

PARACELSUS

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Ralph M. Lewis served as the Emperor of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC from 1939 to 1987. He was an avid historian and world-traveler. In this article (originally printed in the Rosicrucian Digest in March 1952) he shares his admiration for Philippus Aureolus Paracelsus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus, the Alchemical Genius of the Middle Ages.



There it stood before us—square, boxlike harshly etched against the dull rainy sky. This was the original unit of the old University of Basel. Fondly, Rosicrucians have come to refer to it as a Rosicrucian university. In it the renowned Paracelsus inculcated into his discourses on medical science Rosicrucian metaphysical principles and alchemical terminology. To know something of the life of Philippus Aureolus Paracelsus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, is to know of the early struggles of Light against ignorance and prejudice. It is also to know something about Basel. The old building before which we stood—plain and stark, situated on a vantage point over the Rhine River—was a crucible where a great mind was tested and found to have the sterling qualities of a mystic and humanitarian.

Theophrastus von Hohenheim was born November 14, 1493, near Einsiedeln. His home was near the so-called Devil's Bridge which spanned the Sihl River. At the time of Theophrastus's birth, Columbus had just returned to Spain to make the world-shaking announcement of his discoveries. Theophrastus grew up in a cultural environment, the effects of which stood him in good stead all his life. His father, William, was a physician, a man well versed in philosophy and with a strong inclination toward an inquiry into knowledge. In fact, Paracelsus—we shall call him now by the name by which he is generally known—later said of his father that he was "his first teacher."

Early in his youth, Paracelsus began his peregrinations. It was customary for young men who sought higher education to travel extensively. It was thought essential to their acquiring of important knowledge. These journeys took the students to the various universities throughout Europe where they tarried a while at each. It was presumed, and not without merit, that the experience of applying acquired knowledge to the affairs of the day as one journeyed about was the most beneficial. It made life a great laboratory to try out the theories expounded in the universities. It was in the year 1507 when Paracelsus left his father's home. His mode of travel was simple, principally by foot over the rolling hills, through the long valleys, staying a while in little hamlets as well as in the larger cities. He attended the University of Tübingen (from which his father had been graduated) and then successively of Heidelberg, Mainz, Munich, and Vienna—all of this on his first journey. He soon had intercourse with renowned alchemists or spagyristes of the period, whose studies intrigued him and profoundly impressed him.

Paracelsus was greatly disappointed with the scholastic methods of the German universities. He resented their dogmatic attitude which to him seemed to close people's minds to new facts. He further disliked the pompous roles which the professors assumed as learned people among the ignorant. After a brief time at home again, he resumed his

peregrinations, and this time for a period of about twelve years! This brought him a variation of fortune. He went to Africa and to the boundaries of Arabia. He was determined that further observation must be made of the circumstances contributing to disease. An intimate association must be had with the people who are suffering to understand the causes of their illness. He believed it necessary to be close to people and to nature; for he held that they constitute the greatest laboratory available for research. The medical practices of the period appeared to him to be stultified by the traditions in which they were steeped. After achieving his doctorate, he was resolved to seek out suffering humanity wherever it might be found.

It is about this time that he acquired the surname, *Paracelsus*. The “Para” is from the Greek, which literally means “over and beyond.” The “celsus” was after the Roman patrician, Cornelius Celsus. The latter had written an excellent treatise on medicine, *De Medicina*, which had been rediscovered. Its contents inspired and encouraged young Theophrastus. By adopting the pseudonym, Paracelsus, he believed that he was associating with himself the reminder of an ideal which he wished to attain.

In Spain, Paracelsus consulted some of the eminent Moorish occultists and Islamic mystics who were well versed in the Hermetic philosophy of the ancient East. There is no question that these contacts greatly influenced his *esoteric* writings. His interest in the profound mysteries of human existence, which go beyond the care of his body, was thus heightened. In Paris, he became provoked with the professors of the Sorbonne University. He wrote of these instructors in medicine: “Parisian learned doctors despise all others and yet are nothing but utter ignoramuses themselves; they think their long necks and high judgment rise right unto Heaven.”



The Rosicrucian Portrait of Paracelsus. Note the sword held by Paracelsus. According to legend, Paracelsus kept a miracle material in the end-knob of his sword, which was called Azoth, which was believed to be able to cure every possible disease.

Also referring to the practices of some of the scholars elsewhere, he said, “They know not what experimentum means, and how experiments are made, neither their origin nor theory.”

Eventually his travels took him to Russia; there he was much impressed with a visit to Mongolian tribes. He noticed the powerful effects that “faith and imagination” had upon their healing of the sick. Thereupon he wrote an extensive exposition of the subject which, in effect, constitutes an early treatise on hypnotism and psychosomatic medicine. During his peregrinations he was plagued with lice and devised a successful formula for a powder to combat them—it was the first medicine of its kind.

New Remedies Compounded

During the siege of the stronghold of Suleiman II, the great Muslim war lord, by the Knights of Rhodes, Paracelsus took part in helping the sick and wounded. To



him it was an excellent clinical opportunity to note the effects of the diseases and to compound new remedies for them. All of this was experimentation which was not being done in the great universities in which he had studied.

His knowledge of alchemy was so thorough that it gave him an advantageous insight into the chemical properties and their effects on the human organism. He wrote many of his formulas in the alchemical symbols commonly employed by the Rosicrucians of later years. These were not understood by other physicians who became suspicious of his methods. The success of his treatments was becoming widespread. This aroused jealousy in his profession, the members of which exercised strong political influence. In 1525, by their connivance, he was arrested in Salzburg and accused of giving support to rebellious peasants. No evidence was forthcoming and so he was dismissed, but was forced to leave the city.

Still the stories of Paracelsus's fame spread. He visited the home of a girl paralyzed since childhood. After a thorough examination of his young patient, he prescribed a medicine to which he gave the name of Red Lion, an alchemical symbol. To the amazement of her parents, the girl, after a few applications, was able to walk again, and this added to the growing acclaim of his powers. His writings had now become extensive. One of his greatest was *Volumen Paramirum*. In this work, he divided the causes of disease into five general parts as fields for research and study. The first he called *natural*. This pertained to the natural organism itself and what may be inherited. The second division was *environment*, the effects of one's living conditions and associations upon him. The third consisted of the corrupt influence of the *world-soul*. This he delineates as constituting an inharmony with Cosmic forces. The fourth division was *mental discrepan-*

cies, as the hatreds and jealousies which we harbor—or, in other words, psychological causes. The fifth was the *spiritual*, or the violation of the Divine laws.

While in Basel, a prominent personage was stricken. It was the renowned publisher and printer, Johannes Froben, an associate of the great Erasmus. The patient had severe pain in his leg, which physicians could not alleviate. As was the custom, they then suggested amputating the leg. In desperation, the patient called in Paracelsus for consultation. The latter treated and saved the leg. Desiderius Erasmus, famous scholar and theologian from Rotterdam, was in Basel at the time and *witnessed* the treatment. He spoke glowingly of what he had experienced.

This episode caused the Town Council of Basel to invite Paracelsus to become its community physician and to teach at the University of Basel. There were but fifteen medical students when Paracelsus assumed his duties. At the very beginning of his professorship, he expounded his policy of instruction. He would teach principles which “he had acquired through the nature of things, aided by careful reflection...” This, in effect, was a proclamation that he would profit by his long experience of working out among people and from the careful records which he had made of his treatments. He would not abide by the methods and texts which observation had shown him to be obsolete. His further unconventionality was manifest in his giving lectures in the “vulgar” German instead of the traditional Latin. Further, he despised and refused to wear the ornate robes of his colleagues as being too ostentatious. In fact, he ridiculed their pompous display.

He exposed a noxious practice that has continued even to our times. He demanded that the profit-sharing practice between physicians and apothecaries be discontinued. Though his students increased

considerably in number and were highly enthusiastic about his manner of presentation, he incurred the further wrath of the professors of medicine. They caricatured him and challenged his unorthodox methods as being questionable. The persecution reached such proportions that he was forced to flee by night on horseback, the means being provided by a friend, as there was a plot against his life.

During the plague in 1534, Paracelsus entered the old city of Sterzing, which was particularly affected. All who could had fled the terror and death of the city. Nevertheless, he boldly entered, walking down its streets, which were deserted except for the rumbling two-wheeled carts on which bodies were piled high. Without any show of fear, he began treating the afflicted, introducing new

medicine and remedial measures. He was successful in helping stop the epidemic. When the city had recovered, it failed to show appreciation for the valiant efforts of this stranger who, at the particular time, was reduced to the state of a pauper. The populace was suspicious of his philosophical doctrines and even feared that his successful treatments constituted an exorcising of some malevolent powers. He was thus expelled and continued his journey and studies. He was maligned not only during his own time but for centuries or until comparatively recently, principally in the histories of his own profession. It is only in the last few years, comparatively speaking, that his profession has not only vindicated him but highly eulogized him and also printed some of his heretofore unpublished manuscripts.

Medicine is not only a science; it is also an art. It does not consist of compounding pills and plasters; it deals with the very processes of life, which must be understood before they may be guided.

Medicine rests upon four pillars – philosophy, astronomy, alchemy, and ethics.

The art of healing comes from nature, not from the physician. Therefore the physician must start from nature, with an open mind.

When we undertake to create something, we establish a new heaven, as it were, and from it the work that we desire to create flows into us... For such is the immensity of human beings.

Paracelsus

