HISTORY OF MEDICINE ON THE BORDER BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

Lecturer Mirela Radu¹, PhD, English Teacher Reka Incze (Kutasi)²

¹Faculty of Medicine, „Titu Maiorescu“ University, Bucharest
²Faculty of Medicine, University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Tg. Mures

ABSTRACT

Physicians have represented along time the main transmitters of knowledge as they were real scholars. If Renaissance promoted the study of the human body anatomy and physiology, the next step made by practitioners of medicine was to spread the enlightenment. That meant the shift of the very purpose of their profession: from passive opposition to ailments towards an active involvement into the lives of the impoverished. In order to change the odds in the battle against diseases, physicians had the great burden to enlarge the cultural horizons of those whose health was in their hands. Therefore, one way of imparting knowledge was by publishing and spreading their attainments to the general public in a comprehensible way. Once people gained awareness of the dangers entailed by bad hygiene, the physicians’ role in society switched towards more cultural realms. At the beginning of the 20th century health care professionals achieved the next step in the becoming of medicine: setting up a new science to link humanities with pure science. In Romania, the main promoters of this new border science were Victor Gomoiu and Valeriu Bologa and they co-opted other intellectuals.

Keywords: philosophy, science, history of medicine, alchemy, folklore

The new involves acknowledging the past, transforming it and bypassing mistakes. The 20th century met the expectations of those who wanted to know this history by setting up the Institute of History of Medicine in 1921 in Cluj. “More and more are those who pretend to have a spiritual imitation in the past to save the intellectual character of modern medicine. This postulate translates practically into the multiplication of medical-historical literature and giving a growing importance to the history of medicine” (1). One of the first teachers to honor the Romanian institute was the French Jules Guiart (1870-1965) who taught for three years this subject. Those who strongly supported him were Valeriu Bologa and Emil Racoviță. Guiart, fascinated by what he had discovered on the Romanian realm, would also work as an ethnographer, travelling intensively and gathering various ethnographic materials and photos from all corners of our country.

The Romanian physician Valeriu Bologa (1892-1971) is the exponent of a whole caste: that of doctors aware of the modeling power of culture. He dedicated himself to the study of natural sciences (at the University of Jena) and, afterwards, he was attracted to the medical studies in Austria and Cluj. The pride he felt for the art of healing practiced by the Romanians led him to lay the foundations of a new branch of science: the history of medicine. Between 1949 and 1971 he presided the International Society of Medicine History. Feeling that the progress can only be heard through the knowledge of the past, Bologa devoted many books to the facts of the medicine in the past. One of the first important papers signed by the Romanian physician focused on the special situation of the Hippocratic profession practiced by the Transylvanian Romanian doctors who had to face not only the lack of material means but also the political repression: Contributions to the history of medicine in Transylvania (1927). Three years later, Bologa signed a second monograph, The Beginnings of Romanian Scientific Medicine for which he would receive in 1931 the V. Adamachi Prize of the Romanian Academy. But
until 1927, the physician signed only a studies with great historical significance, dedicated to some of the most diverse themes – from midwifery, to the forerunners of doctors, from ophthalmology to medical lexicology formation: Spells, old women and midwives today and the past (1921); New data for Ioan Molnar (1925); About Romanian Occultists (1925); Medicine in Moldavia (1925); Between physiology and medicine (1925); Romanian Medical Terminology of doctor I. Molnar (1926).

Furthermore, Bologa dedicates himself to the construction and endowment of a museum dedicated to medical science in Romania. The Romanian scholar was particularly fond of two sections of the museum: Old Romanian Medicine and Medicine in the Transylvanian past. The great importance he gave to the knowledge of the old times of the profession he revered could be felt from the appreciation with which he emphasizes the importance of those early times, but also the respect he had for his ancestors. For the reader of any age is visible the attachment and esteem that doctor Bologa carries to those who have done medical pioneering work, especially in the Transylvanian region: “From this rich Romanian medical library can be reconstituted the hard work of the first gatherers of new roads in Romanian science. It is possible to see the influences from the outside, it can be seen how gradually a Romanian medical terminology was formed, it can be noticed how, from the great Davila, our medicine goes from the assimilation phase to the one of creation, as more and more characteristically forms a Romanian medical current. The old Transylvanian medical literature was represented equally well at the beginning – from the 16th century – by the works of the German doctors, later with those of the Hungarians, finally from the 18th century and with the first Romanian medical translations” (2).

But Bologa was not the only one who fought for this new branch of medicine. He was helped in his efforts by the fellow surgeon Victor Gomoiu (1882-1960) who founded museums dedicated to the history of medicine in Târgu Jiu and Craiova. Gomoiu, in turn, published a monograph entitled From the History of Medicine and Romanian Medical Education (1923) and during the interwar period he was elected president of the International Society of Medicine History (1936). Gomoiu was also the one who signed the first History of the Medical Press in Romania (1936), the work of collecting and organizing numerous medical papers and writings. But Gomoiu was not just an encyclopedic spirit. He also actively contributed to the struggle that doctors used to do with illnesses whose mortal-
The step to science would come when Eliade participated and won a contest that proposed the literary approach of a scientific subject. The title of the essay (How I found the philosopher’s stone) is an epiphany of the future path that the teenager Eliade would take. The essay written by a youngster seems to have amazed the author himself when, over the years, he said, “How much I would like to be able to reread this story now, understand what that mysterious character revealed to me, what alchemical operations he assisted! I had found the philosophical stone in my dream ... I could only understand, decades later, after I read Jung, the meaning of this oniric symbolism!”(5). The short story, though a fantastic text loaded with supernatural, has as its starting point in Eliade’s interest in chemistry and alchemy. Although he had promised Bologa that he would make his contribution to writing a history of Romanian medicine, Eliade’s departure to India would break this momentum. Though time did not allow him, for the young Eliade was trying to absorb the new information that was crowded him, the philosopher gathers medical material inspired by yoga practices and even offers to write to the Romanian physician an article about Ayurvedic medicinal products, as we find out from a letter dated February 6, 1930: “I have a considerable number of facts on pharmaceutical medicine and magic in India, some of them astounding, such as those relating to vagus nerve control” (3).

For Eliade, alchemy is the gate open to an occult form of practice. Alchemy is the first type of objective report that leaves, over the history of humanity, truly scientific discoveries; a kind of ancestor of rational knowledge. This preparatory, pseudo-scientific phase, the first attempt of structuring scientific knowledge was the one that attracted Eliade from his youth because of its esoteric character. In 1928 Eliade wrote an article (Marcelin Berthelot and alchemy) dedicated to a French chemist and biologist who imposed his name in the field of thermodynamics. Conscious of the enormous gap between Romanian and Western science at the beginning of the 20th century, Eliade sensed, from the philologist and philosopher point of view, the need to systematize the totality of historiographical material in order to be saved from oblivion: “We cannot wait until Romanian science reaches a European level to promote the validity of historical-scientific studies. There is no discipline that can be postponed”(6). The philosopher’s insight was to build a methodology in this vast field of history of medicine. The history of science would be appropriate, with a takeover from a chemist and Ameri-
can historian Sarton, a new form of intellectual movement that would put man and science in the center: “Eliade understands a new interpretation or vision of man not derived from philological studies (textual), as it was Renaissance humanism, but in the history of science – understood as «any systematized knowledge» (Sarton), therefore more than «positive sciences»” (7).

Eliade, great admirer of George Sarton (1884-1956), intuited in the Belgian chemist the innovative spirit. Sarton embraced the history of science as a branch of gnoseology and aimed at linking science and humanism to a comprehensive one: the philosophy of science. Eliade was in the current with the theories of the American and hence the enthusiasm at the moment when a homologous branch was formed on the Romanian realm. The only ones of sufficient intellectual scope that Valeriu Bologa could count on were Mircea Eliade and Nicolae Iorga.

If alchemy was the gate open to science, popular creation and ancestral healing practices were the preamble of modern science. And Eliade felt this correlation, especially as the prose was anchored in folklore: “In his writings, the folkloric elements intertwine with those of the history of religions or ethnology. His stories take place in illo tempore, somewhere outside of physical time, and the characters have supernatural powers, their existence en-

rolling in an eternal present, and the facts being predetermined in advance. Witches, queens, beautiful women who make pact with the evil, curative herbs and charm plants, here are some of the ingredients with which Eliade sows his writings inspired by folklore” (8).

The pioneering work of building a frontier science in our country like the history of science did not frighten Eliade. We find out from a letter addressed to Bologa that, on the contrary, ostentatiously, he protects this new branch of knowledge, although he is aware of the weight of action in a rebellious society to the new: “I defend a science against the envy and imbecility of our intellectuals. I do not even think that our science will soon become popular. But it must not be ignored and, above all, dishonored by the elite to which it is de jure and de facto aimed at” (3).

What brought together a physician (Valeriu Bologa) and a philosopher (Mircea Eliade) were the folk traditions with application in medicine. Apparently two opposing personalities collaborated efficiently and discovered the common denominator, the unspoken binder between a scholar spirit and a metaphysical one, for “the research of Valeriu Bologa met the interests of Mircea Eliade and although they did not sign articles or books, the mere fact that they shared their opinions meant much for the later developments of both” (8).

REFERENCES