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**“*Wie einen feinen jungen Baum...*”: Nature, the fallen man, and social order in Martin Luther’s works on education (1524-1530)**

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## **“*Wie einen feinen jungen Baum...*”: Nature, the fallen man, and social order in Martin Luther’s works on education (1524-1530)**

Martin Luther’s reflections on education and schooling are summarised in two short texts (Wittenberg, 1524 and 1530) addressed respectively to the municipal authorities and to parents. Nevertheless, the subject of education permeates his whole work, emerging in several other treatises and commentaries. His passionate eloquence recurs often to nature as a repertoire of metaphors and a conceptual tool. In this paper, we will attempt a close reading of some key passages, focusing on the two thematic axes of “human nature” and “natural and social order.” According to Luther, “human nature” is the fallen nature of the sinful man, but also a nature full of potentialities unchained by the grace of Christ. Its development through education aims primarily at setting the man in his “natural order,” i.e., the “social order.” From that moment on, *Bildung* has the special duty to discover and make possible one’s own *Beruf*, which makes the man able to accomplish his function in society and adhere to God’s design. Education, therefore, is both the caring action that develops the sprout in a “beautiful tree” and a necessary act of violence, replicating the complexity and ambiguity of the laws of nature.

Keywords: early Reformation; Luther; nature; literacy; *Sozialdisziplinierung*; Lutheran pedagogy.

### **1. Introductory remarks**

The Reformation, as with every major time of change in cultural and religious terms, deeply rethought and redesigned the concept of human nature, its relationship with nature at large, and the potentialities and limits of its shaping and redemption. Especially in the first decades of its diffusion, the early reformers relied on education as the primary agent of the correct shaping of souls and society, therefore adopting the ideas of “human nature” and “domesticated nature” as privileged conceptual tools to explain their principles and disseminate the new belief.

Moreover, the need for a widespread diffusion of Reformed ideas through preaching – aimed both at cultivated and popular audiences – suggested to the pastors, and especially to Luther himself, a flourishing repertoire of metaphors, similitudes, and various rhetorical figures appealing to the daily experience of the listeners/readers. Nature often inspired such figurate language, generally without any appeal to the mysteries of the wilderness and privileging domesticated nature and the “rational” organization of nature in daily life.

A comprehensive analysis of the images and meanings of Nature in early Reformation thought, even limiting ourselves to Luther’s works, would clearly exceed the scope and aim of an article. The investigation will focus primarily on Luther’s main works on education, two short booklets originating from texts composed for preaching: the 1524 discourse *An die Radherrn aller stedte deutsches lands: das sie Christliche schulen auffrichtenn vnd halten sollen*<sup>1</sup> and the 1530 *Eine Predigt, das man Kinder zur Schulen halten solle*.<sup>2</sup> Printed in Wittenberg without any indication of the publisher and shortly reprinted elsewhere and in other formats, these *Flugschriften* were not intended as systematic and careful accounts of the subject, but rather as impassioned, sometimes heated exhortations and injunctions – both titles are built on the verb *sollen* – on the new educational duties in the Reformed society. For this reason, they are a privileged source to understand how Luther addressed his followers and, as far as the concepts of nature are concerned, to grasp his assumptions and the probable background of his listeners on a network of mainstream ideas on humankind that were undergoing a massive wave of change. Other texts by Luther will provide hints for reflection, starting with a relatively concealed passage and how it became extensively quoted.

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<sup>1</sup> “To the councilmen of all cities in Germany, that they should establish and maintain Christian schools.”

<sup>2</sup> “A sermon, that people should keep children in school.”

## 2. History of a quotation

The most renowned statement about education and nature in Luther's work does not appear in one of his aforementioned works on education, and while it is generally quoted in German (or the English translation from German), it was originally written in Latin. The sentence appears in Luther's *Annotationes in Ecclesiasten* (1532), where the comment to the verse *Laetare igitur iuuenis in adulescentia tua* offers the occasion for his habitual polemic against monastic education and the repressive nature of the Catholic clergy. The original Latin text states as follows:

Est ergo Salomon optimus adolescentiae magister. Non prohibet iucunditates sive voluptates, quemadmodum stulti magistri Monachi fecerunt. Quia hoc nihil aliud est quam ex iuuenibus facere truncos et (ut etiam dixit Anselmus Monacissimus Monachus) *quam velle arborem in augustam ollam plantare* [e.o.]<sup>3</sup>

The image of the “tree planted in a small pot,” as a metaphor for the youngsters' bodies and minds hindered in their expansion by clerical education, enjoyed a long-standing fortune starting from the 1792 compilation by Friedrich Gedike, *Luthers Pädagogik*, in which the *Oberschulrat* appointed by the King of Prussia and director of the elite *Gymnasium zum Grauen Kloster* in Berlin quoted Luther's passage in this German enhanced version (here I transcribe only the last sentence with the tree similitude):

[...] wie denn auch Anselmus gesagt hat: Ein junger Mensch, so eingespannet, und von Leuten abgezogen, sei gleich wie einen feinen jungen Baum, der Frucht tragen könnte, in einen engen Topf pflanzen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, (Weimar: 1882-2009), “Weimarer Ausgabe” (from now on WA), 20, pp. 190.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Gedike, *Luthers Pädagogik oder Gedanken über Erziehung und Schulwesen aus Luthers Schriften gesammelt* (Berlin: Johann Friedrich Unger, 1792), p. 37.

[as Anselm himself said: A young man, thus subjugated and isolated from other people, is like planting a beautiful young tree, which could bear fruit, in a small pot.]

This version of the text (with its slightly awkward construction *ad sensum*) strongly emphasised the emotional and connotative traits of the image adding the adjective *fein* and, most of all, developing the metaphor with the expression *der Frucht tragen könnte*. The young tree is not only hindered in its development but altogether made sterile by clerical education and, as such, unable to produce offspring, i.e., to diffuse the knowledge acquired during the long years of study and educate other members of the community. This quotation gave a sort of romantic flavour to Luther's pedagogy, viewing it under the light of strong confidence in the potentialities of human nature and conveying to the 18th- and 19th-century readers an almost Rousseauvian idea of social and educational conditioning as inherently evil.

Even if Gedike could have chosen this passage under the influence of his own "New Humanist," late-Enlightenment culture, the German version was not by his hand; we identified its source in the German edition of Luther's work provided in the 1740s by the theologian Johann Georg Walch,<sup>5</sup> where the text is identical. Certainly, it was neither Walch nor Gedike who made this passage famous but his quotation in Karl Raumer's *Geschichte der Pädagogik* in which the passage cited by Gedike returns in identical form.

The presence of this quotation in the selection of Luther's texts chosen by this seminal author in German history of education established the image of the "tree in a small pot," unable to bear fruits, as a landmark in the Reformation educational thought,

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<sup>5</sup> *D. Martin Luthers sowol in Deutscher als Lateinischer Sprache gefertigte und aus der letztern in die erstere ubersetzte sämtliche Schriften*, herausgegeben von J. Georg Walch (Halle in Magdeburdischen: Johann Justinus Gebauer, 1741).

ready to be translated to English and brought to the flourishing American educational market by Henry Barnard himself. The well-known educational reformer, who brought about with Horace Mann the “Common School” movement in 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States, reused Raumer’s anthology (who in his turn has used Gedicke’s) in his popular *German Educational Reformers* (1863),<sup>6</sup> therefore bringing the tree similitude to generations of teachers, school principals, and policymakers in perfect consistency with the passionate (yet paradoxical) image of Luther as the champion of individual freedom brought about by the majority of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American educational reformers and historians. However, the relation between education and nature in Luther’s works is much more complex, and its message ranges from the superiority of man as a species to his “natural” trend toward evil, both emphasising the significant responsibilities of education and its unavoidable violence. In the following chapter, some aspects of the education-nature relation will be outlined, forming an account of the network of meanings hidden under this aspect of Luther’s pedagogy.

### **3. The (bad) potential of human nature**

From a theological point of view, the fallen man cannot be inherently good in the doctrinal context of the Reformation. The complexity of the early Reformers’ debate on the subject and on the meaning and cleansing powers of Baptism exceeds the aims of this paper, but the well-known principle of the *sola fide, sola Scriptura* builds on the assumption that

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<sup>6</sup> The book was republished several times with improvements and additions and re-proposed in a later version with the title *Memoirs of Eminent Teachers and Educators with Contributions to the History of Education in Germany* (Hartford, 1876 and 1878). Barnard translated the passage as follows, simplifying the syntactic asymmetry of the original: “a young man, thus hedged about, and cut off from society, is like a young tree, whose nature it is to grow and bear fruit, planted in a small and narrow pot.”

man cannot save himself with his own deeds and free will, but he must rely on faith and the Scripture, being naturally inclined to sin after Adam's fall. In this context, education acts as a necessary and inescapable support<sup>7</sup> to faith and the action of grace, making men able to read the Scriptures while stemming the tide of sinfulness.

The proactive role of education in scouting, encouraging and developing human talents must always be considered in Lutheran pedagogy together with its role in repressing sin and disciplining growth direction. Only with this conditioning action can the young sprout, not yet a "tree," avoid the lamentable fate of becoming amorphous "wood." The image comparing uneducated men to the inferior product of undisciplined nature is clearly outlined in this passage from *An die Radherrn*:

Den wes ist die schuld, das es itzt yn allen stedten so dünne sihet von geschickten leutten, on der oberkeyt, die das junge volck hat lassen auff wachsen wie das holtz ym wald wechset, und nicht zu gesehen, wye mans lere und zyhe? darumb ists auch so unördig gewachsen, das zu keynem baw, sondern nur eyn unnutz gehecke und nur zum fewrweg tüchtig ist.<sup>8</sup>

[So whose is the guilt, that today in all cities can be seen a scarcity of cultivated people, if not of the authorities, which have left young people *to grow as wood grows*

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<sup>7</sup> As summarized by Jürgen Oelkers: "Die Frage, ob der Heiligen Schrift für den christlichen Glauben Vorrang zukommen solle, ist nichts Neues und hat schon in der christlichen Antike zu zahlreichen Diskussionen geführt; neu ist der *unbedingte* Vorrang der Schrift, die lesen zu können, den Glauben erst ermöglicht. Niemand kann auf Gnade hoffen, dem die Schrift verschlossen bleibt. Nur in ihr zeigt sich Gott, durch sie spricht der Geist, und deswegen hat die Kirche keine Autorität aus eigenem Recht. Der Glaube, anders gesagt, kann nicht rituell nachgeahmt, sondern muss mit persönlicher Bildung errungen werden und durchzieht die ganze Lebenspraxis, also nicht nur den Gottesdienst". Jürgen Oelkers, "*Sola scriptura*: pädagogische folgen von Luthers Rede an die Ratsherrn," *Rassegna di Pedagogia/Pädagogische Umschau*, 74, no. 3-4 (2016): pp. 306-7.

<sup>8</sup> *An die Radherrn aller stedte deutsches lands: das sie Christliche schulen auffrichtenn vnd halten sollen. Martinus Lutther.* (Wittenberg 1524); WA 15, p. 35. Here we will always quote from the original editions, which have no page numbers, adding the references to the WA for easy location of the passages.

*in the forests*, and didn't monitor how people were educated and learned? Therefore, they have so badly grown that they can be no use for any building, *but they are merely useless wood chops, good only for the fire*].

The use of the word *Holz* (matter) instead of *Baum* (tree) conveys the idea of a human being deprived of his own humanity. According to the "Aristotelian ladder," humanity lies in the possession of the rational soul, i.e., the ability to go beyond vegetation and instinctual action. Renaissance Christian humanism had further enhanced the notion of man's superiority, making him (in Pico Della Mirandola's words) "little lower than the angels," located "between the timeless unchanging and the flux of time."<sup>9</sup> The Reformation, despite its strong humanist roots, strongly challenges this perception: the man in himself has no dignity when he has no faith and, abandoned to his natural penchant toward sin, he is easily reduced to a bestial state.

In this context, education is the only possibility to know the Scriptures and obtain salvation, but also to become useful to the community, playing the role assigned by God in the mundane realm. Luther's metaphor is compelling; the uncultivated wood can only be burned in the fireplace (and, out of the metaphor, in hell) and has no use whatsoever for construction (*Bau*), where the act of building hints at the house of the citizen but also at the whole city. The city is a recurrent image in Luther's works as a mundane realisation of the divine connection (*Ring oder Cirkel*) of spiritual and social order. The proximity of the school, the church, the private house (*Bürgers Haus*), and the town hall is the visible expression of that order:

Summa, die Schule mus das nehest sein bey der Kirchen, als darin man junge

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<sup>9</sup> "[...] stabilis evi et fluxi temporis interstitium, et (quod Persae dicunt) mundi copulam, immo hymeneum, ab angelis, teste Davide, paulo deminutum." *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1496), in Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus De Ente et uno, e Scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1942), p. 101.

Prediger und Pfarrher zeuget, und daraus hernach dieselben an der todten stat setzet. Darnach des Bürgers haus nehest an der Schule ist, als daraus man Schü̇ler kriegen mus. Darnach das Rathaus und Schlos, so Bürger schützen müssen, damit sie Kinder zeugen zur Schulen, und Schulen kinder zu Pfarrhen auffzihen, Und darnach Pfarrher widderumb Kirchen und Gottes kinder (es sey Bürger, Fürst oder Keiser) machen können. Gott aber mus der oberst und nehest sein, der solchen ring oder cirkel erhalte wider den Teuffel [...]<sup>10</sup>

[To summarise, the school must be near the church, for it is the place where the preachers and pastors are educated, and from where the ones who substitute for the dead are taken. The house of the citizen is near the school, for schoolchildren come from there. Then there is the town hall and castle, which protect the citizens so that they can produce children for the schools, and schools educate children to become pastors, and pastors can create churches and sons of God (common citizens, princes, or emperors). God must be overall and near to all, to protect this ring or circle against the Devil].

We will return later to the subject of the spiritual and social order. Here we can observe that human nature in itself, without a proper education, not only is prone to fail and is useless for his community but can be a potential danger and break the order of the city. The uneducated children, neglected by their parents, are the *poison* (as they were venomous mushrooms or animals) and *filth* of other children, and they attract to the city the wrath of God:

Wie will den nu vernunfft und sonderlich Christliche liebe, das leyden, das sie ungezogen auff wachsen und den andern kindern giffit und schmeysse seyen, damit zu letzt eyn gantze stad verderbe, wie es denn zu Sodom und Gomorra und Gaba und ettlichen mehr stedten ergangen ist.<sup>11</sup>

[How could reason and Christian love tolerate that they grow without any education and become poison and filth for the other children, and at the end be the destruction

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<sup>10</sup> *Von der Conciliis und Kirchen*, Wittenberg, Hans Lufft, 1539; WA 50, p. 652.

<sup>11</sup> *An die Radherrn aller stedte Deutsches lands*; WA 15, pp. 33-34.

of the whole city, as it has already happened to Sodom, Gomorrha, Gaba, and many other cities].

The apocalyptic image of the city destroyed because of the corruption spread by the wrecked children of illiterate or neglecting parents is not only a typical expression of Luther's energy of speech in this short propaganda *Flugschriften*. It is also the logical consequence of the idea of the inherent disorder of human nature as corrupted by sin and unable to locate itself in the design arranged by God. Education is the most effective instrument to tame this disorder and allow the human sprout to become a "beautiful tree" instead of vile "wood." The pot must not be too narrow, but the hand of the expert gardener is necessary.

#### **4. Nurture vs Nature: Social order and the responsibilities of humankind**

The centrality of education in Luther's thought, besides its structural role in the diffusion of early Reformation and its long-term consequences, has been reinforced by several historical and ideological circumstances. Among them, the material and moral turmoil of the *Bauernkrieg* and the rise of various forms of radical Reformation were probably the most influential on the development of Luther's educational thought, determining the rooting of education in the political and civil institutions. The subject of the 1524 and 1530 discourses on education, whose content was promptly enacted in dozens of *Schulordnungen* all along the reformed regions of Germany, is precisely the exhortation (or injunction) for all believers to include education among the institutional duties of the two regulatory bodies of mundane life, the local government and the family. The latter should entrust the children to the former with total confidence. This process has been sketched very clearly by Gerald Strauss:

Without posing it explicitly, the question of who should bear primary responsibility for the child's education – family or state – was being answered definitively in the early years of the Lutheran era. Moving together toward what Gerhard Oestreich, anticipating the nineteenth- and eighteenth-century German state, has called *Sozialdisziplinierung*, Reformation church and Reformation state seized upon the control of schooling as an efficient and effective way of acting directly on individual subjects for the purpose of instilling in them a lasting sense of their places and duties in the well-ordered society.<sup>12</sup>

A “well-ordered society” is indeed both the instrument and the aim of education as portrayed in Luther's educational works. The superiority of culture and nurture over nature is given as an assumption, and human society is a token of the boundless grace of God, who donated to the fallen man the possibility of civil society as a mundane instrument of redemption.

Meinstu nicht, wenn die vogel und thiere reden köndten, und das weltliche regiment unter den menschen sehen solten, sie würden sagen: “O jhr lieben menschen, jhr seid nicht menschen, sondern eitel Götter, gegen uns, wie gar sicher sitzt, lebt und habt jhr alle ding. Wir aber so gar keins fur dem andern eine stunde sicher sind, weder lebens, hauses noch narung. Wehe ewr undanckbarkeit, das jhr nicht sehet, wie ein herrlich leben euch unser aller Gott fur uns thieren gegeben hat!”<sup>13</sup>

[Don't you think that, if the birds and animals could speak, and see the mundane organisation governed by men, they would say: “O dear men, you are not men, but bold Gods in front of us, because you stay and live safe, and have all your things. But we have nothing that is safe from the others for one single hour, neither our life, nor house, nor food. Shame to your ingratitude, as you do not see what a wonderful life has the God of us all given to you, in comparison with us, the animals.]

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<sup>12</sup> Gerald Strauss, *The Social Function of Schools in the Lutheran Reformation in Germany*, “History of Education Quarterly,” vol. 28, no. 2 (Summer 1988), p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> *Eine Predigt / Mart. Luther / das man Kinder zur Schulen halten solle*, Wittenberg 1530; WA 30 II, p. 556-57.

The mundane sphere, even if perturbed by sin and human weaknesses, is nevertheless a privileged world because of the prosperity and safety guaranteed by order and rules. Luther recalls the Aristotelian ladder, expressing how humans are “gods” in front of animals – which do not possess an organised civil society – and, such as, of much greater dignity; but this dignity must not be claimed by men as their possession, as a Renaissance humanist would have done. It is purely a gift from God, and those who are not grateful for it deserve full contempt.

Social order is a great privilege and a sign of God’s grace and mercy. However, they also are a great responsibility that is not a choice but is enforced by God on humankind as its peculiar mission in the mundane sphere (*weltliche Regiment*). Education is the instrument required to perform this mission and follow God’s design, and therefore education is a responsibility enforced by God on parents. “Giving children to God,” i.e., allowing them to be educated and fulfil civil roles or the spiritual tasks of preaching and ministry, is a tangible witness of the parents’ faith and willingness to be at the service of the community.

Denn es mus ja das Euangelion und die Christenheit bleiben bis an Jungsten tag, wie Christus spricht Matthei ulti.: “Sihe, ich bin bey euch bis an der welt ende.” Durch wen, sol er aber erhalten werden? Ochsen und pferde, hunde und sew werdens nicht thun, holtz und steine auch nicht. Es werden wir menschen thun müssen. Denn es ist ja solch ampt nicht ochsen noch pferden befolhen, sondern uns menschen. Wo sol man aber menschen dazu nemen, on bey denen die kinder haben? Wenn du nicht wilt dein kind da zu zihen, jhener auch nicht, und sofort an kein vater noch mutter sein kind unserm Gott hie zu geben, wo wil denn das geistlich ampt und stand bleiben?<sup>14</sup>

[Indeed the Gospel and Christianity must last until the last day, as Christ told to Matthew: “See, I am with you until the end of the world.” But by whom should it be

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<sup>14</sup> *Eine Predigt das man Kinder zur Schulen halten solle*; WA 30 II, p. 530.

maintained? Oxen and horses, dogs and pigs will not do it, neither would wood and stone. This *must* be done by us, by men, as it is not *commanded* to oxen and horses, but to men. So, where could we find men for this task, if not among those who have children? When you do not want to educate your son for this, and your neighbour neither, and soon no father or mother will give his child to God, where can the spiritual office and estate sustain itself?].

Lutheran thought clearly privileges nurture and culture over nature, and the centrality of education and schooling in the process makes pedagogy one of the core conceptual keys of the Reformation. The reasons for this attitude can be found not only in the tumultuous context of the 1520s but perhaps also in a pre-Reformation widespread transformation in legal, governmental, and administrative rules and practises in the German territories. From a pedagogical point of view, John Witte's perspective sounds especially convincing:

The concept of "reformation" was not a theological invention of Luther and his later Protestant followers. It was a legal convention of the jurists of the early fifteenth century, who called for the wholesale reformation of the doctrines, structures, and methods of public, private, and criminal law. [...] It was the theological reformation inaugurated by Martin Luther in 1517 that helped to render this legal reformation so pervasive and resilient. And, in turn, it was the legal reformation begun in the previous century that helped to render the theological reformation so instantaneously effective and revolutionary. These legal and theological reformation movements remained mutually inspiring and integrating after the early 1520s. Many of the leading jurists of sixteenth-century Germany were Lutheran converts, who were quick to translate the new theological ideas of the day into new legal forms.<sup>15</sup>

Through literacy, the Reformed pious citizen should have been able to access the Law in its superior form (the Scripture) and its human, imperfect but admirable form (the administrative and legal systems). Witte's analysis gives a further historical background

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<sup>15</sup> John Witte, Jr., *The Civic Seminary: Sources of Modern Public Education in the Lutheran Reformation of Germany*, "Journal of Law and Religion," 12, no. 1 (1995 - 1996), pp. 174-75.

to the collaboration between the municipalities and the Reformed church in providing general education, which was powerfully advocated by Luther in his 1524 treatise *An die Rathsherren*. Only an educational system articulated in a network of schools could provide that *pervasiveness* and *resilience* (in Witte's words), which soon became a feature of the Reformation ethics and conduct of life.

This perspective helps in understanding a further nuance in the representation of nature and the animal realm when Luther speaks about education. As a rule, wild nature (the forest with its plants, birds, and animals: the future place of the romantic *Wanderung* as a proud experience of self-education) is given as a negative example in comparison to domesticated nature. Nevertheless, "oxen and horses, dogs and pigs," i.e., the animals collaborating with men in the orderly life of human civilization, are depicted as *passive* participants to the great gift of civic life, void of any responsibility and unable to collaborate with it. Order and law are prerequisites which make possible the distribution of God's grace in this life, but they can be fully enjoyed only possessing the educability proper of the human species.

### **5. Lost in translation: The joy, necessity, and inherent violence of education**

The short passages here seem to postulate a total overturning of the Renaissance re-enactment of classical *paideia* in which education was seen as a process eliciting and liberating the endless potentialities of men in the context of a deep and freely chosen relationship between teacher and pupil. As always in history, the picture is not so clear and simple.

The concept of education connected to the *artes liberales* and the one focusing on the adaptation to the social context coexisted long before the Reformation, and they were of two different social classes, the nobility and the middle class. The Reformation gives new visibility to education as adaptation because of the central role assigned to the

common citizen of the middle class (the *Bürger*) in the construction and maintenance of the new social order. Both views, as highlighted by Steven Ozment, were compatible with religion, both Protestant and Catholic (while Reformation emphasises the “fallen” nature of man, lacking the possibility of indulgences and similar intercessions):

Between 1400 and 1600, two popular views of childrearing held sway, one more medieval and German, the other closer to the spirit of the Italian Renaissance (Nitschke 1984). Each viewed a child as basically unformed at birth. According to the first, the key to a child's development lay in its imitative nature; like monkeys, children adapted to the environment in which they were placed and progressively realized their adult selves, morally and vocationally, by internalizing the habits, skills, and virtues they saw around them. The second view rather stressed the individuality of the child over its malleable nature, each child said to possess its own inborn talent, which interaction with others elicited. From this point of view, the more varied a child's early experience, the truer to itself its development was likely to be. Both points of view accommodated the Judeo-Christian belief in humankind's fallenness, which encouraged conscientious parents and educators to pursue a highly structured and religious upbringing at home and at school.<sup>16</sup>

Luther undoubtedly participates in this ambiguity about the role of education. Notwithstanding the 1524 and 1530 texts give more space to the theme of adaptation, their structure as public speeches should be considered, and Luther's fidelity to the *studia humanitatis* must not be overshadowed by the rhetorical devices used in both addresses. The discourse *An die Ratsherren* contains several deeply emotional passages about the joy of studying languages and accessing the Scriptures, and of the privilege of the post-humanist scholars in comparison to the ancient Fathers.<sup>17</sup> The very passion often declared by Luther for teaching and school was more linked to the discipline of the *magister*

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Ozment, *Family, Religion, and the Making of Godly Citizens: A Case Study from the 1530s*, “*Paedagogica Historica*,” 35, no. Sup. 1 (1999), pp. 29-30.

<sup>17</sup> *An die Radherrn aller stedte Deutsches lands*; WA 15, p. 41.

*literarum* than to the daily toil of the primary teacher of the German popular schools. Luther was fond of the “open sea exploration” offered by the realm of biblical philology and the infinite nuances of translation and interpretation practised by the theologians; nevertheless, he was aware that popular education and basic *grammatica*, with its harsh discipline, was necessary to provide fertile ground to the “young trees” bound to the delights of higher learning. And he was also aware that the discipline of learning brings with it the inherent violence of shaping the growth of a living being:

Und ich, wenn ich vom predig ampt und andern sachen ablassen kundte, odder müste, So wolt ich kein ampt lieber haben, denn Schulmeister odder knaben lerer sein. Denn ich weis, das dis werck, nehest dem Predig ampt das aller nützlichst, grössest und beste ist, Und weis dazu noch nicht, welchs unter beiden das beste ist, denn es ist schweer alte hunde bendig, und allte schelcke frum zu machen, daran doch das predig ampt erbeit, und viel umbsonst erbeiten mus. Aber die iungen bewmlin kan man besser biegen und ziehen, ob gleich auch ettliche druber zu brechen.<sup>18</sup>

[And I, if I could or should leave preaching and my other businesses, there is no activity I would like more than being a teacher or schooling the children. Because I know, that this work, together with the office of preaching, is the most useful, the greatest and the best; but I don't know which of these two is the best, because it is difficult to tame old dogs and make old blasphemers pious: this is the work of preaching, and often it works in vain. *But the young small trees can be better bent and grown, even if some/many of them would break because of it*].

Educating young people, pinpoints Luther, is more gratifying than trying to correct adults already endured in the practise of sin. From the perspective of salvation, the teacher has many more opportunities for success than the preacher. The joy of educating, in the usual metaphor, is the joy of a careful gardener in the act of both bending and growing the

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<sup>18</sup> *Eine Predigt das man Kinder zur Schulen halten solle*; WA 30 II, pp. 579-580.

plants to their most beautiful appearance. The verbs *liegen* and *ziehen* express the double nature of the educational act; the discipline bound to the adaptation of the pupil (to the grammar rules or the social order) and the harmonious development of intellect, faith, and personality go hand-in-hand.

The action of bending, with its inherent duress, implies the possibility of breaking the young tree and is given by Luther as a necessary risk of the profession. The passage closes on this powerful image, which is one of the most interesting proposed in Luther's works because of its potential ambiguity. The pronoun *etliche* can be translated as "some," "several," or "many." Here the choice is crucial to understand Luther's educational perspective: only "some" of the pupils or "many" of them would be "broken" by the loving but strong action of the educator? Modern translations generally choose "some" perhaps because it is less challenging than the harsher "many," but there is no way to keep the fruitful ambiguity of the original text. Luther probably did not want to establish a quantity or probability. He only aimed at pinpointing that education is as violent as much as caring. This must be because the fallen nature of man resists God's grace – but also because the impetuous nature of the young tree has the energy to break its pot when it is too small. In this inner tension that goes unescapably lost in translation, the vitality and contradictions of Reformation pedagogy are portrayed with unsurpassed evidence.