

History of medicine on the border between philosophy and science

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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.

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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, traveling 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 doc-

tors 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

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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-

ity reaches worrying odds. Director of the Osteoarticular Tuberculosis Sanatorium for Children in Techirghiol, eventually Gomoiu would practice surgery in Bucharest. His surgical work is quantified by the large number of innovative articles he has written, by implementing the term solarectomy (resection of lymph nodes), initiated the inguinal approach of varicocele (Gomoiu-Phocas method). Intransigent character, Gomoiu was removed from academic education. His merit in the history of medicine is to insist on the Romanian contribution to the international folk medicine fund. This brought, at least historically, the Romanian medicine at the level of the other countries reducing the gap. A proof of his ideal and his effort to bring medicine to the Western level are the three works published by the Romanian physician in 1938: *La Croix dans la Folclor medical roumain*, *Histoire du Folclor medical en Roumanie* and *Medicine in the Romanian folk prose*.

Bologa also corresponded intensely with Mircea Eliade, whom he intended to co-opt in his work at the Institute of Medical History. Eliade, despite the fact he had no necessary time for active participation in this approach, had a special esteem for the intellectual physician, as is also apparent from the lines written by the philosopher in an epistle addressed to the physician-historian, a letter dated 23 October 1928: “I testify that whenever I skim through your work and meditate on the situation of the history of sciences in our country – I am remorseful that I do not write more often, warmer and harder, in the papers that are at my fingertips. I know that, personally, for the scientific history studies I’m interested in – I have to thank you. Not to mention what others owe you, especially doctors and historians. The Institute makes «environment» scientific history, we, isolated ones, can at most, make the atmosphere. If an association for such studies can be woken up, I always think that the courage of the achievements has been with the production of the Cluj Institute” (3). Even in India, Eliade maintains contact with the Romanian physician for whom he does not hesitate to admit he has a great cult of his extraordinary work of a huge volume: “The passion of science – that is, the slow, precise, technical sorting of the material our culture provides us - is the great temptation that brings me closer to you” (Letter dated 16.02.1930, Calcutta) (3).

The reason why Eliade particularly appreciated Bologa resides in the philosopher’s aspiration to write a few stories on traditional Indian medicine branches. Eliade admired the founder of medical

history the ability to synthesize the huge volume of works, objects and manuscripts. It was the systematization work that occupied the author of *Religious History Treaty* and *History of Religious Beliefs and Ideas* all the time. At the same time he was better equipped to understand the enormous sacrifice of time and resources involved in ordering, ranking, and organizing such amount of information. Frustrated by the huge volume of notes, contact with Bologna developed philosopher's rationalization and ability to think more rigorously. Eliade's interest in medicine crystallizes in 1936 when, following a lecture held at an International Congress of History, Eliade publishes *History of Medicine in Romania*. The affection borne by the philosopher of the religions to this new emerging branch stems from the support given to the history of medicine which he perceives as a means of producing: "real services to the humanism of our age" (4). Folk medicine is viewed with reverence by Eliade because it represents the immaterial and immutable connection with the ancestors of the nation. Since 1926, Eliade collaborated with Aldo Mieli, who was the publisher of *Archeion* magazine, producing short studies of the history of various sciences, medicine and folklore. That's how Eliade got to correspond with Bologna. The latter wanted to develop a collaboration with Miel's *Archeion* by making contributions in the form of articles devoted to Italian influences on Romanian medicine.

For Eliade, the whole science represents, at least in the initial phase, a single corpus. Subsequently, science has specialized and subspecialized over time. What could bring back all these disparate fragments to one place would be the philological field. In fact, even Bologna was aware that his scientific approach was far more philological. This is how one can explain the help that he Bologna asked from the philosopher. Another connection between the two, Bologna and Eliade, was the scientific curiosity to study botany. As a small child, Eliade devoted much energy to catching, studying, analyzing and cataloging various insects. At the age of fourteen, Eliade published a study titled *Silkworm's Enemy*, under the pen name Eliade Gh. Mircea, which showed the passion he has for insect biology. *The marvelous journey of the five beetles in the land of the red ants*-sketch of the novel – was written in the same period. More the outline of a teenager fascinated by the world of gangs, behind the modest mise-en-place is hiding a satire, an annoyance of the enemy (ants) by five elite beetles. It is a mockery of the human society reduced to the microcosm of insects.

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 Bologna 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).

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