

HIPPOCRATES' COMPLAINT

The fascinating Journey of the Renaissance Medicine

GUIDO del GIUDICE

The teachings of the Renaissance era are still a live issue and they are taken into account in our culture nowadays, because the Renaissance is not only a historic period but it represents a condition of the soul, which returns to illuminate whenever the human action is overwhelmed by periods of torpor and obscurantism. The Renaissance tradition has continued to exercise its influence in art and philosophy in different ways and at different times, whereas nowadays it reduces itself to pure historical curiosity in the

medical-scientific field. Its inexhaustible source of creativity and the awareness of the human capabilities have been sacrificed in the name of impetuous progress and they have no longer been considered unable to offer any valid contribution. The reference to the forefathers of the *ars medica* (Hippocrates, Avicenna, Galen) remains although formally, whereas the memory of the medical renaissance has lost itself in the centuries, because everything refers to the pre-Galilean era is something to be ashamed of. The desire to get rid of ancient subjects, such as magic,



Previous page: Hippocrates, engraving by Peter Paul Rubens (1638). Below, from left: Hippocrates and Galen, painting in the crypt of Cathedral Anagni (first half of the twelfth century); Hippocrates painted by a Byzantine artist of the fourteenth century.



Frontispiece, *Opus Chirurgicum* by Paracelsus (printed in 1565, Frankfurt).

astrology and alchemy, has alienated the philosophy of nature, which once allowed to doctor to realize that everything is related to everything, and that science alone cannot provide any explanation to every question, without any regard of a monistic vision both of man and of universe. Contrary to the ancients, who had to be talented in order to achieve the general truth, the modern doctors, gradually, have focused on some particular facts. This change in perspective has led to a transformation of themselves: in order to pursue science and technology achievements,

they have chosen to sacrifice the combination of medicine and philosophy, that always characterized their liberal education. The famous sentence of Hippocrates, that says the doctor who becomes philosopher is like God (“ιατρός φιλόσοφος ισόθεος”), then resumed by Galen (“Nullus medicus nisi philosophus”), has become a veritable Renaissance dogma. “If they aren’t astronomers they are missing a wing, if they aren’t philosophers they are missing the other” said Theophrast Bombast von Hohenheim called Paracelsus, a leading



From left: Girolamo Cardano at the age of 49; Frontispiece, *Contradicentium Medicorum Liber* by Girolamo Cardano (Venice, Geronimo Scotto, 1545); Giovan Battista Della Porta at the age of 64 (picture of the seventeenth century).

have occurred whose terrible effects will affect the rising generation one day. If you consider the cycle of vicissitude in which individual survival is irrelevant, who the real fool? It would be better if we were tolerant of these precursors of the modern science, in any case they managed with science and alchemy. They weren't able to put the numerous applications of the experimental method into practice, because the reality was not revealing to them. It was difficult to achieve good results, as a consequence they turned to the medieval magic tradition. The magic was regarded by those wise men as the only mean at disposal to exploit the enormous potential of nature that was perceived by them as an active force in the Universe.

Paracelsus considered the magic "praeceptor et paedagogus" a guide to help you discover all the existing secrets in the nature: "Everyone who doesn't appeal to nature often calls it witchcraft, but it is the veritable art to which appeal". Girolamo Cardano, while he was accepting beliefs and superstitions of all kinds, he deeply conceived some innovative ideas. He was ahead of his time with his surprising insights which were then confirmed

some centuries later by the current science research. In the ten books entitled "*Contradicentium medicorum*" that are an admirable example of the differential diagnostic study, he dealt with different opinions and diagnosis of doctors about the diseases. He described the various forms of mental illness in detail, and he was one of the first doctors who treated the fever typhoid and syphilis.

In addition, he guessed the first allergies. His studies of physiognomy (which came earlier those by Della Porta), include his observations and comments that were resumed by Cesare Lombroso, who founded the crime science. He who scolds, or even derides the extravagant remedies or the rituals written in those "medical prescriptions" by both Cardano and Paracelsus should read the cures given by the luminaries to the patients of that time: it's a wonder if someone could survive! Although these men made reference to the past experiences, they relied on their own observations, rather than on the authority of the ancients. Their treatments that improved the bonds between the doctor and his patients

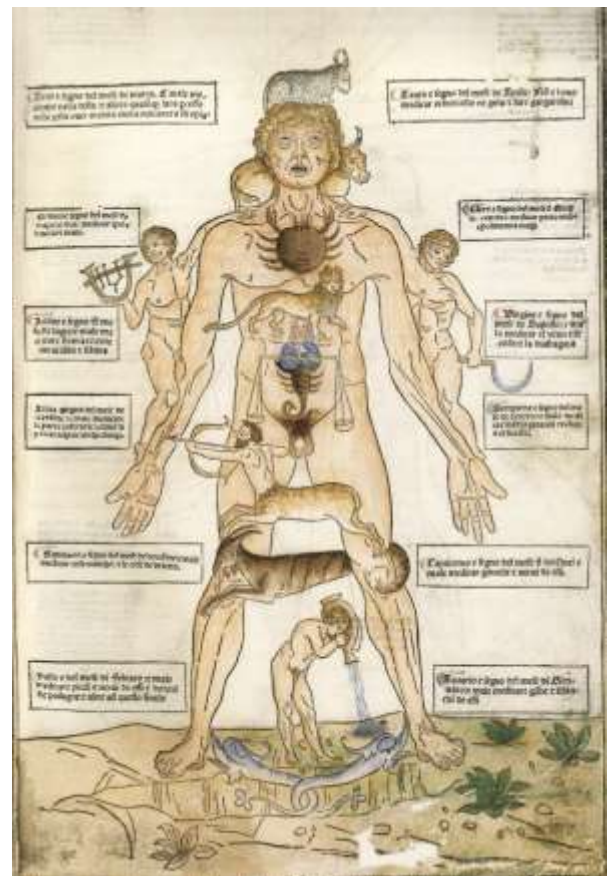
were branded by the Inquisition as demonic magic and hammered by the *malleus maleficarum*.

The dramatic act of Paracelsus who burned the *summa* of medical knowledge on one of the pyres, in Basel, in the 1527 on the day St. John, was an attack to the arrogant colleagues who were passive followers of Galen-Aristotelian theories, which led back all the diseases and their cures into rigid schemes. In *Labyrinthus medicorum errantium*, after philosophy, astronomy and alchemy, he designates, as the fourth subject the virtue, the feeling of compassion that gets the real-being of the sick, without any regard to the privileges of the caste and their profits. From this point of view, the medical Renaissance has something to teach to the Modern Age, where the doctor task is to treat the patient and to control health care costs.

After the developments of the experimental method, everyone needs to take care of patient's health, and has to consider the balance which maintains the human body and environment, one of the aspect more sacrificed for the total trust in the technological progress over the centuries. The ethical dilemma raised by genetics, the epistemological doubts deriving from the quantum physics observation have highlighted the necessity to combine the scientific knowledge with the philosophical inquiry. The medical doctor has the hard task to link up these two important human skills and mix the ancient knowledge with the newest one. Therefore he who wants to get the new scientific discoveries should regard the ancient medical science carefully, because there is no new science that cannot become old, and no old science that has not been new. O modern Asclepio, you have to look back at your ancestors who lived in the Renaissance! If you want to continue your journey, you have to look back at history: "They are amputated roots which germinate, ancient things which return yet again, occult truths which are discovered; it is a new light which after the long night riseth over the horizon in

the hemisphere of our knowledge and little by little approacheth the meridian of our intelligence" (Giordano Bruno).

Translated by Michela Placido



Zodiac Figure, *Fasciculo de medicina*, written in vulgar latin by Johannes de Ketham (1494).