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**THE WORLD OF THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE: ART,  
IMAGE AND IMAGINATION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF PARACELUSUS<sup>1</sup>**

Could one think of anyone as famous yet as mysterious, so open still to numerous questions, the object of such never-ending arguments, as Paracelsus? This is the name by which we know the Swiss physician, alchemist and philosopher Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493–1541). But during his lifetime he was called many things. Aureol (from Latin *aureolus* – gold), perhaps because of the colour of his hair, perhaps because of his alchemical pursuits; the Luther of Medicine for his desire to radically reform the art of healing; even Cacophrastus, due to his use of harsh language, words impermissible in polite society, and his lack of moderation in argument.

Innate talent, vast practical experience, wide-ranging contacts with a variety of people, numerous travels – all contributed to create the phenomenon that is Paracelsus.

Many authors have written of Paracelsus' travels to different lands, mentioning places such as Ireland, England, Lithuania, Russia, Prussia, Poland, Hungary and Croatia. There is considerable doubt that he truly spent time in all these countries: though he probably did visit some of them, the list given in Paracelsus' curriculum vitae is clearly exaggerated. In the preface to his *Wundarznei* he himself provides a list: 'I did not content myself with lectures, manuscripts and books but sought to expand my knowledge during my travels in Granada, Lisbon, Spain and England, Brandenburg, Prussia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Wallachia, Transylvania, the Carpathians, the Wendian Mark, and other countries which there is no need to mention here.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The text is translated by Catherine Phillips.

<sup>2</sup> '... mich nit alein derselbigen leren und gschriften, büchern ergeben wöllen, sonder weiter gwandert den Granaten, gen Lizabon, durch Hispanien, durch Engeland, durch den Mark, durch Prüschen, durch Litau, durch Poland, Ungern, Walachi, Sibenbürgen, Crabaten, Windish mark, auch sonst andere lendr nit not zu erzölen...' Theophrast von Hohenheim, *Sämtliche Werke, I. Abteilung: Medizinische, naturwissenschaftliche und philosophische Schriften*, ed. Karl Sudhoff, 14 vols, Berlin, 1922–1933, X: 19–20. See: Pirmin Meier, *Arzt und Prophet. Annäherungen an Theophrastus von Hohenheim*, Zurich, Ammann Verlag, 1993: 141.

Elsewhere, admittedly, in the *Spital-Buch*, the list is slightly different. Nor is there documentary evidence for such wide-ranging peregrinations.

Nonetheless, we can only be amazed by the incredible breadth and range of Paracelsus' interests. Along with medicine – the art of healing – he touches in his books on all kinds of branches of knowledge that were of interest to him: philosophy, ethics, astrology, theology, alchemy and much more. Least of all, perhaps, was Paracelsus concerned with artistic theory and though he wrote at length on art, he had no interest in theoretical discourse. Everything he says about the arts, about imagination and the source of creativity is in some way related to practice, while emphasising that practice could never be sufficient for success without an understanding of the essential truth. He sought to know and understand the world, as a whole and in all its separate manifestations. One modern writer, Pirmin Meier (b. 1947), wrote of Paracelsus that: 'He gave his energies to healing activity in the service of Science, the knowledge... found in nature.'<sup>1</sup>

Nature and mankind, matter and consciousness, the surrounding world and its image, natural and artificial – all these aspects of existence attracted our Swiss thinker's attention. Paracelsus also took a keen interest in the spiritual side of human life, although his ideas on the subject were far from unequivocal, at times even contradictory. On 5 October 1941 Carl Jung presented a paper on the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Paracelsus in which he said: 'It is not easy to see this spiritual phenomenon in the round and to give a really comprehensive account of it. Paracelsus was too contradictory or too chaotically many-sided, for all his obvious one-sidedness in other ways.'<sup>2</sup>

Such a broad approach on the part of Paracelsus quite obviously meant that he could not avoid the subject of art in his thinking and his philosophical constructs. And since he could not conceive of medicine without philosophy, his philosophy was not mere empty words: in philosophising, Paracelsus laid the firm foundation for his own professional practice, the practice that gave his life meaning.

When Paracelsus uses the word 'art' it is obvious that he by no means always gives it the same meaning as we do today. Often he has in mind what was known in Antiquity as *techne* (Greek τέχνη), meaning not only the art form itself (music, painting and such like) but the physical craft of creation, and – of fundamental interest to Paracelsus – medical treatment. Moreover, over many centuries, art (great, royal or Hermetic) was a term used to describe alchemy, although this same sphere of activity was known equally as 'philosophy', 'learning' and 'science'.

So what did Paracelsus mean when he spoke of the arts? In one treatise, writing of the significance of the arts as divine gifts, Paracelsus enlarged

<sup>1</sup> 'Er strömt aus in heilende Tätigkeit im Dienste der Scientia, dem Wissen... in der Natur.' Meier, Op. cit.: 302.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Jung, 'Paracelsus als gestige Erscheinung', 1942, published in English as: 'Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon', in: *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, XIII: Alchemical Studies*, tr. R. F. C. Hull, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967: 111.

on the scope of the concept, asserting: ‘... and all arts of the earth are divine, [and] are from God; and nothing from any other foundation. For the Holy Spirit is the igniter of the light of nature: for this reason, no one should condemn astronomy, no one alchemy, no one medicine, no one philosophy, no one theology, no one the [liberal] arts, no one poetry, no one music, no one geomancy, no one auguria, and so on for all the rest.’<sup>1</sup>

For Paracelsus, each of the arts – whether a practical craft, making music or treating the sick – was a gift from God himself. Writing about himself and about the skill in healing that he had been given, he wrote: ‘The heavens did not make me a physician: God made me one. The heavens do not make physicians. It is an art that comes from God and not from the heavens.’<sup>2</sup> We should of course note that the scandalous doctor’s approach to religion was somewhat unusual. Not only had he no wish to show formal respect for the authorities, but equally he had no desire to recognise formal Church ritualism. In his treatise ‘On the Invisible Diseases’, Paracelsus concluded: ‘From this it follows that [there are] those to whom fasting and prayer can serve bad ends. This does not mean that fasting and prayer are for that reason bad things: what is bad is that which is added to it... By this I mean that we do not need any ceremonies.’<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Paracelsus was almost the first to describe the phenomenon of religious hysteria. That ritualism, those ceremonies that he saw as superfluous, could turn the virtues of faith into their exact opposite, into pharisaism, and could even lead to psychological ailments, which he called ‘invisible diseases’. Pharisaian falsity and insincerity contradict the true essence of the world created by God. In another treatise, ‘Paragranum’, Paracelsus wrote: ‘For inasmuch as God created the art[s] and gave them for the use of the human being, which is something no one can deny, art must dwell only in truth, and indeed in the certainty of truth, not in the desperation of art but rather in the certainty of the art. For God wants the human being to be truthful; not a doubter and liar.’<sup>4</sup>

That exclusivity and supreme value which comes from the Lord, felt Paracelsus, freed one from respect for Ancient authorities such as Avicenna and Galen, since their art did not accord with the truth of the world created by God. Paracelsus notes with a certain sarcasm that the chance of finding the knowledge needed in the writings of Galen and Avicenna was as high as that of a peasant finding something useful in a treatise by a learned agronomist. Tellingly, Paracelsus looked to artistic creations that were well known to his contemporaries in choosing examples to illustrate his words. With that some light sarcasm he wrote: ‘It is as if someone wanted to learn to be

<sup>1</sup> Paracelsus, ‘Paragranum’, in: *Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541). Essential Theoretical Writings*, ed. and tr. Andrew Weeks, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2008: 269.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*: 91.

<sup>3</sup> Paracelsus, ‘On the Invisible Diseases’, in: *Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541)*, *Op. cit.*: 919.

<sup>4</sup> Paracelsus, ‘Paragranum’, *Op. cit.*: 265.

a musicus<sup>1</sup> by relying on [the tale of] Tannhäuser and of Frau von Weißenburg.<sup>2</sup> Here Paracelsus had in mind the medieval tale of Tannhäuser, which had been published in a popular edition in 1515, and the legend and song of the Lady of Weißenburg. Since the song is known from a manuscript of 1524–1525 and since Paracelsus wrote ‘Paragranum’ in 1530–1531, we are led to ask if the famous physician and alchemist was not equally interested in folk art and the very latest developments in poetry. Although, of course, with regard to the Lady of Weißenburg, it is possible that he had in mind not the song but a medieval tale which would have been familiar long before.

A major role was played in the philosophy of Paracelsus by ideas about the visible and invisible. In many of his works he gives thought to the visible and invisible worlds, visible and invisible essences, visible and invisible diseases, and, finally, the visible and invisible parts of the human body. According to Paracelsus, ‘What is visible is the external, which is not essential.’<sup>3</sup>

We also find mention of visible and invisible images, which Paracelsus explains thus: ‘[Take] a piece of wood that lies before us. From it can be crafted an image [Bild] by the craftsman [Schnitzer] who takes from it that which does not accrue to it. This is to say that in the [piece of] wood there is an image which is not initially apparent.’<sup>4</sup> Paracelsus equates this creation of an image with divine creation. Though here he calls God ‘Highest Master Craftsman’,<sup>5</sup> responsible for creating everything, including mankind, in the right proportions and dimensions and of the necessary quality.

Paracelsus meditates on the roots and sources of art in a number of texts. In ‘Paramirum’, for instance: ‘[Take] the glazier or glass-maker – from whom does he have his art? Not from himself: one’s own reason is in no way capable of arriving at such a thing. Yet as soon as he took the subjects of his art and cast them into the fire, the light of nature showed him glass. That art has been encompassed in those containers. It is the same with the physician. Hence follows the second example. A carpenter builds a house: he can invent this himself out of his wisdom if he has wood and an axe.’<sup>6</sup> Paracelsus goes on to give thought to the art of the physician who, though armed with medical knowledge and with a patient to heal, lacks the necessary experience, and he concludes that art is something acquired during the process of creation. ‘Thus, just as the glassmaker has [received] his art of glassmaking from the fire, since he did not know beforehand what he was doing, but [in so doing] has retained the art, thus fire teaches the wisdom and art of medicine, which is the test of the physician.’<sup>7</sup> Paracelsus’ assertions thus

<sup>1</sup> The Latin word *musicus* can be translated both as ‘musician’ and as ‘poet’.

<sup>2</sup> Paracelsus, ‘Paragranum’, Op. cit.: 179.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.: 171.

<sup>4</sup> Paracelsus, ‘Paramirum’, in: *Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541)*, Op. cit.: 387–389.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: 389.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.: 309.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

lead one to conclude that no one can achieve success in any art (the range of understandings encompassed by that word being extremely broad) without talent given from above, but that divine gift alone is not sufficient, for one must travel the path to success, acquiring knowledge and experience on the way, mastering the necessary skills that come to the bearer of a divine gift only in the process of practice. In another treatise Paracelsus was to emphasise that: 'The art reveals itself through the things. It does not conceal itself.'<sup>1</sup>

Writing about the process of creation of any kind, Paracelsus repeatedly noted the importance of combining the visible and visible in that process. 'However, I will have more to say about the invisible, about which first of all the following example should be heeded. The visible body has an effect on all things; and all of its motions and actions are seen by the human being. But all of this is only half of the action performed; it is only that which we see. The other half is seen by no one. It is performed by the invisible body. Imagine that a carpenter were to build a house with [what we will call] two bodies: In respect to the invisible one, he is building it in the image. With respect to the visible one, he is building that which is manifest.'<sup>2</sup>

Leaving aside the extensive reflections that follow, we shall pick out Paracelsus' assertion that both the visible and the invisible body are present during the process of construction, of skilful creation or erection, each of them in accordance with its nature and purpose. The image created by the invisible body influences the work of the visible body, which is responsible for creating the material and tangible. What does Paracelsus mean by the word image? Interestingly, in explaining this concept he gives a definition, *impressio*, that is almost modern in gnosiological terms. 'Thus, your eyes see a house, and even when the house no longer stands before your eyes, you still see it.'<sup>3</sup> A modern philosopher might define *impressio* or 'impression' as the image of the object that arises through the direct effect of the latter on the sensory organs.

The visible and invisible bodies act in their own allocated spheres. The invisible creates images through imagination, the visible in the material world, on an earthly, even earthy, basis. 'A painter who wants to paint must have an earthly wall. A stonemason who wants to make things must have an earthly ground. The smithy needs an anvil of the earth. In sum, all of this means that whatever the human being makes, he has to make on something.'<sup>4</sup>

According to Paracelsus, a major role is played in the process of creation by imagination. Meditating on the participation of the visible and invisible bodies in creative activity, he directly relates the impact on physical bodies

<sup>1</sup> Paracelsus, 'On the Matrix', in: *Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541)*, Op. cit.: 707.

<sup>2</sup> Paracelsus, 'On the Invisible Diseases', in: *Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541)*, Op. cit.: 797–799.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.: 799.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.: 799–801

and the effect of the imagination, linking the image and work with material, earthly objects. The instruments and operations in the visible and invisible worlds are those relevant to each. As Paracelsus wrote: ‘No art has been given by God without that which is necessary for its completion... The imagination is a craftsman in and of itself and possesses both the art and the entire equipment to make everything that it has in mind, whether it be cooperage, painting, metal working, weaving, or what have you. It is prepared and skilled for all these things. What else is needed? Nothing except the spheres in which it works: that is, the wall on which it paints what it chooses. There is nothing else that it lacks. It is so subtle and powerful that it is able to imitate everything that the eyes see and grasp, and indeed it can even accomplish things that the visible body cannot.’<sup>1</sup>

Writing about categories of imagination and impressions, Paracelsus relates them to concepts of the highest and lowest, to macrocosm and microcosm, to elevation and descent, in a way utterly in keeping with the principles of Hermeticism. ‘What climbs up into heaven is *imaginatio*, and what falls down is *impressio* born out of the imagination.’<sup>2</sup> *Impressio* as understood by Paracelsus is not just the formation of some image in the consciousness, but rather an influence, an impression left by heavenly, macrocosmic influences on the microcosm, on the individual.

Paracelsus’ ideas about imagination, which he sees as linking the visible and invisible worlds and as being a source of influence on material objects, were to have their own effect on many alchemical philosophers. In his famous *Alchemical Lexicon*, one of Paracelsus’s followers, Martin Ruland (1569–1611), wrote: ‘Imagination is the star within man, the heavenly or supra-heavenly body.’<sup>3</sup> In another article he explained what is meant by supra-heavenly bodies (*corpora supercoelestia*): ‘Supra-heavenly bodies are those which are experienced by the mind only through imagination and not through physical vision. They are miraculous subjects of the effect of spagyria.’<sup>4</sup>

It is thought that it was Paracelsus who introduced – along with many other revolutionary innovations – the term spagyria, defining something which was, like alchemy, also described as an art. Scholars disagree as to the meaning of this word.

Many alchemists and scholars of alchemy see no difference between the two words spagyria and alchemy. Others differentiate between them. The Italian

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.: 801.

<sup>2</sup> ‘und das herauf kompt in himel, ist imaginatio und wider herab felt, ist impressio, die geboren ist aus der imagination.’ English translation cited in: Heinz Schott, ‘“Invisible diseases” – Imagination and Magnetism’, in: Ole Peter Grell, ed., *Paracelsus: the Man and his Reputation, his Ideas and their Transformations*, Leiden: Brill, 1998: 315.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Imaginatio, est astrum in homine, coeleste sive supracoeleste corpus.’ Martin Ruland, *Lexicon Alchemiae, sive Dictionarium Alchemisticum*, Frankfurt: apud Johannem Andream & Wolfgangi, 1612: 264.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Corpora supercoelestia, sunt ea, quae per mentem in imaginatione solunt, & non per oculos carnos cognoscuntur. Spagyrorum subiecta sunt mirabilium operum.’ Ibid.: 175.

alchemist, apothecary and physician Angelus Sala (1576–1612) wrote: ‘Spagyric art makes up that part of chemistry which deals with natural bodies: vegetable, animal and mineral. Adepts of this art perform the necessary operations with the intention of applying these bodies in medicine.’<sup>1</sup>

With no doubt that the gift of art came from God, Paracelsus – probably in response to accusations of heresy and sorcery – raised an acute question in the treatise ‘On the Invisible Diseases’. It can be summarised thus. If all arts come from God, then how do we understand those arts that are viewed as dubious by Christianity, such as divination, fortune-telling, alchemy and such like? And how should the possessor of a gift deal with the fact that in using the art he has been given, and thus in helping others, he must violate all the rules, even biblical commandments? With all his innate wit and colourful expression, Paracelsus was unequivocal in his answer: ‘Let us suppose that the entire devil himself is involved in the art that comes into my hands. Yet the helping is in my hands as well. At that point, [the art] is no longer the devil’s. It is mine... For this reason, I can appropriately demonstrate what sort of things one has called “sorcery” and misrepresented with other names of the kind. We are called upon to help to another. Would it be wrong, if the devil were standing before me and I were to say to him: “Go help the horse out of the ditch in my stead,” and he did it? ... Rather, it would be in true faith that I would command the devil or a spirit to do such a thing... For it would be appropriate that the devil should be obedient to someone who is faithful.’<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ‘Ars Spagyrica sit illa Chymiis pars, quae pro subjecto habet corpora naturalia Vegerabilium videlicet, Animalium, ac Mineralium: in quibus quicquid operatur, id ad utilem in Medicina finem tendit.’  
Angeli Salae, *Vicentini Opera medica-chymica hactenus separatim diversisque linguis excusa, nunc uno volumine, Latinoque idiomate edita*, Frankfurt: apud Hermannum à Sande, 1682: 221.

<sup>2</sup> Paracelsus, ‘On the Invisible Diseases’, Op. cit.: 903.