

Essay Review

Basle, Printing, and the Early Modern Intellectual World

VIVIAN NUTTON*

Frank Hieronymus, *Theophrast und Galen – Celsus und Paracelsus. Medizin, Naturphilosophie und Kirchenreform im Basler Buchdruck bis zum Dreissigjährigen Krieg*, 4 vols and index, Publikationen der Universitätsbibliothek, Nr. 36, Basle, Universitätsbibliothek (distributed by Schwabe AG), 2005, total pages of 5 vols 3828, €317.00, SFr.450.00 (hardback 3-7965-2068-5).

This is the most complex, and certainly the heaviest, work I have ever been called upon to review. Neither its punning title: *Theophrastus and Galen – Celsus und Paracelsus* nor its more informative subtitle, *Medicine, natural philosophy and church reform in Basle printing down to the Thirty Years War*, gives a proper idea of the riches it contains. Even as a catalogue of imprints, it extends beyond its ostensible chronological limits to include some works printed outside Basle or well after the ending of the Thirty Years War in 1648. It is a work of great learning (and no little humour) that should stand on the shelves of any research library worth the name, yet its full merits can be gauged only by serendipity or constant familiarity rather than by a consultation to find details of a specific printed book. It is a reference work, yet one that oversteps the boundaries of the genre; it is a book catalogue, yet one that omits to record the number of pages in each volume; and it is a study of printing that reveals almost as much about non-printed material. It has a restricted focus, a chronological list of printed books, yet the way it is conceived makes it nothing less than a study of the learned medical, scientific and religious world of the Renaissance and Reformation as

seen through and in Basle, one of its most important centres.

It tells one story if one begins at the beginning, and another if one begins at the end, with the seven indexes that form volume 5. A mere glance at its first six indexes, of dates, authors and titles, printers and their location, addressees, owners, and the composers of commentary, dedications or liminal poems, opens windows onto the early modern republic of letters. But this information is dwarfed by that in index 7, a gallimaufry of names and topics ranging from God and ruins to brain disease, the rhinoceros and the wondrous Johannes Baptista Campofulgus. As with Zwinger's *Theatrum vitae humanae*, 1571, the subject of possibly the longest notice in the catalogue, all human life is here. Anyone with an interest in early modern science who looks up any name or word is likely to find unexpected information or a new context for familiar material. But, I suspect, not even 134 pages of double-columned index will reveal everything.

The project began as an exhibition in the Basle University Library to commemorate the major anniversaries of the birth and death of Paracelsus (1493–1541). Not only did he work and teach in Basle, but many of his writings were first published there by his followers. Printers like

*Professor Vivian Nutton, The Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL, 210 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE, UK.

Heinrich Petri and Peter Perna supported the new medicine both for its therapeutics and for its links with evangelical religion. The conjunction of medicine, science and religion was promoted by the presence in the city of many religious exiles, such as Adam von Bodenstein and Guglielmo Gratarolo, who took advantage of willing printers to publish their beliefs in treatises in German and in Latin, the universal language of scholarship. The rise of the university as a bastion of Protestant scientific learning under Zwinger and the Platter family attracted students from all over northern Europe, who took back to their homes the latest products of the Basle presses. All this is wonderfully documented in the Basle Library, whose collections of early printed books, manuscripts and autograph letters are a prime resource for students of sixteenth-century medicine and science. Not surprisingly, the 1993 exhibition was a visual and intellectual feast, and attracted large numbers of visitors.

The small catalogue then took on a life of its own, and expanded in concept and content. The list of imprints by Paracelsus and his followers, the basis for Part 2, nos. 175–210, was extended to cover medicine and science, interpreted broadly to include mathematics, geography and even rhetoric, as well as the role of the printers in supporting, and at times directing, evangelical reform in a godly city. In all, 766 items are listed; 174 in Part 1, covering the period before 1550; 36 in Part 2; 506 in Part 3, non-Paracelsian imprints after 1550; and 10 additions in the Introduction. Excluding the introduction and index, this bibliographical cornucopia runs to 3694 pages, an average of five pages per printed book. When the strictly bibliographical description rarely runs to more than ten lines, and the concluding paragraph giving details of the provenance of each copy (or often copies) usually to less than that, one may wonder how Dr Hieronymus has managed to fill so many pages.

Each entry begins with a short listing of the author, title, place and date of printing, the name of the printer, and the size of the book. This is then followed by a description of the book's contents, composition, history, and significance in the history of medicine and science. Often

there are comments about the place of the book in the history of printing in Basle, and the entry ends with a description of exemplars in the Basle Library. Often a reproduction of the title page is given, sometimes in half-page length, but usually full-page, and even as folding plates attached to the inside back cover. But these reproductions range widely to show some of the illustrations, manuscript notes of ownership or commentary, and even some of the manuscript documentation and drafts that reveal the history of the book's publication. No copy of 413, John Caius' very rare edition of some minor works of Galen, 1557, survives in Basle. But in the collections of the Frey-Grynaeum Institute there exists the copy of the fourth of these works, *De ossibus*, that Caius prepared for his printer, Oporinus. The illustrations show how Caius inserted his corrections into the 1543 Paris edition before sending the volume to Basle. These abundant reproductions provide a remarkable visual resource for the history of medicine and of printing (one illustration, I know, has already helped in identifying a damaged volume in a London library). An electronic version of some of the entries, incorporating still more illustrations, can be found on the Library's website: www.ub.unibas.ch/kadmos/gg/; or via their 'Virtuelle Bibliothek' (Handschriften/Griechische Geist).

These illustrations also add substantially to our understanding of scholarly communication. So, for example, Basilius Amerbach writes in the margin of his copy of Gesner's *Bibliotheca Universalis*, p. 397 (= no. 182) a note on the death of Paracelsus and the information that he is commemorated with a fine grave inscription in Salzburg. Crato von Crafftheim's edition of the *Consultationes medicae* of his teacher Giambattista da Monte (1565 = no. 391), is illustrated with the title page and its portrait of da Monte. But also included are reproductions, transcripts and German translations of two manuscript letters of Crato to Zwinger in 1563 seeking his mediation with Petri and Perna to ensure the publication of this expensive volume. One was written by his secretary (and obviously intended for wider circulation), the other, more private, by Crato himself, apologizing for not

having written the first letter himself and asking Zwinger for news of the latest books, “since here (in Breslau) we receive only theological polemics, German histories, and school textbooks”. The story of Paracelsus’ flight from Basle in 1528, no. 181, is illustrated with selections from the printed reminiscences of others and with the correspondence of Paracelsus and Bonifacius Amerbach. Several of the letters published here have not been edited before (and certainly not illustrated). Some of them come from the vast letter collection in the Library, others from the City Archives, and elsewhere. But it is a pity that, as far as I can tell, their provenance is not always given, or when it is, as with no. 197, Adam von Bodenstein’s official complaint against the over-tolerant Sebastian Castellio, and Bodenstein’s exclusion from the medical faculty in 1563–64, it is hard to locate among the mass of other material. Here the reference is given in a footnote in the reproduction of an 1892 German translation, not the easiest place to find it.

But most space is taken up with summaries and translations. The content of each book is summarized succinctly, but the prefatory material is often translated entirely or given in a substantial summary. Since some of these prefaces are extremely long, this can take several pages, especially if a reproduction of the original is also provided. But this is often most valuable, for the Prefaces, poems, permissions to print and suchlike tell us a great deal about the intellectual and social world of the author and printer. Throughout, individuals are identified with scrupulous care (albeit in a somewhat repetitive manner if they have already made an appearance), and the information given here will be extraordinarily useful for those working on any aspect of Renaissance medicine and science. But, even with the aid of the indexes, it is not always easy to extract what one might want.

Strikingly illustrated here are the ways in which Basle printers managed to gain their dominance in the northern European market for medicine and science, putting in the shade potential competitors like Strassburg and Zurich. This was not just an individual enterprise, but one in which many members of the

city, from the religious authorities and town council downwards, had a stake. Professors and schoolteachers acted as editors, religious exiles might find employment with the printers, and the flow of material and books both into and out of the city provided employment for carters and bargees. This dominance also fostered an improvement in the quality of text and illustration. Hieronymus makes a strong case for saying that Vesalius’ decision to have his *De humani corporis fabrica* (no. 138) printed in Basle rather than in Venice was owed to personal contacts and knowledge of the Basle printers’ skills (especially after Isingrin’s printing of Fuchs’ *De historia stirpium*, 1542 = no. 123). But the supposition that John Caius visited Basle on his way back to England to help Vesalius with the printing of the *Fabrica* seems unlikely. Nevertheless, Caius used the Basle printers to publish his own works for a European audience (nos 055, 166 and 413), including the notorious near-plagiarism of da Monte’s lectures on Galen’s *Methodus medendi* in 1544.

Basle’s role as the centre of Paracelsian printing is well known, and historians of Paracelsianism will benefit enormously from the information contained in these volumes. Likewise the importance of Basle’s university as a centre of Protestant scholarship and, at the end of the century, as the home of a modified Paracelsian medicine has not gone unremarked. These volumes, however, provide a new context. One can see how the search for a Protestant medicine went hand in hand with attempts at godly reform of the wider community. Similarly, Paracelsian imprints form only a small part of a wider publication programme on medicine and science. Indeed, Basle’s fame as a centre for such publishing long antedated the Paracelsians, and one might argue that it was publication there that enhanced the reputation of von Bodenstein and Toxites, rather than the reverse.

Anyone wishing to find out more about a particular Basle book on science and medicine can do so easily by using index 1. It is a little more difficult to gain an impression of overall trends, for Hieronymus’ introduction concentrates on individuals and firms rather than their productions, but the raw material for further

study is here. One might then ask about the extent to which Basle acted as a reprint factory, supplying northern Europe with copies of books first published in Italy (as with the writings of Fracastoro, no. 130, or *Mercuriale*, nos. 607–10, 623). Did the Basle printers aim primarily at a learned world used to large folios in Latin, and to what extent did they go in for self-help manuals or ephemeral advice in time of plague? What is the percentage of non-Latin material? And how does that compare with, say, Strassburg? Do the printers' workshops resemble the intellectual ant-hill imagined by Elizabeth Eisenstein or the fabled copy-editing room of Clarendon Press staffed by mad geniuses and defrocked Jesuits (the two groups are not exclusive)? Can we gain any idea of print runs? Did they vary from topic to topic and language to language? Did size matter, or were folios and octavos aimed at different markets? How far did Basle printers look to fellow Protestants to buy their books, and had this any noticeable effect on their choice of titles to publish? The answers to many of these questions, essential for a proper understanding of scientific printing in early modern Europe, can be found in these volumes, even if they are not immediately obvious on these tight-packed pages. Indeed, more than one doctoral thesis, I suspect, could be derived simply from collecting the relevant information scattered across these massive tomes.

The strengths of this catalogue are also its weaknesses. It shows perhaps too obviously its origin in a commemorative exhibition, but that has also allowed for the inclusion of material not strictly implied by the title. It is filled with the enthusiasms that only a scholar who has devoted his whole life to an institution and its books can display, yet, occasionally, one wishes for a little more time to digest what is there. I felt that I was being guided round an exhibition by a wonderfully erudite guide, always eager to move on to point out some novelty in the next case. Following the guide's route will teach you a great deal, but it is not at all easy to obtain answers to questions the guide has not thought of or to follow a different route. Although there is a substantial bibliographical survey in volume 1, there is no proper bibliography as such, which

makes it difficult for the ignorant to interpret cryptic references, particularly if one is checking an imprint in a later volume somewhat removed from the initial citation. The chronological order is not always followed, and one must have constant recourse to the index volume to find related imprints. Whether the somewhat basic covers and binding will stand up to such heavy use remains to be seen. Although the reproductions of books are entirely adequate, those of manuscripts often lack clarity—but proper photographs would have added enormously to the cost (and weight). That this survey could have been more user-friendly is best illustrated by the introduction. This is essential reading for anyone interested in the early modern learned world, yet it lacks headings, let alone subheadings, and one cannot easily retrieve a half-remembered reference without recourse to the index volume. Once there, one may find quickly what one is looking for, or the relevant passage may be only one of several listed—and then it has to be located somewhere on a large and well-filled folio in a different volume. Regular use brings familiarity, but I was not the only one to have problems at the beginning.

These critical comments are to warn potential users that they cannot expect to find all that they might want immediately put in front of them. But they should not give up looking, for there are unexpected treasures here. Like the Basle library itself, whose staff have treated me with great kindness on visits over the years to check manuscripts, the richness of the contents belies a modest, almost utilitarian, external appearance. While sampling the individual entries and checking up, via the index, material that might prove to be relevant for wider topics, I have always discovered something new, while the reproductions of books and manuscripts will be of great value for showing students in lectures and seminars. I have learned a lot from dipping into these volumes, and I shall continue to do so often. They are a major contribution to the history of the city and institution to which Dr Hieronymus has devoted so many years. They also constitute a starting point for wider investigations into the whole learned world of early modern Europe.