**Victor Frankenstein’s “Science”**

Modern readers are often puzzled by Victor’s approach to discovering the “elixir of life” in that he does not seem to perform scientific experiments as much as read books. Prior to the eighteenth century, what we call “science” and what we call “philosophy” were essentially the same disciplines. The study of nature and the desire to know how nature functions eventually came to be called “natural philosophy,” but the quest for such knowledge was still more what we would consider philosophical than scientific.

Mary Shelley indicates that Victor is a student of this “natural philosophy” when she indicates who some of Victor’s early influences were. While admitting that many of these men’s theories had been discredited, Victor still admits that it was they who largely set him on the course he was eventually to take.

**Cornelius Agrippa** was a Renaissance philosopher and scientist whose works reflect a strong interest in the occult and ancient, mystical “sciences” of the near East. His writing blends European interpretations of Plato’s philosophy with Jewish Kabalistic beliefs. His famous work “De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum” (the vanity and uncertainty of the arts and sciences), published in 1527, is a treatise on the occult, as a hidden, knowledge that existed in Renaissance Europe and was known to a select few. It is a collection of thoughts on Renaissance magic including such diverse topics as astrology and the effect of planetary motion on human events, occult virtues, the natural tendency of certain “elements” to work harmoniously together and others to oppose one another, spells, methods of predicting the future, numerology, the divine Trinity, the Kabalistic Names of God and the orders of evil spirits.

In terms of “real science,” his ideas have all but been discredited by later thinkers and by the processes of observation and experimentation.

**Paracelsus** was another Renaissance philosopher and scientist who introduced a new concept of disease and the use of chemicals rather than herbs to treat diseases. Paracelsus asserted that diseases were caused by external agents attacking the body, contrary to the then-traditional idea of disease as an internal upset of the balance of the body’s humors (yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm). To cure the disease, one needed to attack this external agent. Alchemy became the means by which the chemical remedies were prepared.

Thus, Paracelsus changed the emphasis of the alchemy from chasing the mythological “Elixir of Life” or “Philosopher’s Stone,” to making medicines.

Some of Paracelsus’s ideas, however, bordered on the occult. He was said to have been taught the secret of the universal solvent in Constantinople. He was believed to have had such tutors as gypsies and sorcerers, and affected miraculous cures of several maladies.

**Albertus Magnus** was still another Renaissance philosopher and scientist who advocated the search into the natural causes of things apart from the church’s position that God was the cause of all effects.

For example, in one of his most famous works Albertus wrote:

“The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature.”

This was a radical idea for the time, as most scholars believed that the scriptures were the sole source of all knowledge. Not only did Albertus advocate what we would call today the scientific approach to studying the real world, but he did so in such a way that his ideas were accepted by the Church.

In a work on plants Albertus wrote, “In studying nature, we have not to inquire how God the Creator may, as He freely wills, use His creatures to work miracles and thereby show forth His power: we have rather to inquire what Nature with its immanent causes can naturally bring to pass,” thus placing the emphasis on understanding how nature worked rather than on trying to understand God.

Not everyone held Albertus in high esteem, however. Roger Bacon, who was a contemporary, and in many ways a rival of Albertus, was highly critical. He wrote that Albertus, “is a man of infinite patience and has amassed great information, but his works have four faults. The first is boundless, puerile vanity; the second in ineffable falsity; the third is superfluity of bulk; and the fourth is his ignorance of the most useful and the most beautiful parts of philosophy.”

Roger Bacon was, however, an even stronger advocate of experimental science than was

Albertus but did not feel compelled to reconcile his scientific theories with Church doctrine.

He was also able to demonstrate a number of factual and reasoning errors in Albertus’s work.

Work Cited

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