Paracelsus (1493-1541)

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Phillipus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus Von Hohenheim, was born near Zurich, Switzerland, the year after Columbus discovered the new world. He inherited his interest from his father, a practising physician and a botanist. He was especially partial to the prefix *para*, and named himself Paracelsus (better than Celsus).

Paracelsus very likely studied the arts at the University of Vienna and medicine at the University of Ferrara in Italy. He recognised the relative development standstill of Middle Ages. He had the courage of his convictions and burned the works of Galen and Avicenna in public in 1527, as town physician of Basel. He denounced ancients in harsh terms, refusing to accept their theory of humours. He also insisted on lecturing in German instead of Latin. The result was that he was kicked out of Basel.

He had to do much of wandering (part of it not altogether voluntary), for his life was marked by eccentricity, quarrelsome ness and vast number of enemies created by him. The last twelve years of his life were spent in practising without many publications, as printers were reluctant to accept his manuscripts.

Despite the mystical obscurity of statements, he marks the beginning of the transition from alchemy. He came to one crucial decision about the purpose of Alchemy, that it was not meant to discover methods for manufacturing gold but to prepare medicines to treat various diseases. Paracelsus’ contemporary and fellow physician Agriola, had the same point of view, but it was his loud mouth that did most to bring it to general notice. Apart from medicines used from plant sources, Paracelsus stressed the importance of minerals. He did not always achieve happy results, but his almost psychotic cocksureness led him to use chemicals, which included mercury compounds, sulphur, lead, antimony, iron and copper, even when practice showed them to be toxic.

Paracelsus wrote intelligently on the problems of mental disease, scoffing at theories of demonic possessions. He correctly associated head injuries with paralysis and cretinism with the goitre. He was first to describe the medical use of zinc and is sometimes considered its discoverer, though the alloy brass was known even in ancient times.

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