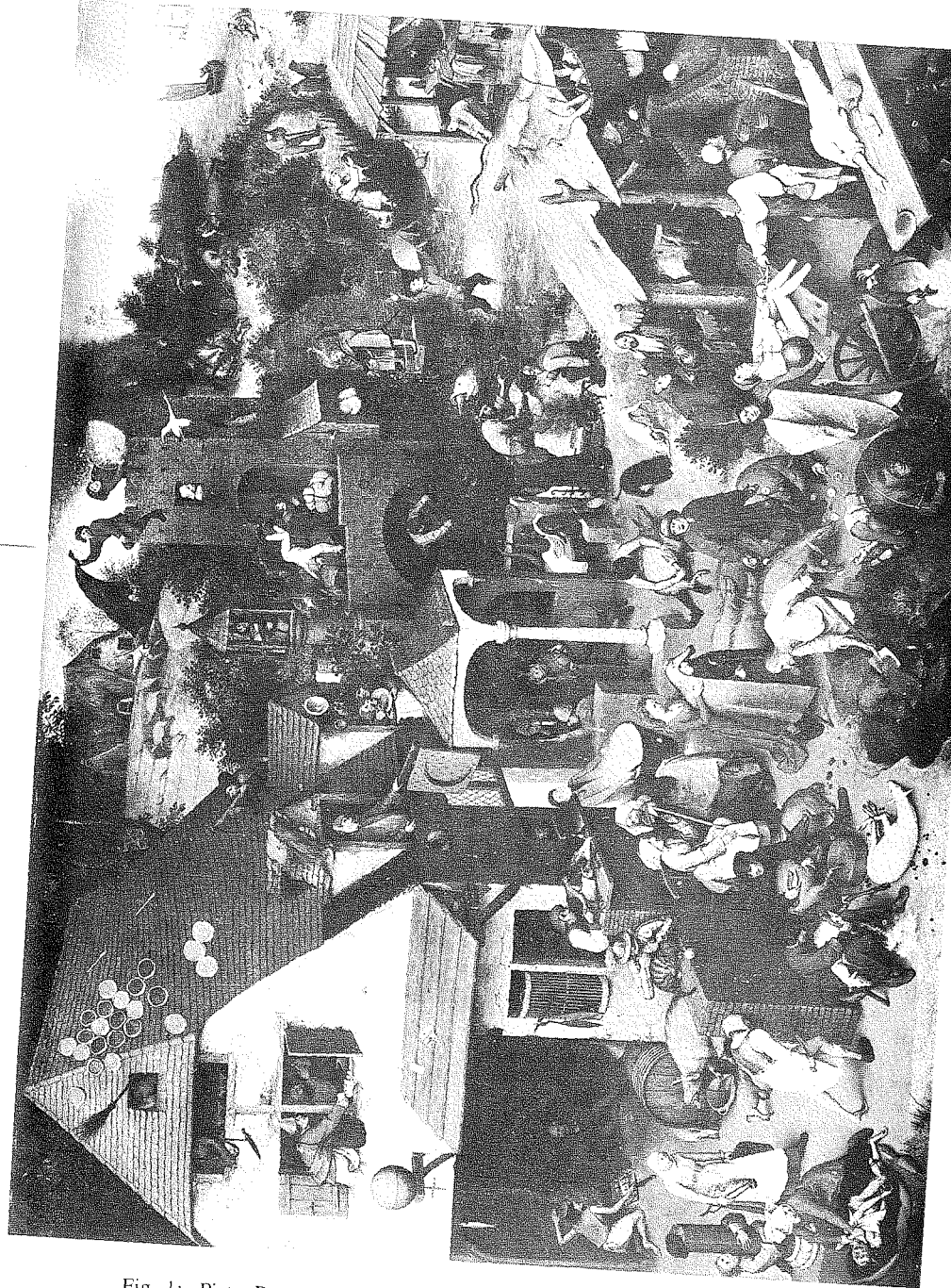


Fig. 1: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1559, oil on panel, Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie.

Historians and scholars of vernacular proverbs have tended to be preoccupied with examining their materials for insight into popular culture, with searching for the residues of daily life among those who left little written evidence of their concerns or attitudes. This goal is encumbered with a paradoxical handicap, however, in that the primary sources for these studies of what were in essence oral cultures must take the form of written, and, most particularly, printed collections. Increasingly, it has become apparent that we must examine these collections not as hazy and distorted windows onto the world of the common man, but within the urban and literate cultures in which and for which they were produced.

This is not to deny that proverbs are an intrinsic element in the oral cultures of almost all non-literate peoples, including the rural and lower class populations of early modern Europe, or that the materials we shall examine in this article – the proverb collections of the sixteenth-century Lowlands – can provide us with some form of access to contemporary Netherlandish popular culture. But we must acknowledge and examine the circumstances in which these collections were made: the identities and purposes of those who collected them, the audiences for which they were assembled, and most importantly, the functions they served and the structures of thought which underlie their organization.

~~Little work has been done in recent years in the study of sixteenth-century~~ Netherlandish proverb collections in general, and still less concerning their urban, literate cultural context. The monumental overview of the source material included by Suringar as part of the introduction to his *Erasmus over Nederlandsche spreekwoorden*, has never been superseded in the more than one hundred years since its publication⁷. The enormous collections by Harrebomée and Stoett are essential resources, but are inadequately referenced for scholarly purposes: sources and variants are all too often absent⁸. Kloeke has provided an invaluable service by publishing editions of two important proverb collections, and the prefaces to both of these are helpful for linguistic studies of proverbial materials, but do little for our understanding of context and reception⁹.

One of the most insightful recent studies on proverbs of the period is Natalie Zemon Davis' 'Proverbial Wisdom and Popular Errors'¹⁰. This essay provides a brief overview of the social implications of proverb collecting in France during the period in question here¹¹. An important point which Davis makes concerns the meanings of proverbs. Precisely because they are formulaic and metaphorical in their use of language, proverbs do not possess a single, unequivocal meaning. Any given proverb could be used in a variety of circumstances and ways, and could even be altered through substitution or reversal of terms to fit the situation at hand. This accords with recent anthropological studies of proverb usage¹².

Crucial to Davis' account is the recognition that neither the collectors nor the readers of these proverb collections were interested in an anthropologically accurate record of the common sayings of the common people. Davis still works from the assumption that proverbs belong primarily within the preserve of non-literate populations. Her essay considers middle and upper class interest in and use of

proverbs as appropriation, and posits that in taking these materials over a certain violence is done them in the form of distortion and 'correction'.

Davis notes that "lawyer, writer, artisan, and peasant in the sixteenth century all delighted in the *form* of the proverb – its generally balanced structure and its brevity."¹³ The very qualities which rendered the proverb so useful in an oral culture were exactly those which made it so appealing to the very literate, and specifically rhetorical, culture of burgher and humanist. As Walter Ong has noted, within an oral society any knowledge which is not mnemonically patterned effectively does not exist¹⁴. The concise and formulaic proverb is an ideal medium in which mentally to store the wealth of experience from daily life. For the rhetorically trained clerk or scholar, these sayings must have held the appeal of gems in the rough, examples of the natural rhetoric described in their editions of Cicero and Quintillian, linguistic equivalents to the natural architecture and design displayed by the seashells and other examples of natural artifice they also took such pleasure in collecting.

Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs

The *Netherlandish Proverbs*, now in Berlin, painted in oil on panel, is signed and dated 1559¹⁵. Characteristic of Bruegel's early multi-figured images, the horizon is set extremely high, opening up almost the entire surface of the painting as a stage on which deploy the countless figures. The height of the horizon line also allows the artist to tilt the ground plane up until it is nearly parallel to the surface of the painting, granting the viewer a bird's eye perspective from which to observe the complex scene spread below him. The painting is particularly close in format, style and subject matter to two other works, the *Carnival and Lent* of 1559 and the *Children's Games* of 1560¹⁶.

Bruegel the painter stood in an apparently close relationship to the Netherlandish practice of rhetoric. He is generally supposed to have belonged to the leading intellectual circle of Antwerp, whose members were humanists schooled in classical rhetoric. On the basis of an epitaph in Abraham Ortelius' *Album Amicorum*, Ortelius' possession of Bruegel's grisaille *Death of the Virgin* and letters written to Ortelius by the Spanish theologian Benedictus Arias Montanus, Dierick Volckertsz. Coornhert and the Italian Scipio Fabius, we may assume that Bruegel and Ortelius had a familiar relationship¹⁷. Although a similar relationship with Christopher Plantin is often referred to, no substantive evidence survives to confirm this, and Bruegel did not so far as we know ever work for Plantin¹⁸. Bruegel's putative teacher and father-in-law Pieter Coeck van Aelst was a publisher and a reputable translator, producing among other works Dutch, French and German translations of Sebastian Serlio's books on architecture. Bruegel was a member of the painter's guild, which had, since the 1480s, been completely incorporated with the leading vernacular chamber of rhetoric in Antwerp, the *rederijker* group called the *Violieren*. Sixteenth-century Netherlandish art criticism found its voice through rhetoric, with its conceptual vocabulary adopted from

rhetorical treatises and most of its practitioners members of vernacular rhetorical chambers, including Lucas d'Heere, Marcus van Vaernewijck and, slightly later, Carel van Mander.

The foreground of Bruegel's *Proverbs*, which fills almost the entire painting, is occupied by a schematic Flemish village, a representative assemblage of buildings which give order and measure to the landscape they fill. A lower-class hovel of wood and thatch is set at lower right, with an artisan's shed constructed of boards immediately above. The large building filling the left side of the painting is a tavern, built of wood and stucco, but with a curious stone addition with a marble pillar near the center of the painting, which from its material and the praying figures inside is suggestive of a chapel. A stone bridge connects the inn to a tower made of brick, whose crenellations suggest it to be the property of the landed nobility. The tower is the only part of that building still intact; the ruin of a brick wall with an arched doorway follows the stream which divides the landscape. Just above the ruined wall a farmhouse burns in the distance, while in the background to the left of the tower, a second, intact farm may be seen. In the extreme distance at the upper right a tiny church is depicted on the horizon, so small that it seems almost not to be a part of this painted world. Two devices for punishment, a pillory-post and a gibbet, complete this assemblage of civic structures.

The buildings present a range of types covering the diversity of contemporary social life. Included are buildings belonging to both rich and poor, belonging in both town and country. The artist has gone to considerable lengths to ensure that the distinctions drawn between the structures are clear, depending on size, design, and building materials. No type is repeated, as even the two farmhouses are distinguished by virtue that one is ablaze and the other is not. Not visible in even the best of reproductions, the textures of rough wood, crumbling stucco and smooth stone are quite apparent in the detailed brushwork of the painting itself. The strong contrast presented in the disrepair and good preservation of the two gabled windows in the tavern roof demonstrates that Bruegel wishes distinctions to be clear even at the smallest level of architectural structure.

The human figures which populate this townscape are as diverse as the buildings. Rich and poor, noble and peasant, clergy and laity all inhabit the image. Various professions and trades may be identified, including farmer, fisherman, baker, barber, soldier, sailor, merchant and mendicant¹⁹. Clearly, the painting is not uniformly peopled by members of the peasantry as has been suggested by some scholars²⁰.

Having briefly described the painting, I now find myself at a crossroads. Previous writers on the *Netherlandish Proverbs* have at this juncture chosen to catalogue the proverbs shown, quarreling over their precise count and tracking down obscure examples. Typically, this first involves numbering the proverbs so as to be able to match conveniently image to commentary. The numbering is overlaid on the painting in a systematic fashion, arbitrarily dividing the painting into bands of consecutively numbered proverbs²¹. This superimposition of numbering on the image has implications beyond those of simple convenience. It simultaneously

implies a commonality to the proverbs, an inclusiveness within a single overriding pattern or structure, and suggests that the distribution of proverbs across the picture surface is random and arbitrary. Related to this is the application by scholars of the term 'encyclopaedic' to the *Proverbs*, which carries with it suggestions of a body of knowledge assembled in an order determined not by inherent meaning, but by an externally and therefore arbitrarily imposed system such as alphabetization²².



Fig. 2: Detail of fig. 1

By including all the proverbs within a single, linear system, these authors predispose themselves to interpreting the proverbs in a similarly encompassing manner. Given that proverbs almost by definition involve startling and provocative turns of phrase, the images they evoke frequently present an absurd face to the viewer. This has led many scholars to cite the absurdity of the proverbs as a defining quality of the painting as a whole, and to select one or two of the hundred-odd proverbs shown as thematic statements under which all the others are to be subsumed – invariably citing the world-upside-down seen hanging from the wall of the inn, or the woman placing a blue cloak over her husband, a mark of cuckoldry and deceit²³. This painting, they would say, is a condemnation of man's folly. In the sixteenth century, however, the multivalency of proverbs was a quality recognized by writers as influential as Erasmus. Since a single proverb might be said to possess a hundred possible meanings and applications, it seems highly questionable to attempt to assign a single meaning to over a hundred proverbs²⁴.

Is there an alternative model to the encyclopædia for our understanding of the structure of this image which would allow us to retain the complexity of its material? Within the painting itself we can find evidence for quite another way of ordering the proverbs²⁵.

In the bottom right (fig. 2), we find the proverb "one must bend to make one's way through the world" illustrated by a poorly dressed man on hands and knees crawling into a large crossed orb, which stands for the world. Next to this figure we see a richly attired young dandy spinning a smaller worldly orb on his thumb. This proverb is clearly played off against the first, each gaining in impact from the juxtaposition. Both proverbs concern human stature in the world, respectively depicting humility and self-confidence. This pair, in turn, is itself played against another proverb found just above them. Here we see a monk "putting a flaxen beard on Christ," a proverb denoting false piety. Christ is shown with the crossed orb resting beneath his hand. While the verbal form of the proverb does not directly relate to the two others just mentioned, visually the presence of the orb with Christ alters our perception of the other two. Christ's dominion over the world, indicated by his hand authoritatively resting on the globe, differs in kind from the relationship to the world shown by the rich and poor men below.

The resonances which arise from the proximate juxtaposition of these proverbs are enhanced through Bruegel's ability to make explicit relational aspects which are only implicit in the verbal form of the proverbs. The poor man is shown crawling *through* a strangely permeable worldly orb which is larger than he is. The confident young nobleman, on the other hand, easily balances a much smaller version of the orb *on* his thumb. Christ's hand rests authoritatively *upon* the worldly orb, thereby demonstrating his dominion over the mundane sphere. The scale of the worldly orbs relative to the figures affects our response to the meanings they embody, and the physical relations further influence our attitudes towards these proverbs. The poor man engulfed by the orb effectively conveys the sense of his subservient attitude, while the jaunty pose of the rich man and the cavalier acrobatics with which he balances the orb on his thumb demonstrate his

control of his own situation. The precarious balance of the world on his thumb, however, contrasts with the stable position of the globe lodged between Christ's hand and knee.

Other proverbs involving the motif of the worldly orb further elaborate on these themes (fig. 3). On the left of the painting the orb again makes its appearance, this time suspended from the tavern wall. With the cross placed below the orb, it now represents "the world upside down," the reversal of the natural order of things. The other proverbs involving this motif established relationships between man and the world; this proverb suggests those relationships to be unstable. In a more earthy vein, the figure just above this orb questions the entire enterprise of being concerned with one's place in the world. Shown with his rear end sticking out of a window and his trousers undone, he "shits on the whole world," demonstrating his disdain for the world, or at least everyone else in it.

This man who "shits on the whole world" belongs to a second group, which stretches in an axis across the width of the painting. Moving our eyes to the right around the corner of the building, we see a man shown in a gable window of the tavern (fig. 3). He, too, has his trousers undone as he enacts the proverb "pissing at the moon," an impossible task²⁶. The excretory theme is continued further to the right with two figures shown in complete agreement, "two shitting through one hole" (fig. 5). One of these figures ensures that we have not missed another member of this group by pointing his finger out of a hole in the wall of the outhouse at a man who "wipes his hole on the door," showing his disdain for those inside. This theme is found yet again in the far distance at the upper right corner, where a man is seen who "shits on the gallows," a criminal demonstrating his contempt for the punishment he has managed to escape (fig. 6).

Returning to the two figures in the outhouse, we find them linked with at least two other clusters of proverbs. The results of their labors will land in the water, where they will be joined by the wasted riches of the man below the outhouse, who "throws his money in the water" (fig. 5). The actions of this spendthrift nobleman are similar to those of the well-dressed burgher or merchant, who "casts roses before swine," a vernacular variant of the Biblical casting of pearls before swine (fig. 2)²⁷. While also illustrating wastefulness, this proverb shifts the focus from the purely monetary to the more general squandering of making offerings to those incapable of appreciating their true worth, whether financial, intellectual or moral. Throwing things away can also be productive, as with the fisherman on the closer bank of the stream, who "throws out a haddock to catch a cod," prudently investing in the hopes of later netting larger profits (fig. 5).

The two-in-one structure of the proverb shown in the outhouse links it with yet another set of proverbs. On the roof over their heads someone "kills two flies with one blow." Back to the left, in the other gabled window of the tavern we see "two heads in one cap," another reference to complete agreement, but one depicted here with the other end of the anatomy (fig. 4). There is a particular irony to this representation, in that one head is shown smiling while the other frowns. Two individuals need not always be compatible, as the proverb "two dogs with

one bone seldom come to terms” indicates (fig. 2). Indeed, this same structure serves in another proverb to demonstrate that what a single individual says is not always compatible, which is the connotation of “he speaks with two mouths,” illustrated by the grotesque face peering from the darkened side-window of the tavern (fig. 4).

With over a hundred proverbs at my disposal, I could continue this recital almost endlessly. I have not followed the few paths I have mentioned to their ends, nor attempted to explore the resonances established by each set of proverbs, nor pursued the many forks offered along the way. We have examined clusters of proverbs which stretch across the surface of the image, but have seen others which are localized in a particular area. Each of the proverbs discussed belongs within one set or another, and some examples participate simultaneously in several sets.

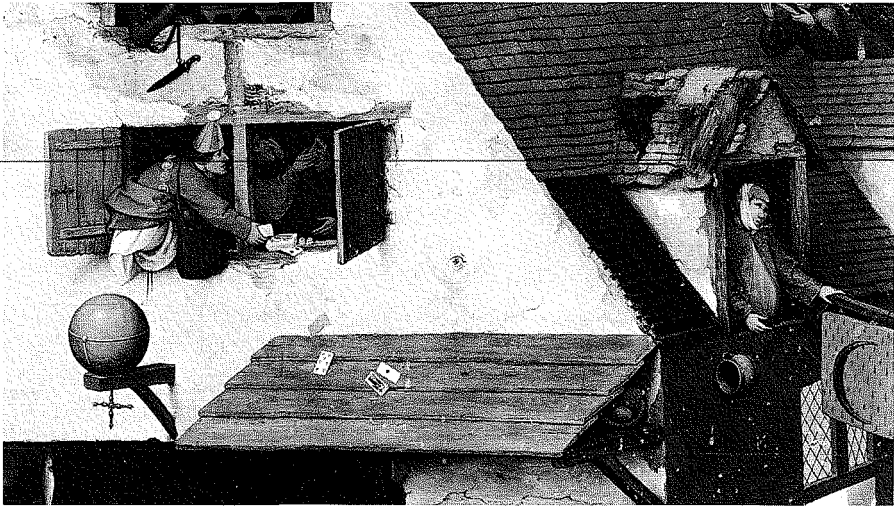


Fig. 3: Detail of fig. 1

In order for the proverb clusters to be evident and accessible to the viewer, Bruegel had to structure his composition so that they may easily be found. The importance of the buildings becomes evident here. The care which Bruegel took to distinguish each building from the others should remind us of the instructions given in classical rhetorical treatises for the training of the memory: a series of places should be chosen, preferably architectural in nature, and as distinct from each other as possible. In these rooms or buildings, the orator is to place striking figures bearing significant emblems or objects to represent the ideas he wishes to recall. When required, these may be retrieved by mentally walking through the series of rooms and observing the figures and objects contained within them.

We might think of Bruegel’s buildings as such places, carefully distinguished from one another, and there can be no question but that they are filled with very

striking figures. The extreme fluidity of the proverb clusters is thereby in part counterbalanced by the specificity of location and the exigencies of pictorial composition, which offer the viewer certain paths from place to place and proverb to proverb, albeit not compelling him to follow any given route in particular²⁸. The adages are not randomly or arbitrarily scattered across the pictorial field; they stand in definite relations both to their sites and to their neighbors. While I do not mean to suggest that Bruegel's painting is a memory palace, I do intend to draw attention to the manner in which we are required to navigate from place to place, the way in which we tend to identify the proverbs we find by their location²⁹.

The Structure of Proverb Collections and Erasmus' Notebook

How might a contemporary have understood this manner of structuring the painting? From what we know of the printed collections of proverbs that began appearing in the Lowlands from around 1480, such assemblages as Bruegel's *Proverbs* were made more with an eye towards gathering materials for later use than as ends in themselves. The collection *Gemeene Duytsche Spreckwoorden* (Common Netherlandish Proverbs), printed in 1550, notes on its title page that the proverbs contained within its covers are not only "very pleasant to read" but "profitable to know for all those who would learn to speak and write wisely". In a similar vein, the brief foreword to the reader describes "how beneficial and useful are common proverbs, and how purely they ornament and embellish a discourse"³⁰.

This collection contains over 2600 proverbs, which are neither indexed nor listed alphabetically. How does the reader who wishes to avail himself of these "beneficial and useful" materials seek out those appropriate to his needs? A careful examination reveals a structure underlying the collection, an ordering principle under which the proverbs are arranged into meaningful patterns. In some places this means that a particular word is shared in common by a set of proverbs, as in the opening group which all make reference to God, but more frequently the proverbs cluster around concepts or themes without necessarily sharing vocabulary. One section of the book has numerous proverbs which involve animals, another various colors. Elsewhere one finds sets of proverbs discussing trust, hunger, seasons, appearances, false appearances, faith, truth and so forth.

The reader of the book, someone looking for material with which to "embellish" a speech, must still browse through the collection, but can do so reasonably quickly by keeping an eye peeled for key words. While there is some continuity between categories when one theme is followed by its opposite, there is no consistent pattern followed for any length of time. Indeed, to call the groupings categories may itself be misleading, as the sets are generally of ten or fewer proverbs. We might instead think of the structure as one of clustering, with related proverbs coalescing on the page in a relatively unsystematic fashion³¹.

Yet, I think it would be a mistake to imagine that Bruegel is mechanically imitating such proverb collections as the *Gemeene Duytsche Spreckwoorden*. In-

stead we should see both of these as manifestations of a mode of thought which is an outgrowth of a rhetorical education.

Towards the end of his rhetorical treatise, *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum commentarii duo*³², Erasmus describes for the reader a system for collecting and organizing illustrative material to be used in creating and ornamenting orations, essays or sermons. Having first enjoined his reader to resolve to read the entirety of classical literature at least once, Erasmus recommends the creation of a notebook in which to store the gleanings of this Herculean task. The notebook is to be divided under headings and sub-headings which cumulatively encompass the whole of human experience, as for example the virtues and vices, since everything which pertains to the human condition is the natural domain of the orator.

Having thus arranged his headings, the reader is then set to begin transferring material from his reading into the appropriate places in the notebook. As each particularly striking or pithy citation is encountered the reader transposes it from its original home into the ordered context of the notebook. Assuming that a particularly diligent reader was able to complete the huge task this entails, the resulting notebook would represent a systematic rearrangement of what was arguably, for Erasmus, the sum total of human knowledge.

Thus, the method becomes not merely a handy way to pepper your essays with erudite citations, but actually a model for thought, for experiencing the world and ordering and retaining those experiences for later use. For a practitioner of this method, one must imagine that it would become second nature to pigeonhole every event, every overheard idiom, into the appropriate category. The final result would be a system of thought in which the world itself would be seen as constructed according to these divisions.

If we now try to imagine what a page from this notebook would look like, a significant quality emerges. Our page, perhaps with the heading noted at top, would be filled with a series of quotations culled from diverse sources. Variations would be present in style and tone, as also in the sentiments expressed. Some quotations will appear in apposition to each other, others in opposition. As the reader peruses the page, individual citations, removed from their original contexts, begin to interact with each other. The significance of any given statement is affected by those sharing the space of the page.

We should remember that the entries came to occupy their place on the same sheet by virtue of their aptness to the given theme, rather than the specific sentiment they express. The headings were determined in advance of both the reading project from which the citations were drawn and the final orations to which they are intended. The juxtapositions created by the presence of the quotations together on the page suggest certain affinities and disparities to the reader, which ultimately modify and complicate the reader's understanding of the thematic heading. If we again consider the notebook as a whole, remembering both that it is divided into headings which encompass all of human affairs, and that in theory it is an abbreviated version of all of human learning, the notebook must be seen as containing all possible orations. It is in itself not a statement, but is the potential for

all statements. The notebook is a storehouse in which intellectual riches are to be gathered in prudent anticipation of future need.

The placing of the gathered material has a distinctly spatial, and thus visual, character. Each heading is a place, a pigeon hole, to which ideas are brought from their original locations. The spatial aspects of the notebook create the possibilities for resonances between citations and establish the pre-conditions for utilizing the book in generating orations. The notebook is a physical manifestation of the rhetorical loci – the places of memory where one’s mind is sent to retrieve thoughts and phrases; the places of invention through which one’s mind is sent in search of arguments³³.

The History of the Notebook System

Erasmus, though he was one of its most influential proponents, was not the inventor of the notebook system, and it is worth making a brief excursion to examine the history and implications of this educational tool and mnemonic device. The simple amassing of written notes from one’s reading is in itself no startling innovation. The humanists who transformed this commonplace practice were fond of citing classical precedents for it, thereby neatly making use of the technique in the very act of granting it authority³⁴. Since ancient Greece and, to a nominally lesser extent, Rome were fundamentally oral/aural cultures the evidence for the habit of making written notes is scarce, and one must take the development of artificial memory systems as evidence that the use of written compilations of material was the exception rather than the norm.

This is less true for the Middle Ages. As Ong has suggested, the obligation of preachers to address in their sermons recurring patterns and problems of human morality must have resulted in a corresponding pressure to establish stable texts and readily available supplies of exempla – the stories, anecdotes, parables and proverbs used to enrich and enliven sermons – and thus to be disposed towards fixing their sermons in written form and to assembling florilegia under the commonplaces of virtue and vice which were their stock in trade³⁵. The close bonds between religious and secular humanism in Northern Europe provided a means by which the precedence of this practice could have been made available to the scholars and educational reformers of more immediate importance to us here.

Since our concern is the elucidation of habits of mind which underlay the structuring of collections such as Bruegel’s *Netherlandish Proverbs* or the *Ge-meene Duytsche Spreckwoorden* and the recognition of that structure by a contemporary audience, we must examine by what means these practices gained a wider cultural dissemination. Primarily, this will be seen to result from a specific series of texts oriented towards educational reform, produced by a set of authors who cumulatively represent a who’s who of humanism and pedagogical philosophy in Northern Europe: Rudolph Agricola, Erasmus, Johann Sturm, Philipp Melanchthon, and Juan Luis Vives³⁶. In this examination we will be occupied with the codifying of a very specific technique and with the tracing of a distinct

intellectual lineage whereby that technique was passed on from generation to generation of teachers and students.

The use of notebooks as an adjunct to rhetorical practice and an aid to education apparently first arose in the classrooms of Leonardo Bruni and Guarino Guarini³⁷. This should be seen as a direct outgrowth of the philological emphasis of early Humanism. The problems of assimilating the connotative complexity of classical Latin required the compilation of vast collections of apposite material from which the student or scholar could acquire some sense of the elusive and allusive use of language in classical literature³⁸. The acquisition of fluency in comprehension was not the final goal for the student. Instead, the ultimate aim was to participate in the re-production of knowledge, by writing and speaking proper, orderly Latin, by both imitating the ancients in grammar and style and citing verbatim their more striking thoughts. Innovation and novelty were not the favored virtues of scholarship in this period; imitative fluency and skill in weaving together authoritative citations were of much greater import.

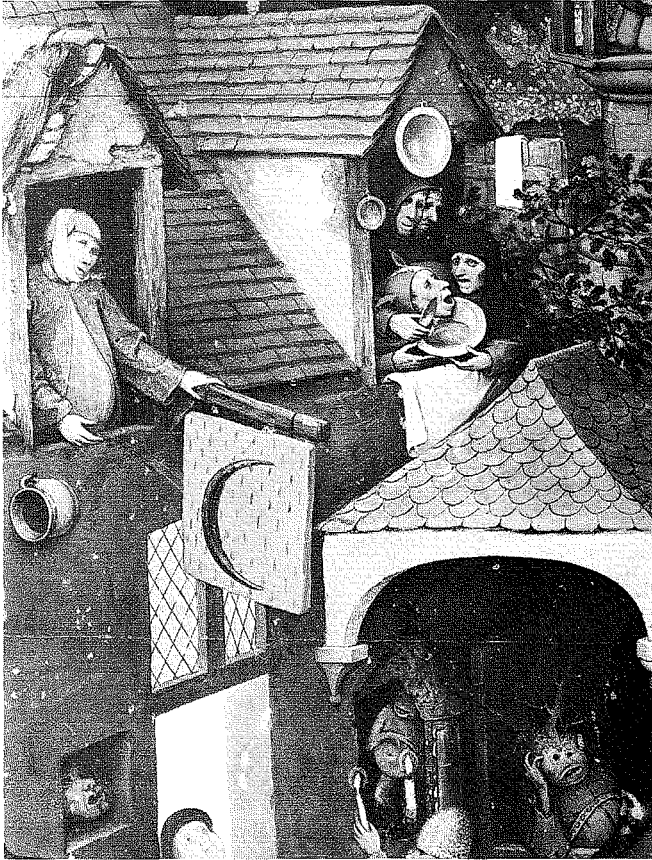


Fig. 4: Detail of fig. 1

This is made more explicit in the 1459 educational epistle of Guarino's son, student and successor Battista, *De modo et ordine docendi et discendi*, which sets out in concrete form the teaching practices of his father. As the literary historian R.R. Bolgar describes it, "Reading was always analytical. The matter which needed to be collected was divided into two parts, *Methodice* and *Historice*, the former containing rhetorical forms and idioms, the latter general information. Each had a notebook allotted to it and as he read, the student jotted down the details that seized his attention"³⁹. The first notebook was concerned with technical mastery of Latin, with how the language was to be used, and the second with assembling examples of classical wisdom, with what the language was to be used to say. This division corresponds to the distinction made between *verba* and *res* in classical rhetoric, between words and subject matter, a distinction which is here pedagogical in function and which will also determine the bipartite form evident in the title of Erasmus' *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum commentarii duo*.

Guarino's advocacy of the notebook as a study guide is limited in its practicality, at least in the extremely simple form indicated in his and his son's letters. As has been indicated previously⁴⁰, it would require only a very brief period of use before the quantity of material compiled would become too cumbersome to work with. After years of excerpting citations, the difficulty of locating a specific reference, or even any reference apposite to whatever issue is at hand, would render the notebook essentially useless. The single division into collections dedicated separately to usage and content is not enough to render the method practical on a widespread basis, despite the injunction to "list the materials you have assembled"⁴¹.

The credit for elaborating the system into one of far greater practicality, which subsequently was to prove enormously influential in a variety of contexts, lies with a Northerner, the Frisian humanist Rudolph Agricola. Agricola served as an intellectual conduit from south to north, studying in Italy with Battista Guarino, spending some years attached to the court of Ferrara as a scholar and musician, and then returning to Northern Europe, where he travelled from city to city, writing extensively, corresponding with colleagues throughout Europe, and teaching, although he was seldom content to stay in any one position for long⁴².

Though Agricola is more widely known for his dialectical treatise, *De inventione dialectica*, in which he laid the groundwork for the synthesis of dialectic and rhetoric, and for the introduction of topical invention as a noetic model, we are primarily concerned here with a letter outlining an educational program, sent in 1484 to a young friend, the Antwerp organist Jacob Barbireau⁴³. Once published, posthumously as with all of Agricola's writings, the letter became widely known as *De formando studio*⁴⁴.

Agricola proposes towards the end of his letter that there are two goals attendant to the program of learning he has just outlined: to have what we learn easily accessible, and to be able to use that knowledge productively in speaking or writing about whatever subject is required. Agricola foresees his student discov-

ering material in his reading, in the form of short narratives such as the death of Lucretia, or sententiæ from classical authors such as Virgil, which he will later wish to deploy in his own writing. To this end, Agricola envisions a collection which is ordered beneath headings, termed *capita* in the Latin. As examples he cites a series of oppositional pairs: “virtue, vice, life, death, wisdom, ignorance, sympathy, aversion and suchlike concepts”. He leaves the choice of headings up to the student, but specifically enjoins him that they should be “applicable to all possible subjects and as it were generally valid”. Nowhere is a physical notebook directly adverted to, and it is possible that Agricola has these headings in mind, literally, as thematic groupings for the memory⁴⁵, but the use of the term ‘capita’ does suggest a written repository. Rhetoric was now unquestionably the domain of the written word⁴⁶.

Clearly, Agricola’s formulation has distinct advantages over the basic method-ici/historici division of Guarino. By establishing a series of oppositional pairs of headings, which cumulatively are “applicable to all possible subjects and as it were generally valid,” Agricola creates a framework which is both more flexible and more specific, and which therefore is more suitable in practical terms to serve as a repository for the materials acquired. The headings serve as an ordering principal and as mnemonic aids, allowing the scholar to retrieve material as needed from its place of storage. The pairing of the headings sets in place a rudimentary second level of ordering, one which will lead eventually to the attempts by Peter Ramus and his followers to structure all of human knowledge into bracketed charts of paired terms.⁴⁷ The version of the notebook system offered in Erasmus’ *De copia* represents an intermediate step along this path, with the dyadic headings of Agricola vestigially retained, but the headings themselves further divided into sub-headings of striking particularity.

Like Erasmus, Agricola was a cleric. He was the natural son of an abbot, who combined his religious training with his intellectual interest in classical learning to form what has been termed the Christian Humanism of northern Europe. Bolgar has suggested that Agricola took up the idea for this system of headings under which material could be organized and located from medieval preaching techniques, citing the *Summa predicantium* of John of Bromyard as an exemplary collection, comparable to Erasmus’ *Adages*⁴⁸. This accords with both the religious background of Agricola and with the practical aims of the notebook. Agricola carefully stresses that the purpose of gathering material, indeed of learning altogether, is the re-production of knowledge. Just as the mediæval preacher required a handy source of material for sermons, the renaissance scholar required a conveniently accessible repository for the authoritative minutiae garnered from his reading, to be available as needed for his own writings.

Like the Guarinos, Agricola was interested in the acquisition of proper usage, recommending his pupil to carefully compare terms and to note how they are deployed, and also like the Guarinos, he intended his program for the education of a single, elite scholar. The scope of his program, and its technical practicality, though, gave it a broad appeal to the generations of northern Humanists whose

goals included the establishment of Humanism as the basis for general public education. For them, Agricola was to become the founding father, if not the patron saint, of scholarship, of proper Latin usage, of educational reform⁴⁹. *De formando studio* was published in five editions of the collected works of Agricola, and almost forty separate editions between the years 1508 and 1579⁵⁰. We frequently find bound together with Agricola's text an excerpted edition of precisely that section of Erasmus' *De copia* which explicates the method for collecting illustrative material, the notebook system, usually titled *Ratio colligendi exempla*, thereby providing evidence that the section of Agricola's text outlining his version of the system of collection was accorded particular significance by scholars in the sixteenth century.

Through the dispersion of Agricola's letter, abetted by the tremendous esteem in which he was held as a Latinist, a scholar and a pedagogue, the notebook system found a place in the writings of every major educational reformer north of the Alps in the sixteenth century. We have already noted the treatment it was given in Erasmus' *De copia*. Similar expositions of the technique are to be found among the pedagogical writings of Juan Luis Vives, Johann Sturm, Roger Ascham and Philipp Melanchthon⁵¹. Among these men, Humanism was established as a basis for public education, no longer the preserve of the individually tutored elite as it was in Italy.

Melanchthon was almost certainly the agent through which the notebook system became a model for structuring proverb collections. In 1529-1530 a German schoolmaster named Johannes Agricola of Eisleben, no relation to the Frisian humanist Rudolph Agricola, published two volumes of German proverbs containing in total 750 proverbs. He explicitly states that he is emulating Erasmus, who provided the world with an access to Classical adages and classical learning. Agricola proposes to do the same with German vernacular proverbs⁵². Agricola was a theology student at Wittenberg in 1517 under Martin Luther, serving as the German religious reformer's 'famulus' and later as his secretary at the Leipzig disputation. He received his baccalaureate in 1520 together with Melanchthon and subsequently joined the university faculty. By 1524 he was a dean of the university. Shortly thereafter, however, he left Wittenberg to return to his home town of Eisleben, also Luther's place of birth, and there founded a Latin school based on the pedagogical program established by Melanchthon.⁵³ The two proverb collections were published five years after he took the post in Eisleben and must be seen as connected to his activities as a teacher.

Agricola's are the first proverbs published entirely in the vernacular: they are not translations of or equivalents to Latin proverbs, nor are Latin translations appended to them. Agricola is the first scholar to provide explanations and essays to vernacular proverbs in emulation of what Erasmus had done with classical adages. In so doing, he was apparently the only author of a proverb collection in the sixteenth century to use his collection for polemical purposes, for which act he received considerable criticism, albeit not from the Catholic opponents of the Reformation, but from members of the Reformation, including Luther himself⁵⁴.

In the preface to his collection, Agricola includes a section entitled 'Warzu die sprichwortter dienen'. He lists numerous examples from ancient history – the Jews, the 'Heathens', the Greeks and Romans, ancient Germans – where laws and rules of society are preserved "in few words so that one may easily remember



Fig. 5: Detail of fig. 1

them". He extends the metaphor to coins: gold coins may be few but are worth much; one may have lots of counterfeit money, but it is worth nothing. He wishes his readers to see proverbs in this context, as condensed moral and even legal exempla which use few words but say much. This is surprisingly close to our modern notion of proverbial lore: a means of preserving for future generations the corporate knowledge of an oral society, where brevity and linguistic patterning such as rhymes and formulaic construction serve as mnemonic aids. Agricola, like Erasmus, stresses the formal qualities of proverbs, especially brevity. This same brevity, however, is what necessitates the explanatory lines which are appended to each proverb. Like Erasmus, Agricola sees the proverbs as dark, requiring the light of scholarship to reveal their true meanings. Proverbs are treated as figures of speech, to be used and appreciated not just for what they say, but also for how they say it.

The ordering principal already mentioned in relation to the *Gemeene Duytsche Spreckwoorden* discussed above originates in Agricola's collection. As Kloeke demonstrated, the compiler of the *Gemeene Duytsche Spreckwoorden* used Agricola's collection as the basis of his own, taking over almost all of Agricola's proverbs in largely the same sequence. These have been augmented by a considerable number of additional proverbs, almost quadrupling the number treated by Agricola⁵⁵. The new proverbs, some of which may have been derived from the late fifteenth-century collection, the *Proverbia communia*⁵⁶, are for the most part interpolated with the original clustering of proverbs provided by Agricola. Significantly, the clustering of the proverbs continues at the end of the volume, after Agricola's examples have been exhausted.

The interest in vernacular proverbs demonstrated by the frequent publication of proverb collections during the sixteenth century stems from several roots. Proverbs were taken up as a basic material to be used in educating pupils in Latin. The earliest printed collections we have, including the Deventer *Proverbia communia*, first published in 1480 and probably compiled shortly before that date, and the 1518 *Pappa puerorum* of Murmellius, were created to serve as aids in the introductory Latin classes. Proverbs were dictated to the pupils, who translated from the vernacular to Latin, or vice versa. The introduction of children to Latin through the use of familiar sayings had much to recommend it. Proverbs, even in the vernacular, were recognized as possessing wit and formal grace, and had the added benefit of being by definition brief. Proverbs were also sources of knowledge and moral authority, serving as formulas to make judgments when doubts arose concerning actions or behavior. Used in this capacity, proverbs simultaneously helped to instill a knowledge of Latin, provided a model for style, established a basis for understanding the dialectical or rhetorical use of language and had the added benefit of helping to shape the moral fabric of the students' minds⁵⁷.

Education in northern Europe was fundamentally grounded in the study of classical Latin, which is as much as to say in the study of rhetoric⁵⁸. The model of language conveyed to the students included an awareness of style and struc-

ture, a taste for construing arguments through citation and a respect for the authority encapsulated in well-known thoughts and phrases. The constant references in proverb collections to the brevity and wit of their materials, to their utility in ornamenting discourse, to the importance of fully understanding their 'dark' meanings, the sense underlying the images they invoke, all point to proverbs, even in the vernacular, being admired and collected for their intrinsic rhetorical force. Ubiquitous elements of the basic stages of education, proverbs were presented as one of the fundamental tools in the repertoire of linguistic forms.

The literature of the sixteenth century has been described as mosaic- or tapestry-like, referring to the scintillating patterns of quotation, the complex interweaving of citations which form its basic fabric⁵⁹. The writing we most admire from the period, be it that of Shakespeare, Rabelais or Montaigne, does not take originality and innovation to be its most prized quality. Instead, the virtues of the time are the skill and ingenuity of the authors in fitting together materials from diverse sources; the facility with which a narrative, a thought or a word is amplified into ever more complex patterns; the display of artifice in juxtaposing words and phrases, structures and tropes. The notebook system we have considered was developed to assist in the production of such literature, and the proverb collections of Bruegel or the anonymous compiler of the *Gemeene Duytsche Spreekwoorden* are but two of the innumerable compendia created within this context.

The Location of Knowledge in Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs

By now, I hope that the similarities in structure between Bruegel's painting and Erasmus' notebook will have become apparent⁶⁰. The *Proverbs* may be seen as analogous to a page from the notebook on the following three bases: first, the similarities of the materials involved – indeed, proverbs are among the materials Erasmus recommends collecting; second, the manner in which Bruegel has used the spatial aspects of pictorial composition to group proverbs associated by theme or motif; and third, the degree to which the painting as a whole is resistant to an encompassing definition of meaning, its apparent lack of a message.

Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* is not a page from Erasmus' notebook, however, nor is it a memory palace, nor even the pictorial equivalent to a book of collected proverbs. In common with these things, it possesses an organizational structure which groups subject matter into thematically related clusters, while refraining from any insistence on an overarching uniformity to the set as a whole. But Bruegel has used the truly visual nature of his medium, of painting, to explore possibilities of association and resonance unavailable to these other models of collecting. The simultaneously available field of the image allows Bruegel to situate individual adages within several proverb clusters at the same time, thereby multiplying the resonances which each juxtaposition awakens and revealing the implicit multivalency of each proverb.

Bruegel is able to suggest relationships which are not even implicit in the original form of the proverbs by creating visual analogies, visual puns. We saw

an example of this in the use of the crossed-orb motif (fig. 2). The worldliness of the two figures in the foreground is played against the unworldliness of the figure of Christ. His presence is coincidental to the other two adages, yet it allows the artist to complicate our reaction to their juxtaposition. Bruegel provides us with certain markers to help us navigate through the clusters: the rich dandy with the world on his thumb points out his less fortunate companion who crawls through life. His other hand gestures towards the proverb “to put a stick in the wheel,” to hinder one’s progress. The size and shape of the wheel matches the worldly orb the poor man crawls into; the incapacitating stick is analogous to the brace which marks the man’s leg as lame.

Bruegel has partially activated the material which, in the storehouses of notebook, memory palace or proverb collection lies relatively dormant. He draws attention to certain affinities and disparities in his material; he lays out signposts for various paths we may choose to follow through the image. By showing his figures singlemindedly performing their bizarre actions in a social world, he has begun the process of resituating the proverbs back into the world of experience from which they had been abstracted in the first place.

The viewers of the *Netherlandish Proverbs* are presented with an entire world to explore. We may select a proverb and use that as a starting point for a journey through an endless labyrinth, through a “garden of forking paths”. We are presented with a tangled skein of associations spread across the surface of the image, waiting for us to discover and unravel them.

In the furthest distance in the image find a cluster of proverbs concerned with the relation of looking to knowing, an apt category for this way of looking at the painting (fig. 6). Like the man in the boat, we should “keep our eye on the sail” and be alert so as not to miss anything. We should know, as the perplexed man seated beside them evidently does not, that “for this reason or that, the geese walk barefoot,” that there is a good explanation for everything. Given the intricacies of Bruegel’s syntactical web of proverbs, we should take comfort in the knowledge that “there is nothing spun so fine that the sun does not show it,” that nothing remains hidden forever. And lastly, as a warning against academic hubris, we might well heed the message of the proverb I have chosen to end with: “if the blind lead the blind, they will end up in the ditch.” I hope I haven’t led you astray.

This article began by making a contrast between examining Netherlandish proverb collections, whether written or visual, within a folkloristic and a humanist context. I would like to end by blurring that distinction.

The habits of mind which I have argued underlie the organizational structures of Bruegel’s *Netherlandish Proverbs* and the proverb collections of Johannes Agricola and the unknown compiler of the *Gemeene Duytsche Spreckwoorden*, are an intrinsic part of the northern humanist pre-occupation with copiousness, with *copia*. The ideal of copiousness was the unrestricted and abundant flow of words, a woven fabric of words and ideas. But this fabric was not a seamless

one. Writers, poets, philosophers and theologians drew upon a vast repertoire of established verbiage: the classical authors of Greece and Rome; the Church Fathers; the immense lore of commentators. From these sources they extracted aphorisms, sententiæ, apothegms, epithets, parables, exempla, proverbs, and so forth, and then reordered, rephrased and reweave them into scintillating new patterns.

Within this humanist world, the form of language was as important as the content; or perhaps more accurately, the form of language was seen as inextricable from the content. Artifice was indistinguishable from art. Proverbs by their very nature belonged within this world. In proverbs form and function were fused; the patterning which ensured their survival within an oral culture conformed to the expectations of the rhetorically trained authors of humanism. They were elegantly balanced, they possessed moral weight, they represented the authority of venerable lineage.

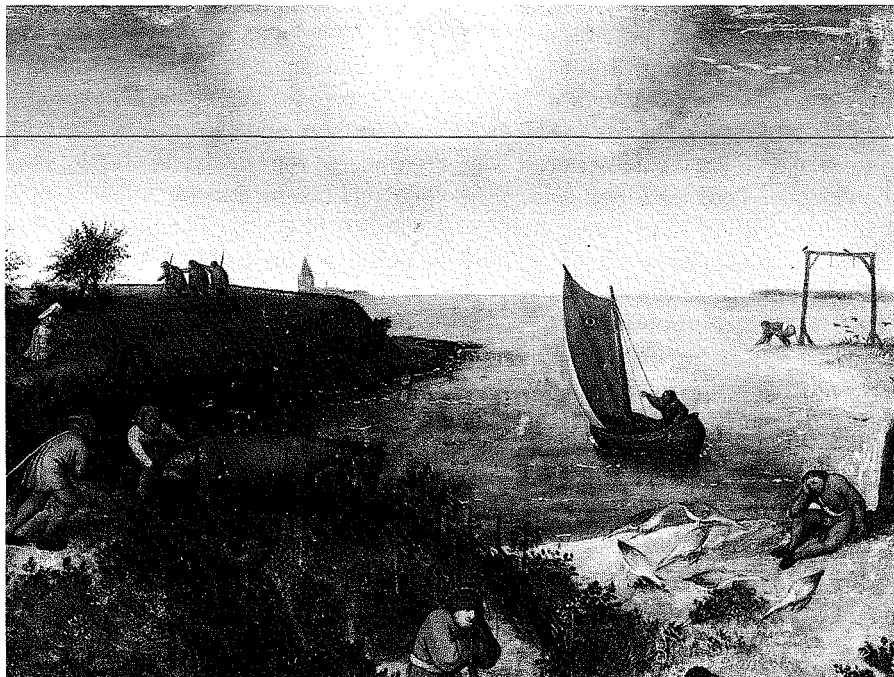


Fig. 6: Detail of fig. 1

We must not forget that Renaissance rhetoric was itself a curious hybrid of oral and literate cultures. The art of rhetoric developed within the primarily oral-aural noetic economy of ancient Greece and Rome. The recuperation of rhetoric in the Renaissance was, however, almost entirely dependent on texts and almost exclusively directed towards the production of written, not oral, discourse. The rhetorical loci originally served to ensure the smooth flow of discourse and argu-

ment: the places of invention for the discovery and ordering of oral argumentation; the places of memory to ensure the accurate and orderly recovery of these arguments in oral delivery. They retained these functions within the economy of the written word in the Renaissance, where authors had to contend with the Herculean task of referencing and cross-referencing enormous bodies of apposite material. The appropriation of stock phrases or formulas, the weaving together of diverse threads of discourse, the stress on an unending flow of language all stem from this base in spoken language. For the humanist, literate culture of the sixteenth-century Lowlands to display such interest in proverbs, even vernacular proverbs, is entirely consistent with this background. The clerks and scholars of the time, through their rhetorical education, conceived of language in much the same way as their illiterate, uneducated landmen.

We should be careful to note, however, that there are some important shifts in the noetic world already evident at this point. A poet or an orator in a truly oral culture repeats and rewords statements, phrases or ideas to allow his audience as much opportunity as possible to catch what is being said. Copiousness is a requisite quality: if your listener failed to hear or understand what you said the first time, he will the second or third; he cannot go back to reexamine the text, because there is no text. The words vanish as they are spoken. This clearly is not so with a written text. Any word or phrase may be pondered repeatedly, any source may be verified. Thus repetition, and particularly rephrasing, acquire a new significance. To say the same thing in different words is now effectively to say something different. The proximity of citations in the notebook or proverbs in Bruegel's painting changes and expands the ramifications of any given item, rather than merely reconfirms them.

The basic informational problem which all cultures face is one of storage and retrieval. How does a society retain the body of knowledge acquired through experience of the world and pass it on from generation to generation? Walter Ong has described three stages in the history of the word: oral-aural, chirographic-typographic (alphabet and print), and the modern electronic age⁶¹. The period we have been examining is one of transition, the time when the old oral-aural economy of language gave way to the economy of the written word under the relentless pressure of the typographic revolution. Eventually, the full potential of printed texts would make itself evident, and we would acquire the literary apparatus with which we are all now familiar: tables of contents, bibliographies, lists of maps and illustrations, and indices. But even as these innovations were beginning to be exploited, the residue of older ways of thinking continued to survive and to leave their marks on the literature and art of this period. We must recognize the structures which result in order to understand fully the richness and complexity which this art has to offer us.

We still retain many of the habits of mind described above. We think of information as spatially located, *in* books, *in* words or even *in* our minds. The indices we consult when looking for a particular piece of information are guides to the *places* where that data is located. The notes at the end of this paper refer you to

the sources, the places, where I gathered my material or where you may find additional information. This article is itself a mosaic of thoughts, phrases, citations.

We, too, are in an era of transition, as the now fundamentally typographic world of ideas gives way to the electronic age of computers, chips and cd-roms. The way we conceive of the world, the very way we think is conditioned by the means we employ for gathering, storing and retrieving knowledge, and these are changing. We must assume that our literature, our scholarship, our art will be transformed as well.

Summary

On the Structure of Knowledge in Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* of 1559 is a compendium of over 110 representations of vernacular adages. Usually considered to be an example of Bruegel's identification with or condemnation of the popular culture of his day, the painting is instead considered primarily as a collection, with particular attention paid to the structure Bruegel has given this vast array of proverbs. Bruegel has grouped the individual components of the painting into clusters, playing proverb against proverb in a variety of ways and contexts. The physical proximity of certain proverbs of thematic similarity creates resonances by which each given proverb modifies the meaning of its neighbors. The relationships are loose, with some proximate proverbs falling outside the theme set by their neighbors, and other proverbs belonging to several different sets simultaneously. What we are left with is a tangled skein of associations which spreads across the surface of the image, waiting to be discovered and unravelled by the viewer.

This type of spatial structuring is not unique to Bruegel, nor even to the visual arts. Printed collections of proverbs display a similar spatial ordering of their contents, using neither alphabetization nor indexing, but instead grouping the proverbs around shared words or themes.

Both Bruegel's painting and these other collections must be seen as manifestations of a broader intellectual tradition which conceived of knowledge spatially, assembling information into ordered treasuries to be drawn upon when treating any possible theme. The most compelling model for this is offered by Erasmus in his rhetorical treatise, *De copia*, where he proposes a method for assembling and ordering illustrative material to be used in enriching any oration the scholar may be planning. Called the 'notebook system' for the thematically subdivided notebook in which the material is stored, this technique provides us with a model for the collecting and structuring of information that is much closer in nature to Bruegel's composition than the usual analogy of the encyclopædia.

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1. The most convenient reference for the Dutch wording of these proverbs is Jan Grauls, *Volkstaal en volksleven in het werk van Pieter Bruegel* (Antwerpen/Amsterdam 1957). The original sources provide several variants of each proverb, sometimes within a single collection. These can differ in tense, mood, gender and number, as well as in the overall sentiment by substitution or addition of terms, reversal of terms or inclusion of a negative. The use of a particular verbal form in this article is not meant to imply a definitive identification. See note 24 below concerning the multivalency of proverbs, and note 26 concerning the rhetorical figure of enallage.

2. Thus the concern of this article is with the synchronic intellectual context of Bruegel's painting and not the diachronic pictorial context. The most important pictorial predecessor to Bruegel as an illustrator of proverbs is Frans Hogenberg, whose etching *Die Blav Hwicke*, probably published in 1558, one year before the *Netherlandish Proverbs* was painted, is almost certainly the prototype for Bruegel's image. Bruegel includes forty of the forty-three proverbs depicted in the Hogenberg in his own image. The Hogenberg print is not structured in the same manner as the Bruegel painting. See Louis Lebeer, 'De Blauwe Huyck', *Gentse bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiedenis* 6 (1939-1940) 161-226 for the earliest discussion of this and related images. For a reproduction of the complete Hogenberg etching, see Walter Gibson, *Bruegel* (London 1977) 72-73.

The history of proverb illustration in the Netherlands has yet to be written. I know of no other proverb images which anticipate or continue the particular associative structure underlying Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*.

3. Carel van Mander, *Het Schilderboek* (Haarlem 1604) 233-34. The original text reads: "De Natuer ... onder de Boeren om Boeren met de Pinceel nae te bootsen heeft uyt gaen picken ..." This is a familiar topos of artists' biographies, found also, for example, in Giorgio Vasari's life of Giotto. It is primarily invoked to present the artist as possessing natural genius, *ingenium*, but in Bruegel's case perhaps also to accord with the subject matter of many of his works. One should note that van Mander's later anecdote concerning Bruegel masquerading as a peasant in order to pass among countryfolk unobserved, itself probably derivative of Lomazzo's similar anecdote concerning Leonardo da Vinci, contradicts his identification as a peasant. On the topos common to biographies of artists see E. Kris and O. Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler* (Vienna 1934). For a discussion of the use of these topoi in van Mander's life of Bruegel, see Grossman, *Pieter Bruegel: The Paintings* (London 1955). David Freedberg, 'The Life of Pieter Bruegel', in D. Freedberg (ed.), *The Prints of Peter Bruegel the Elder* (Tokyo 1989) 21-31, cites the explicit use of these topoi to argue that van Mander never intended to identify Bruegel as a peasant.

4. We should be careful, however, not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Biographical topoi are deployed in order to account for particular aspects of the art, and provide us with clues concerning the critical reception of that art.

Keith Moxey supplies a politicized synopsis of the literature relating Bruegel to popular culture in 'Pieter Bruegel and Popular Culture', in D. Freedberg (ed.), *The Prints of Peter Bruegel the Elder* (Tokyo 1989), 42-52. Moxey suggests that Bruegel "... participated in the growing rejection of popular culture by the culture of the elite ..." a statement which arises from the implicit assumption that popular and elite cultures stand in a necessarily antagonistic relationship to one another. Moxey also makes the puzzling claim that Bruegel, as a member of his culture, would have been incapable of commenting in his art on the social, moral, religious or political issues of his own time.

5. For Bruegel and Neo-Stoicism see J. Müller Hofstede, 'Zur Interpretation von Bruegel's Landschaften: Ästhetischer Landschaftsbegriff und Stoische Weltbetrachtung', in O. Simpson, *et al.*, (eds.), *Bruegel und seine Welt* (Berlin 1979) 73-142. For Bruegel and Ortelius, see footnote 17 below. For Bruegel and the Family of Love, see H. Stein-Schneider, 'Pieter Bruegel, peintre hérétique, illus-

trateur du message familiste', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 107 (1986) 71-74. For Bruegel and alchemy see J. van Lennep, 'An Alchemical Message in Bruegel's Prints?', in D. Freedberg (ed.), *The Prints of Peter Bruegel the Elder* (Tokyo 1989) 66-79. For Bruegel and the rederijckers see W. Gibson, 'Artists and Rederijckers in the Age of Bruegel', *Art Bulletin* 63 nr.3 (1981) 426-446. For Bruegel and Rabelais see S. Alpers, 'Bruegel's Festive Peasants', *Simiolus* 6 nr.3-4 (1972-73) 163-176. For Bruegel and Coornhert see C. G. Stridbek, *Bruegelstudien* (Stockholm 1956). W. Gibson, *Bruegel* (London 1977) provides an excellent general treatment of the artist and his milieu. R. Marijnissen and P. Ruyffelaere, *Bruegel* (Antwerpen 1988) supply a helpful overview of Bruegel criticism on a painting by painting basis.

6. For a recent refutation of folkloristic approaches to Bruegel's art, particularly the *Netherlandish Proverbs*, see Margaret Sullivan, 'Bruegel's Proverbs: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance', *Art Bulletin* 73 nr. 3 (1991) 431-466. Sullivan carries her argument to an extreme, however, in asserting that the image must be seen in the context of humanist interest in Latin and Greek proverbs, relegating all vernacular proverbs to the realm of folklore. I would suggest that our interest lies instead in considering why literate, urban readers and viewers would have been interested in material we tend to consider a part of folkloristic popular culture.

7. W.H.D. Suringar, *Erasmus over Nederlandsche spreekwoorden en spreekwoordelijke uitdrukkingen van zijnen tijd* (Utrecht 1873). The standard bibliography for literature concerning proverbs is Wolfgang Mieder, *International Proverb Scholarship* [...] (New York / London 1982; Garland Folklore Bibliographies, 3).

8. P.J. Harrebomée, *Spreekwoordenboek der Nederlandsche taal* (3 vols., Utrecht 1858-71). F.A. Stoett, *Nederlandsche spreekwoorden, uitdrukkingen en gezegden* (Zutphen 1923). Stoett remains the best general reference work on Netherlandish proverbs. He notes in his introduction that the very nature of a proverb collection, or any other dictionary, precludes completeness. See p. iii.

9. G.G. Kloeke (ed.), *Kamper spreekwoorden naar de uitgave van Warnersen anno 1550* (Assen 1959) and *Uitgave van 'Seer schoone spreekwoorden / oft Prouerbia' ... in 1549 te Antwerpen verschenen* (Assen 1962).

10. N.Z. Davis, 'Proverbial Wisdom and Popular Errors', in idem, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford 1975) 227-267.

11. The practical history of proverbs in the Low Countries – the role they played in conversation, their function in law courts, the use of proverbs in Netherlandish literature and so forth – is as yet unexplored. The general outlines for such a study might follow the examples of Davis, 'Proverbial Wisdom' for France and J. Obelkovich, 'Proverbs and Social History', in P. Burke and R. Porter (eds.), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge 1987) 43-72, for England.

12. See for example Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning', *Proverbum* 22 (1973) 821-827 and Heda Jason, 'Proverbs in Society: The Problem of Meaning and Function', *Proverbum* 17 (1971) 617-623.

13. Davis, 'Proverbial Wisdom', 243.

14. See Walter Ong, 'Commonplace Rhapsody: Ravisius Textor, Zwinger and Shakespeare', in R.R. Bolgar (ed.), *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 1500-1700* (Cambridge 1974) 91-126, see especially 94. Ong refers to E. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge 1963) 36-60 on the noetic economy of oral cultures.

15. Unlike that on written proverb collections in the Lowlands, the literature on Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* is enormous. The majority of the scholarly writing on this painting is concerned almost exclusively with identifying the proverbs illustrated, and disappointingly little of it attends to the qualities and composition of the painting itself. One notable, and early, exception is Wilhelm Fraenger, *Der Bauern-Bruegel und das deutsche Sprichwort* (Munich 1923), which establishes the moralistic reading of the image followed by many subsequent authors, but also attends closely to the composition and its structural relation to contemporaneous works such as the novels of Rabelais or the verse form *priamel*. A very useful, if overly conservative, identification of the proverbs and their sources is provided in Jan Grauls, *Volkstaal en volksleven in het werk van Pieter Bruegel*, which despite its title provides little more than brief explanations of each proverb. Dundes and Stibbe, *The Art of Mixing Metaphors* (Helsinki 1981) suggest many associative relationships in the course of their list of proverb identifications. Unfortunately, their identifications and suggested associations are frequently speculative and anachronistic, particularly when they wax into psychoanalytic readings. The recent article by Margaret Sullivan, 'Bruegel's Proverbs', situates the painting within a humanist con-

text, arguing that contemporary viewers would have associated the image with Latin proverbs as opposed to vernacular ones.

16. Both in Vienna. Although outside the parameters of this article to discuss at length, these two paintings display the same associative structure found in the *Netherlandish Proverbs*, as do also some of Bruegel's graphic works, such as the series of *Vices* and of *Virtues*. Another painting which might be considered in this context is Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* in Madrid. For a compelling reading of the *Children's Games* which notes a 'syntactical' structure not unlike that discussed here, see Edward Snow, "'Meaning" in *Children's Games: On the Limitations of the Iconographic Approach to Bruegel*', *Representations* 1 nr. 2 (1983) 26-60.

17. Bruegel's relationship with Ortelius is the subject of two articles: A.E. Popham, 'Pieter Bruegel and Abraham Ortelius', *Burlington Magazine* 59 (1931) 184-188 and J. Muyllé, 'Pieter Bruegel en Abraham Ortelius: Bijdrage tot de literaire receptie van Pieter Bruegels werk', in *Archivum Artis Lovaniense: Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van de kunst der Nederlanden opgedragen aan Prof. Em. Dr. J.K. Steppe* (Leuven 1981) 319-337. The letters of Fabius are the only sources other than the *Album amicorum* which advert to a personal relationship between Bruegel and Ortelius, asking the latter to convey greetings to both the painter Maarten de Vos and a "Petrus Bruochl". As Popham has indicated, the reference is not unequivocal, since a doctor Pieter van Bruegel had also travelled to Italy.

18. Most recently Sullivan, 'Bruegel's Proverbs', pp. 433 and 441, reiterates the assertion that Bruegel and Plantin were associated, without providing evidence to support it. She also posits an 'audience' for Bruegel derived from the other names mentioned in Ortelius' *Album amicorum* without providing any specific evidence to link them with the artist, and apparently without considering the lapse between Bruegel's departure from Antwerp in 1564 (and his death in 1569) and the drafting of the *Album*, begun in 1573 and completed with an index in 1596. The Bruegel epitaph can be dated to ca. 1574.

19. To my knowledge the *Proverbs* has not been systematically examined with an eye to identifying costumes and their implications for profession and class, a project which would be quite helpful.

20. See, for example, David Kunzle's 'Bruegel's Proverb Painting and the World Upside Down', *Art Bulletin* 59 nr. 2 (1977) 197-202.

21. Examples may be found in several works on Bruegel. See, for instance, Marijnissen and Seidel, *Bruegel* (New York 1984) 39. Dundes and Stibbe, *Art of Mixing Metaphors*, include a similar numerical scheme as a frontispiece, but do note on p. 11 its arbitrary nature. Despite this, they persist in concluding that the work does represent a uniform, moralizing set of proverbs, subsumed under the single proverb of the world upside down. See their p. 67.

22. The term 'encyclopaedic' had a limited and precise usage in the sixteenth century, referring to the cumulative knowledge acquired in the 'cycle' of courses comprising the seven liberal arts. The modern and more general sense of the term as all-encompassing or universal is frequently applied to many sorts of collections of the sixteenth-century, a usage which requires some reconsideration. The term has become a modern catch-all to describe collections of a broad and diverse nature, with the result that differences of structure and function tend to become blurred. The cross-referenced indices of modern encyclopaedias, our term index being an abbreviation for index locorum communes or list of commonplaces, is a closer analogue to the phenomenon under discussion here than the encyclopaedia itself.

23. See D. Kunzle, 'Bruegel's Proverb Painting and the World Upside Down', for a well-reasoned distinction between the Bruegel *Proverbs* and the image type of the world-upside-down.

24. Erasmus, in the introduction to his collection of proverbs – the *Adagiorum Collectanea*, in later editions the *Adagiorum Chiliades* – devotes a section to explaining the multivalency of proverbs. A single proverb may be applied to a variety of circumstances, as when "a great jar with holes" is used to describe "forgetfulness, extravagance, miserliness, futility or ingratitude". With the use of irony a proverb may be used in opposite ways: we might say "hail the conquering hero" both to congratulate a friend who has succeeded at a difficult task or to mock an arrogant opponent after his defeat. Erasmus also notes that one may expand the uses of a given proverb through substitution of terms, tailoring the implication to whatever situation is at hand. See D. Erasmus, *Collected Works*, vol. 31, p. 18.

Natalie Davis also makes the point that proverbs are by their nature flexible. See pp. 243-244 of her 'Proverbial Wisdom and Popular Errors'. Paul Vandebroek, while arguing that Bosch uses proverbs in an explicitly moralizing manner, also notes that proverbs are inherently multivalent. See his *Jheronimus Bosch: tussen volksleven en stadscultuur* (Berchem 1987) 217-218.

25. Previous authors have noted thematic congruences between many of the proverbs depicted, but none to my knowledge have attempted to ground the associative mode to be discussed below within a contemporary noetic framework. See Fraenger, *Der Bauern-Bruegel*; Dundes and Stibbe, *The Art of Mixing Metaphors*; and the gallery leaflet in the Berlin Dahlem Museum by Großhans, n.d., for examples.
26. This proverb might be used to illustrate Erasmus' rhetorical figure of enallage, the expansion of meaning through inflection of words. If read as "he pissed at the moon," the proverb becomes equivalent to our "pissing into the wind," a failure which has unfortunate consequences. Similarly the move from "shitting on the world" to "pissing at the moon" takes two equivalent verbs (both excretory) connected to two equivalent nouns (both heavenly bodies) and produces two quite different meanings. The various permutations of the worldly orb mentioned earlier may be thought of as a form of visual enallage, with Bruegel "inflecting" the motif in each instance. See Erasmus, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, *De copia*, ed. Craig Thompson (Toronto 1978) 321-329.
27. Matthew 7:6.
28. A notable exception to the previously discussed application of a numbering scheme to the painting as an aid to identifying and locating the proverbs, is found in W. Fraenger, *Der Bauern-Bruegel*. Fraenger divides the proverbs by place, discussing those found in the tavern, the street, the bridge and tower, and so forth. This is indicative of the close attention to the composition which characterizes Fraenger's brief but insightful book. Bruegel scholarship in general, and that concerned with the *Netherlandish Proverbs* in particular, has been oddly and lamentably inattentive to the visual qualities of the art.
29. There are important differences between Bruegel's painting and a memory palace. The rooms of the palace should ideally be of similar size, evenly lit, spacious. This is quite different from the architectural irregularity, the dim lighting, the crowded squalor of much of the painted scene. In the palace every figure and object must be easily retrievable; in the Bruegel we must frequently search in dim corners to discern what is lost or obscure. For the history of memory systems see Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago 1966); Herwig Blum, *Die antike Mnemotechnik* (Hildesheim 1969) and most recently Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge 1991).
30. Reprinted by Kloeke as *Kamper Spreekwoorden*. See note 5 above.
31. A seventeenth-century example illustrates this pattern. Johan de Brune's *Nieuwe wijn in oude le'er-zacken* (Middelburgh 1636) is a compendium of proverbs gathered from various languages and translated into Dutch. De Brune explicitly labels his categories, listing 267 groups in about 470 pages. Headings for the clusters of proverbs begin to recur less than a quarter of the way through the book, but not in any particular order, and scattered among new headings. One imagines that the resulting quilt of clustered proverbs derives from the process of acquisition: the author assembled the collection over a reasonably lengthy period of time, dividing and ordering his material thematically at various stages, but making no attempt to insert newly acquired proverbs into already established sets.
- The thematic ordering principle followed in the *Gemeene Duytsche Spreekwoorden* is not used in all sixteenth-century collections. Many are arranged alphabetically, often by the first word of the proverb, even if it is only an article, making the reader's task of locating a specific proverb extremely difficult. In this early period of typography, alphabetization itself is often lax by modern standards, at times only taking into account the first letter of the first word – listing all the a's together in otherwise random order – and at other times spelling phonetically – overlooking silent letters or conflating phonetic equivalents such as c and k. See Walter Ong, 'Commonplace Rhapsody', pp. 107-120 on the typographical history of visual retrieval.
32. First published in Paris, in 1512 as a textbook for John Colet at St. Paul's School in London. Major, revised editions appeared in 1514, 1526 and 1534. *De copia* quickly became a standard textbook in Latin schools throughout northern Europe. For the publishing history of *De copia*, see H. D. Rix, 'The Editions of Erasmus' *De copia*', *Studies in Philology* 43 (1946) 595-618.
33. The literature on the role of the rhetorical loci, commonplaces, is enormous. For a useful introduction to the subject see Joan Marie Lechner, *Renaissance Concepts of the Commonplaces* (Westport 1962). Other important studies include Paul Joachimsen, 'Loci communes: Eine Untersuchung zur Geistesgeschichte des Humanismus und der Reformation', *Luther-Jahrbuch* 8 (1926) 27-97; August Buck, 'Die "Studia Humanitatis" und ihre Methode', *Bibliothèque d' Humanisme et Renaissance* 21 (1959) 273-290.
34. See, for example, Guarino's citation of Pliny the Elder as a precedent for his own recommendation of the use of notebooks in study, as cited in Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (London 1986) 16.

35. Walter Ong, *Presence of the Word* (New Haven / London 1967) 61, himself citing Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century*, 37-38.
36. Another name belongs on this list, that of the English educator Roger Ascham, tutor to Elizabeth I and author of several books concerning education. It is here excluded since his influence did not extend beyond England in the period under consideration. See Foster Watson, *Vives on Education* (Totowa 1971) xxxvi-xxxviii, for a brief account of Ascham's contribution to the technique discussed below.
37. See R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge 1958) 269-270.
38. On the problem of assimilating classical Latin see especially Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (London 1986) 11 ff., and Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 8-20.
39. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage*, 269.
40. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage*, 272.
41. That Guarino's advocacy was heeded cannot be doubted, however, since a number of books of collected citations were published by his disciples. See Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage*, 270.
42. A brief biography of Agricola is supplied in Marc van der Poel, *Rudolf Agricola: Over dialectica en humanisme* (Baarn 1991) 11-17.
43. See E. Kooiman, 'The Letters of Rodolphus Agricola to Jacobus Barbirianus', in *Rodolphus Agricola Phrisius 1444-1485: Proceedings of the International Conference* (Leiden 1988) 136-146, on Agricola's relationship to Barbireau.
44. The letter presumably was sent in lieu of Agricola himself, after he turned down a position in Antwerp which would have allowed Barbireau to study with him in person, to take a position in Heidelberg. The original text of the letter may be found in the Alardus edition of Agricola's works, *Lecturabrationes* (Cologne 1528; reprinted Nieuwkoop 1978) 192-201. Dutch translations of the text may be found in M. A. Nauwelaerts, *Rudolphus Agricola* (Den Haag 1963) 114-130 and M. van der Poel, *Rudolf Agricola: Over dialectica en humanisme*, 135-145.
45. If Agricola is here describing a mental repository of matter, this would suggest an intriguing variation on the classical system of memory. Rather than storing the particular facts and arguments relevant to a given law case or political oration, the scholar is instead acquiring a wealth of material of only potential utility.
46. See Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford 1971) 4.
47. Ong, in his *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge 1958), argues that the impaling of disciplines from grammar and physics to theology on these branching charts represents the culmination of a trend towards conceiving of knowledge and thought in visual terms.
48. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge 1958) 272 and note p. 432.
49. See L. Jardine, 'Distinctive Discipline: Rodolph Agricola's Influence on Methodical Thinking in the Humanities', in *Rodolphus Agricola Phrisius: Proceedings*, 38-57, on the impact of Agricola on education and especially p. 47 concerning the institutionalization of humanism as a curriculum of study. These points are discussed at greater length in Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities*.
50. For the publishing history of *De formando studio* see Gerda Huisman, *Rudolph Agricola: A Bibliography of Printed Works and Translations* (Nieuwkoop 1985).
51. The notebook system is mentioned by Vives in his *De ratio studii puerilis* (1523), *Introductio ad sapientiam* (1524) and *De tradendis disciplinis* (1531). Melanchthon published a short tract on the notebook system, *De locis communibus ratio* (1531). Johann Sturm included the notebook in his treatise on education, *De literarum ludis recte aperiendis liber* (1542). For Ascham, see note 25 above.
52. See the 'Vorrhede' in Johannes Agricola, *Sybenhunderd und fünfßzig Teütscher Sprichwörter verneüwert und gebessert* (Hagenaw 1534; reprinted by S. Gilman (ed.), Berlin 1971. See note 52):
53. See the afterword in Johannes Agricola, *Die Sprichwörter Sammlungen*, ed. Sander Gilman (Berlin 1971) 335 for a brief overview of Agricola's career.
54. For the documents pertaining to the controversy see the afterword by Gilman, in Johannes Agricola, *Die Sprichwörter Sammlungen*, 336-353. The controversy arose because of perceived criticism of Ulrich of Würtemberg. See also Gilman's exposition of the controversy in 'Johann Agricola of Eisleben's Proverb Collection (1529): The Polemizing of a Literary Form and the Reaction', Six-

teenth Century Journal 8 nr. 1 (1977) 77-84. On the lack of polemic in Erasmus, see Gilman 'Johann Agricola' and M. M. Phillipps, *The Adages of Erasmus* (Cambridge 1964).

55. G.G. Kloeke, *Kamper Spreekwoorden*.

56. On the *Proverbia communia*, see Richard Jente, *Proverbia Communia: A Fifteenth Century Collection of Dutch Proverbs* (Bloomington 1947). Jente states that "... Johann Agricola ... knew neither the P.C. or the works of Bebel and of Tunnicius based upon them". Kloeke, on the other hand cites 191 correspondences between the P.C. and the *Gemeene Duytsche Spreekwoorden*, of which 46 are to be taken as direct borrowings. Jente, p. 36. Kloeke, *Kamper Spreekwoorden*, pp. XIII-XIV.

57. The history of proverb collecting in the Lowlands, while pertinent to this study, is too large a subject to be treated here in anything other than a cursory fashion. The *Proverbia communia* and the Murellius belong to an initial phase of proverb collections produced as educational aids, in which group we might also include Erasmus' *Adagia*. The *Gemeene Duytsche Spreekwoorden* belongs to a second phase of publication, in which the books are for the most part produced as compendia for use in speaking or writing. In this group we may include the French-Dutch collection *Seer schoone spreekwoorden*, Andriessoon's *Duytsche Adagia ofte Spreekwoorden*, the various epitomes of Erasmus including that of Sartorius and the manuscript collection of Reyer Geurtz. As the example of the relationship between the collections of Johannes Agricola and the *Gemeene Duytsche Spreekwoorden* shows, linguistic boundaries, particularly between German and Dutch collections, are essentially meaningless. An account of Dutch proverb collecting must therefore also take into account German collections such as those of Bebel, Franck, Tunnicius and Gartner. For an excellent overview of the source material, see Suringar, *Erasmus over Nederlandsche spreekwoorden*. A second article on the history, structures and functions of Netherlandish proverb collections is planned for *Volkskundig Bulletin* by the current author.

58. Excepting the schools taught in the vernacular, of course.

59. See, for example, Walter Ong, 'Commonplace Rhapsody' on weaving as a metaphor for literature of this period, particularly Shakespeare. August Buck discusses similar issues in relation to Montaigne in his 'Die "Studia Humanitatis" und ihre Methode', 273-290. Rabelais is discussed in this context in Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text* (Oxford 1979). See also Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage*, 271-273 for the use of the term mosaic as descriptive of sixteenth-century literature.

60. Curiously, Erasmus himself declines so to order his proverb collection, primarily on the basis of his collection being too unwieldy. In proverb 2001 of the *Chiliades*, appropriately the *Herculei labores*, the Labors of Hercules, he writes: "I also saw that an order of some kind could be introduced if I followed the *ratio* of what was alike, unlike, contrary and related, and if I had prepared before as many headings as possible and had referred each proverb to its class, so to say. But I omitted this organization wisely, partly because it seemed proper to me in collections like this - I don't know exactly why - that there be no order, partly because I saw, if I had crammed into the same class all those of the same meaning, there would arise a tedium to the reader, and suddenly disgusted he would exclaim "This warmed over cabbage is killing me," partly because the magnitude of the labor deterred me; why should I die? I perceived that this organization could not be made unless I recast the entire work from top to bottom and that there was no thought of getting it out if I had not put a final end to it But now it was possible, even during publication, to add to it or omit from it". This translation taken from: T. C. Appelt, *Studies in the Contents and Sources of Erasmus' Adagia* (Chicago 1942) 39, n. 2.

61. Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word*.