The Smiling Spleen

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Paracelsianism in Storm and Stress

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Preface

Paracelsianism has its established place in the history of science and of medicine. It is there presented as the exponent of innovating ideas. These lent the basis for an observational naturalism and medical practice which in radical confrontation threatened to overthrow the still ruling ancient tradition. However, Paracelsianism was more than a new ideology with practical consequences in academic pursuits. It was a movement of far-reaching influence in many different fields - moulding and transforming the view of the world and of man. It entered the scene with a religious fervour which it retained for two centuries and which even today finds its devotees. Its history has never been written although we are well acquainted with the life and work of Theophrastus Paracelsus (1493-1541) and his 'chemiatric' followers. Nor can the present book offer
anything that could do justice to the history of the movement. It is a modest and selective contribution to the subject. Its main concern is the fate of the Paracelsian heritage as reflected in the support and critique which it elicited in the seventeenth century.

Neither Paracelsus nor his acolytes invented and argued ex vacuo—not a few of their theories and practical precepts were firmly rooted in ancient tradition. We have singled out some and endeavoured to reinterpret them in the light of the ancient sources and their characteristically Paracelsian modification. One such example is the neo-Hippocratism as advocated in Paracelsianism, another the location of central organismic authority in the stomach (cardia) and a third the spiritualization of the ancient materialist and humoralist idea of the 'smiling spleen'. There is no more incisive demonstration of the watershed between the ancient and the new than this splenic lore - however sober and rational the former would appear to the present-day observer by contrast with the daydreams of the latter. We conclude with the repercussion of the movement in the ideas of such secular torch-bearers as Boyle and Leibniz. This epitomizes the mission which Paracelsianism had to fulfil in forming an essential component in the rise of scientific and medical modernism.

Preface IX

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Note Added in Proof

Dr. Walter Pagel died on March 25, 1983. At his request Marianne Winder has seen the completed manuscript through the press.