

THE BLACK ART



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CONTENTS

Alchemy: Formative Principles

<i>On the Four Elements</i>	6
<i>On the Seven Planets and Metals</i>	13
<i>On the Three Alchemical Principles</i>	39

Alchemy: Historiography

<i>Historiographical Analysis 1</i>	54
<i>Historiographical Analysis 2</i>	64
<i>The Magnum Opus</i>	77
<i>The Influence of Hellenistic Philosophy on Alchemy</i>	87
<i>The Dignity and Influence of Alchemy on the Renaissance</i>	109
<i>Christian Theosophy and Alchemy</i>	135
<i>Carl Jung and Alchemical Symbolism</i>	155

Alchemy: Objectives

<i>The Elixir of Life: A Critical Investigation into the Art of Transmutation.....</i>	180
<i>The Riddle of Alchemy: A Secret Desire Transformed.....</i>	213

Alchemy: The Cosmogony of the Splendor Solis

The Black Sun:

<i>A Decisive Symbol of Transformation and Renewal.....</i>	244
<i>Beleaguered by the Black Sun: Three Dreams.....</i>	254
<i>Child's Play: A Fundamental Key to Transformation.....</i>	271
<i>Women's Work: Integral Mechanisms of Consciousness.....</i>	283

The Spiritual Sun:

<i>Disidentification from the Realms of Convention.....</i>	294
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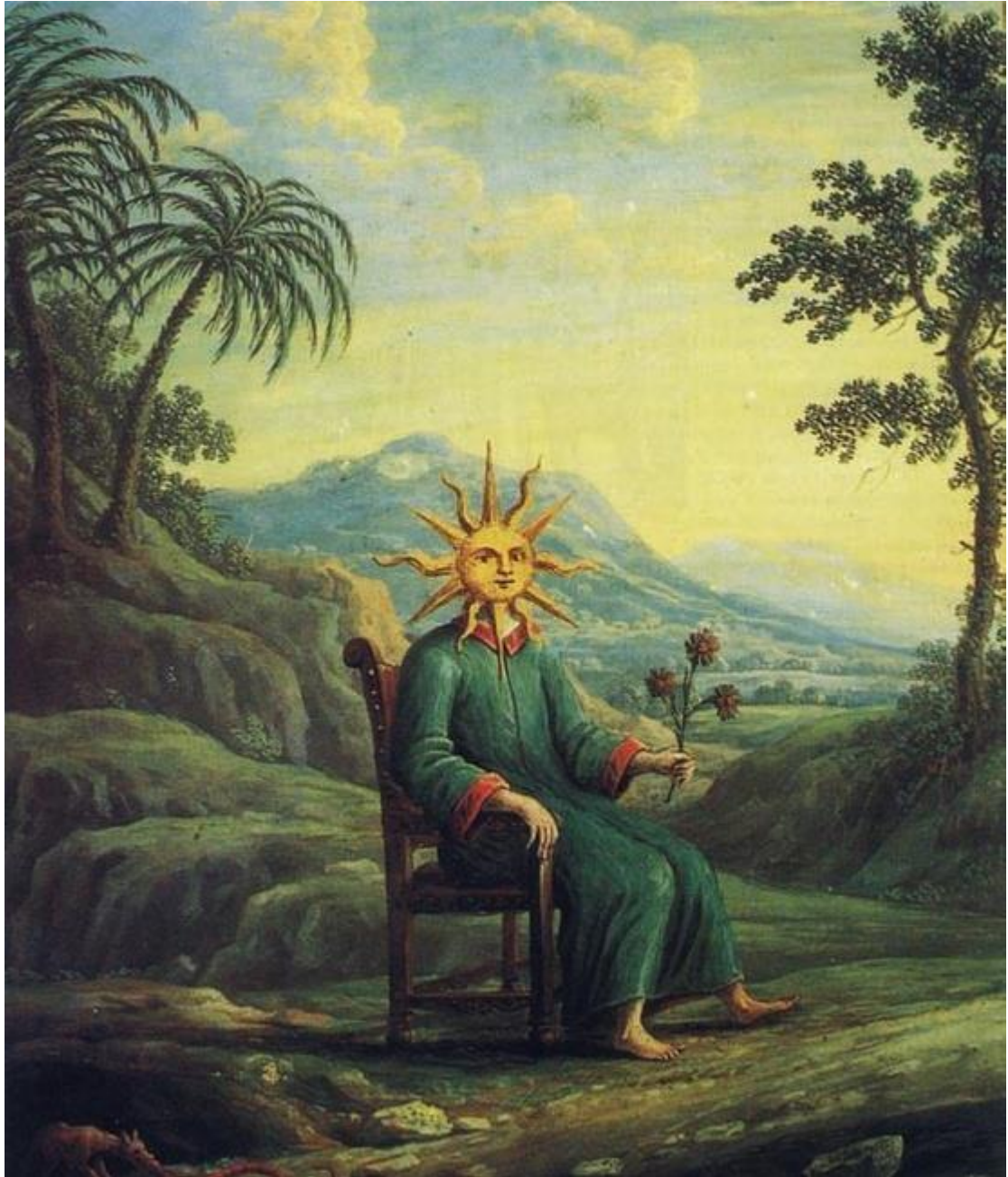
Alchemy as a Therapeutic Process

<i>A Short Introduction.....</i>	307
<i>A Psychological Interpretation of "The Emerald Tablet".....</i>	315
<i>Prima Materia and Nigredo</i>	321
<i>Fermentatio.....</i>	329
<i>Separatio.....</i>	335
<i>Calcinatio.....</i>	341
<i>Albedo.....</i>	348

<i>Conjunctio</i>	355
<i>Mortificatio</i>	362
<i>Solutio</i>	368
<i>Coagulatio</i>	373
<i>Sublimatio</i>	381
<i>Rubedo</i>	387
<i>Short Biography</i>	393

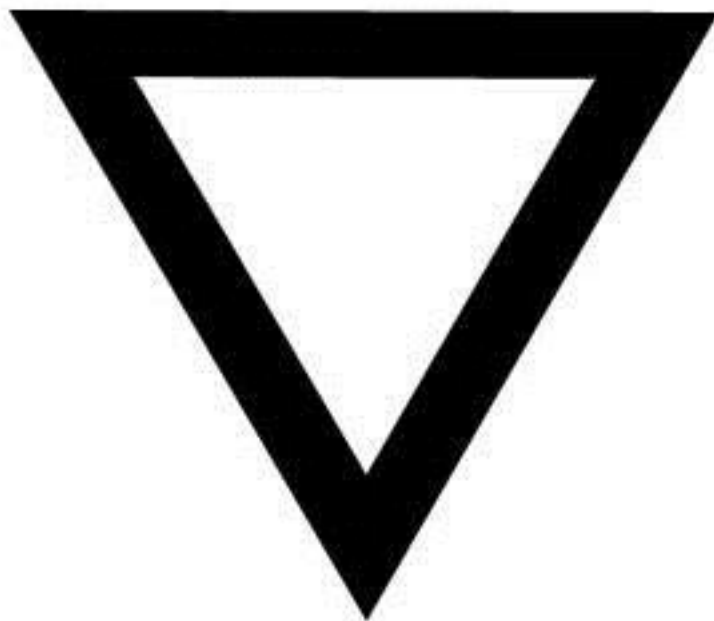
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On the Four Elements

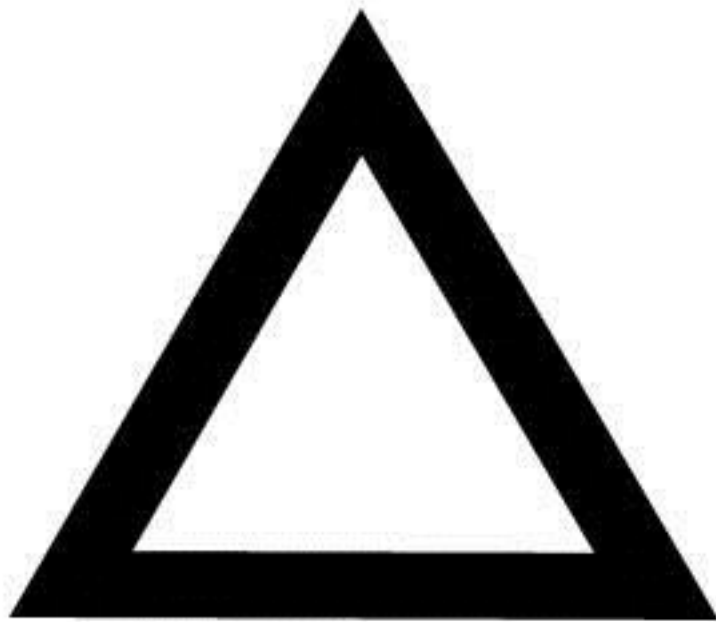
WATER



In the esoteric language, the four elements are not to be confused with the four corporeal manifestations of the same name. They are merely the initial or primary differentiations of the primal virginal substance of all creation, the *prima materia*. All of them exhibit two of four secondary properties—hot, cold, dry and moist. This theory came down to us through the Aristotelian doctrine of matter, though it most probably took shape under the philosophical musings of the Ionic pre-Socratics. The ethereal element of water is cold and moist, and its material manifestation as a composition of two atoms of hydrogen and one of water (H_2O) is an immediate and exoteric expression of the former's

quintessential aspects—its volatility, passivity, amorphousness, colourlessness and receptivity. Water is characterised by the condition of heaviness, but also of expansion. On a scale which orders the four ethereal elements on the basis of their pureness and level of refinement, water would come third, after both air and fire. Unlike the latter two which tend to rise, water is rather dense and possesses a downward tendency. Nevertheless it's not as heavy, invariable and sluggish as the element of earth. In alchemical manuscripts and other esoteric documents, it is symbolised by an overturned triangle.

FIRE



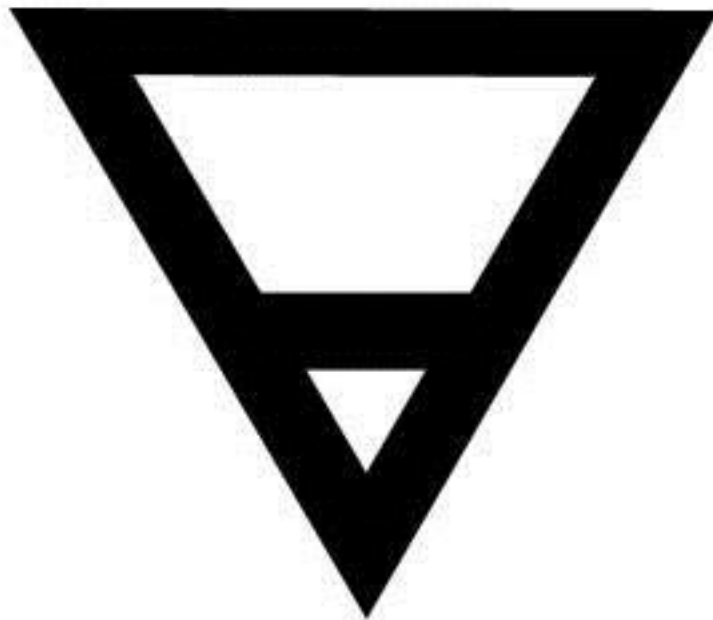
Fire is the most revered of the four ethereal elements. In ancient times, its inextricable connection to the sun rendered it of utmost

importance as the source of life and all creation. In the temples of many solar deities, fire would burn unremittingly in the innermost sanctuary, or the holy of holies, where it symbolised the undefiled first matter, the Empyrean of God. Heraclitus of Ephesus (535-475BCE), a contemporary of Anaximenes of Miletus (584-28BCE), was the first intellectual and philosopher to identify fire as the most pivotal of the differentiating elements of the original chaos, the *prima materia*, as well as the foremost quality defining the latter. He posited that fire was the active and only mover behind elemental rotation, that is, the transformation of the four elemental properties into one another—earth into water, water into air, air into fire, and fire into earth again. By this virtue, it made perfect sense that the underlying cause of all phenomena, the manifestations of the noumenal world, as well as fundamental change through chemical processes including calcination, coagulation, distillation, sublimation and dissolution could be attributed to the subtle action of ethereal fire.

This pre-Socratic notion infiltrated the classical world entirely, for philosophers of the likes of Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato and Aristotle all agreed that the primordial substance or the receptacle of matter was probably an intangible fire of sorts. It was theorised to be triune or threefold in nature, possessing an ethereal or celestial, a subterranean and a terrestrial equivalent. The element exhibits the fundamental properties of hot and dry, and its material manifestation as the oxidisation of a particular substance through combustion is an immediate and exoteric expression of the former's quintessential aspects—its boundlessness, inscrutability and its propensity to purify and

generate; its ability to rise and illuminate; and its relentless activity and elasticity. In contradistinction to water which was envisioned to be feminine in nature and connected with the colour green, fire was masculine and linked with red. If the elements were ordered according to the compass of all possible movements, fire would come first. Unlike the other three first differentiations of the *prima materia* which exhibit multiple tendencies, fire remains faithful to just one—the condition of rising. In alchemical treatises and in the realm of esotericism, it is symbolised by a triangle.

EARTH

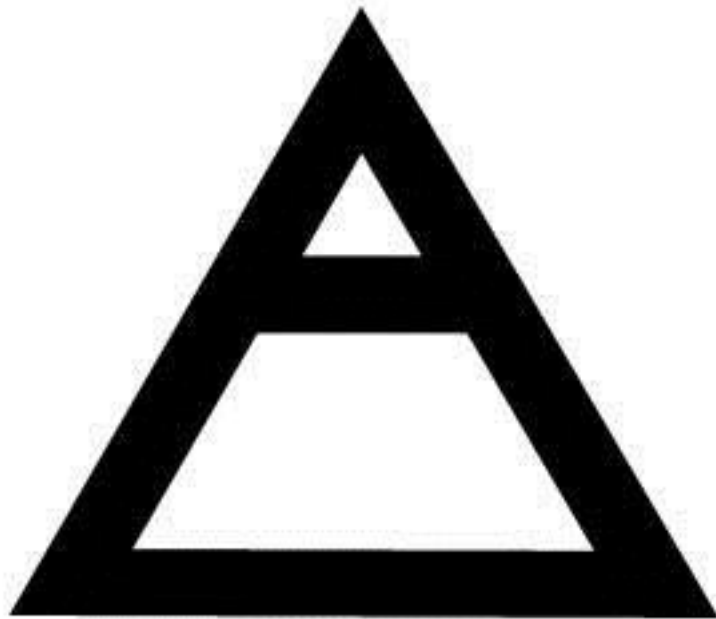


The formulation of the four ethereal elements of fire, water, earth and air is more often than not attributed to the speculative thought of Empedocles of Acragas (492-432BCE). It was generally

agreed amongst most Pre-Socratic philosophers that these four primary differentiations were the first spawn of a basic substance known as the *prima materia* that has existed for time immemorial. In scrying the memory bank of philosophical conjecture, we see that the first person to identify ethereal earth as a primary element was the sixth-century thinker Pherecydes of Syros. Both he and Aristotle adhered to a train of thought which placed the element at the exact centre of the heavenly rotations, identifying it as the fecund from which the other three—fire, water and air—miraculously sprung forth. In addition, it was also common piece that everything filtering down into the physical realm would filter through the ethereal element for the conferral of form before it finally materialising. Aristotle reasoned that the ethereal version of earth must be like its physical or material constituent, characterised by the conditions of heaviness, solidity and geometrical or concrete form. Hence it was likely that earth-laden principles and substances would be orientated by a gravitational tendency to drop towards the navel of the cosmos. Together with water, earth was considered a wholly feminine principle with a receptive and passive personality. Its two fundamental properties were cold and dry, putting it last on a provisional ladder that orders the four elements according to their subtleties, intricacies and material fineness. Ethereal earth is esoterically and symbolically connected to potentiality, the colour white, the concept of life, as well as the cardinal direction of south and the phenomena of heat and electricity. In the alchemical theory of matter and in esotericism, the element is

equated with the principle of “salt” and symbolised by an overturned triangle bisected by a horizontal line.

AIR



For centuries, people in the ancient world believed that water could be transmuted into air through fire. We can probably safely attribute this to the fundamental properties attributed to the ethereal element by the classical philosophers. Air is hot and wet, linking it to both fire and water on the wheel of elemental rotation where the underlying theory of shared characteristics explains why one element can transmute into another. Anaximenes of Miletus (mid-6th-century BCE) was the first pre-Socratic philosopher to attach a special significance to air, naming it as the element of which the primary chaos and Empyrean of God was composed. This conviction was inherited by

esoteric and practical alchemy in late antiquity, and immortalised in an eighth-century Arabic text by Jabir ibn Hayyan (which would become known and popularised as the Emerald Tablet) which says of the Philosopher's Stone, "The wind carried it in its womb." Hence the element was so important in esoteric thought that it was even imagined to be the womb which brought forth the elusive and transcendent Stone itself.

Alchemy's veneration of the element is completely logical, given that the Pre-Socratic philosophers including the likes of Anaximenes of Miletus and Diogenes Apolloniates (late 5th century BCE) whom influenced ideas pertaining to the first differentiation of matter were initially convinced that ethereal air was the very fabric holding the tapestry of woven threads of created nature together. Air is an active, masculine element and its two fundamental properties are hot and moist, or wet. Just like its material counterpart, the element is inextricably associated with volatility, expansion and becoming, but also with the condition of death and sleep, the cardinal direction of north, the colour black and the quality of falsehood. If the four elements were ordered according to the compass of all possible movements, it would come second, after fire. Its primary tendency is to rise and extend. In all esoteric currents, including chemico-operative and spiritual-philosophical alchemy, air is symbolised by a triangle bisected by a horizontal line.

On the Seven Planets and Metals

THE SUN OR GOLD



Perhaps the esoteric worldview is encapsulated best by a sixteenth-century alchemo-mystical didactic treatise entitled the *Splendor Solis*. According to an old legend, the mysterious author of this text, Solomon Trismosin, imparted the secrets of the Philosopher's Stone and spagyric methods to Paracelsus of Hohenheim (1493-1541CE), thus enabling him to pioneer the field of iatrochemistry. Comprised of seven individual tracts that are replete with twenty or so illustrations and accompanied with lengthy quotations, the text vindicates that *“all corporeal things originate in and are maintained and exist of the earth according to time and influence of the stars and planets as Sun, Moon, and the*

others. These, together with the four qualities of the elements which are without intermission, moving and working therein, thereby creating every growing and procreating thing in its individual form, sex and substance, as first metals originate in the earth of a special and peculiar matter produced by the four properties of the four elements which generate in their mixture the metallic force under the influence of their respective planets.”

This is no doubt a condensed summa of the animistic Neo-Platonic cosmos, where Mother Nature is regarded a living organism or animal and all her creations are not only interconnected and linked with one another but infused with a kind of love or mutual attraction called *sympathy*. The *materia prima* as the origin of all things is implicitly referenced, from whence the Empyrean of God, the sphere of fixed stars, the *primum mobile* or rotating heavens, the ether and seven planets, the moon, as well as the Earth itself, comprised of the first four differentiated elements—fire, water, air and earth—all materialize. Furthermore, the unique combinations formed by the four ethereal elements produce the plant, animal and mineral kingdoms. While the seven planets are an exoteric expression of archetypal powers delimited by the Sphere of the Fixed Stars and the Zodiac, the seven metals themselves express initial manifestations of unique permutations formed between the four ethereal elements under the aegis of the seven planetary powers. If all that is below is a pale reflection of everything above, as the Emerald Tablet (*Tabula Smaragdina*) would have us believe, then astrology and alchemy must be inextricably linked. Given the widespread belief that the planetary powers governed a part of

the human body, it became common knowledge that astrology was primarily concerned with the manner in which the heavenly rotations controlled human destiny; alchemy, on the other hand, was a sacred science deeply embroiled in the exploration of the earthly metals and elements.

If the Divine Spirit were to be personified as a ladder descending from the heaven to the earth, the uppermost echelon would be hot and dry in nature, masculine in sex and full of action potential. Alternatively, the lowest echelon would be cold and wet in nature, feminine in sex and wholly receptive or passive. One might undoubtedly ask where lies the logic in such reasoning? Well, the act of being and becoming in the cosmos can only be experienced if there is a polarisation of Divine Spirit or pure consciousness into entirely active and passive poles. Irrespective of where they are positioned on the consciousness totem pole or scale, all cosmic qualities express themselves actively through the planetary powers and passively through the earthly metals.

The highest, active pole is incarnated light, intellect and pure essence. Its nature is inflexible, eternal and unchanging, hence why the solar orb (active materialisation) and the metal gold (passive materialisation) are considered its corporeal constituents. Both the sun and gold are radiant and magnificent, seemingly indestructible and free of any blemishes or tarnish. There is an obvious qualitative connection between the two that remains unacknowledged by contemporary science, save perhaps in the sideswept scientific investigations of radical thinkers Frau Lily

Kolisko and Agnes Fyfe. These scientists wholeheartedly conformed to the esoteric perspective that the planetary body and its metal were heavenly and corporeal reflections of an eternal principle, the active pole of existence. In fact, this is the teleological condition that the whole of Mother Nature strives for—to become pure being. In hindsight sentient Nature and all her conscious constituents wish to become Divine Spirit. Following a course of logic delineated by sympathetic associations, if the sun and gold are exoteric markers of this highest cosmic principle, then the other six generative powers, reflected in the planets and their metals, must be substandard variants of this prototype. From a purely animistic standpoint, one might describe them as premature births, abortions or failed experiments.

All symbols for the seven generative powers which comprise the cosmological totem pole, the multidimensional ladder which extends from the Empyrean of God, the highest heaven, all the way down to the sphere of earth and dross matter, are cut from three rudimentary shapes: the circle, the semicircle and the cross. As the only proponent of immaculate geometry, the circle is identified with the uppermost echelon of the cosmic ray, pure consciousness itself. Therefore it is a pictorial synonym for both the sun and gold as reflectors of this cosmic quality. The symbol itself is completed by a single dot midpoint of the circle, implicating gold as the only metal through which its prototype, incarnated light, finds and seeks expression. In alchemy, the concept can also be exemplified by the figure of a king.

As a metal, there is evidence to suggest that gold was known from about the fourth millennium BCE onwards. In Egypt and Nubia, where gold was “more plentiful than dirt”, ancient temple inscriptions have been found describing the fire-setting and quartz-crushing methods that were used in extracting gold from desert mines. Its therapeutic properties have been known from antiquity, but its popularity soared during the Middle Ages when Swiss physician, alchemist, mystic and philosopher Paracelsus (1493-1541CE) began administering it to his patients for the alleged purpose of cleansing their circulatory systems of pathogens and impurities. A little later, the first pharmaceutical bodies of Renaissance Europe created a gold tincture called *Crocus solis* by subjecting gold to the action of nitro-hydrochloric acid. The precipitate was then subjected to a cycle of distillation with water and mixed with a small amount of potassium as it condensed into a fine powder. Many Renaissance alchemists believed that by preparing gold tinctures or solutions they were creating the elusive Elixir of Life.

THE MOON OR SILVER



At the lowermost point of the ethereal cosmological ladder lies the passive, feminine pole. Anyone can penetrate the veil of corporeal appearances and see as well as understand the cosmological truths directly beneath by studying two intimately connected features—a primary source of light and its reflecting or refracting surface. The sun, for example, expresses the central qualities of the active, masculine pole; it is a material, superior manifestation of incarnated light, intellect and pure essence. Just like the great solar orb in the cupola of the heavens, the uppermost echelon of the cosmological totem pole, the masculine aesthetic mode of being, remains eternally rigid and supernally bright. On the contrary the lowermost echelon of the cosmological ladder, the feminine aesthetic mode of becoming, is in an unstable state of continuous flux. It is formless yet forming,

colourless yet colourful. This pole is a guise, a face of the *prima materia*, the jelloid substance of which the entire cosmos has been hewn. The *prima materia's* primary feature is to reflect, or to imprint and embody the natural forms imposed upon it. For that reason its corporeal counterparts are the moon (active materialisation) and the metal silver (passive materialisation). Both the moon and silver are sensitive, impressionable and receptive bodies, passively reflecting and forming colourless images from external sources of light. Radical thinkers of the likes of Frau Lily Kolisko, a student of anthroposophist Dr. Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925), was able to methodologically demonstrate a qualitative connection between the lunar orb and the metal silver through a chromatographical method which aimed to register changes in chemical reactions of the latter during eclipses, as well as planetary conjunctions and oppositions made by the former with another planetary sphere.

All symbols for the seven generative powers which comprise the cosmological totem pole, the multidimensional ladder which extends from the Empyrean of God, the highest heaven, all the way down to the sphere of earth and dross matter, are cut from three rudimentary shapes: the circle, the semicircle and the cross. The second of these symbols, the semicircle, is identified with the lowermost echelon of the cosmological totem pole, the feminine aesthetic principle or pure receptivity itself. Hence as an expression of the lunar cause, it is also a pictogram for material manifestations that have been linked with it, explicitly the moon and the metal silver. All created matter that is preponderated by a strictly polarised feminine aesthetic energy liquefies any unique

materialising combinations harnessed by the four ethereal elements. The logic behind this supposition lies in the logic that the feminine aesthetic is pretty much a synonym for the *prima materia*, an entity which exists without form like water and liquid mercury. In alchemy, the concept was exemplified by the figure of a queen.

As a metal, silver has been identified, mined and used for practical purposes since about the fourth millennium BCE. It appears to have enjoyed its heyday under the aegis of classical Greece and Imperial Rome, both of which encompassed a deep knowledge of its inherent properties and flexibility of use. Silver was used in the fabrication of the first coins, but also as an agent for purifying water and preventing contagion of food and beverages. During the eighth century, the Arab alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan revolutionised its use by generating its first metal salt, silver nitrate. During the Middle Ages the occult enterprises (i.e. magic, alchemy, astrology) slithered their way into conventional European cosmogony from the periphery, together with the laws of sympathy, antipathy and correspondence to which they all ascribed. Silver's association with the moon and with the sublunary realm of generation lay at the heart of the earliest homeopathic remedies; if the lunar sphere presided over healing, then it was only natural that silver, its corporeal manifestation, could be concentrated into a solution and administered to cure ailments of the brain, for epilepsy and vertigo, and to accelerate remedial action on bodily wounds and burns. Working on such premises, many Middle Age and Renaissance alchemists mixed silver nitrate with opium, musk and camphor in their home

laboratories to create a therapeutic tincture known as *pilulae lunaris*, or Pills of the Moon, which they prescribed to patients suffering from the abovementioned ailments.

VENUS OR COPPER



Thus far we have discerned that the metal gold and the Sun represent the active, masculine aesthetic polarity on the cosmological totem pole of pure consciousness. Alternatively, the metal silver and the moon are exoteric markers for the passive, feminine aesthetic polarity on the same cosmological design. Planets and metals are active and passive manifestations of generative powers on a coloured spectrum of consciousness which is itself preponderated by a positive and negative elementary transformative schism induced by the initial rupture

within the primordial power, the first substance or *materia prima*. This cosmic phenomenon is exemplified in the symbology of many cultures and traditions, particularly the Chinese yin-yang and the alchemical union of dry Sulphur and moist Mercury.

Whilst the two great lights circumnavigating the cupola of the heavens, the sun and moon, as well as their associate metals in gold and silver could be thought of as the eastern and western horizons of a cosmological domain, the other planets and metals, traditionally five in number, are merely hierarchical variations of incarnated light (the Sun or gold) or pure creative receptivity (the moon or silver). Unlike the two major polarities, these other formative forces are restricted in expression and impure by comparison. In the case of the Venusian force, expressed actively by the planet Venus and passively by the metal copper, the active solar force predominates to such an extent that it overrides all other elemental influences. According to fifteenth-century alchemist Basilius Valentinus (Basil Valentine), the Venusian influence is heeded by copious amount of unsettled solar energy like a bromeliad yellowed by overexposure to sunlight. The quality is immortalised in the symbol for the formative force which is fashioned from two other fundamental shapes, the circle and the cross. The first denotes ethereal solar power, and the second elemental differentiation of the *prima materia* into ethereal fire, water, earth and air. Seeing that the circle is arranged above the cross, we can safely assume that the elemental differentiations are not dissipated back into the agglomeration of the *prima materia*, but are instead transposed to a more vigorous level.

Knowledge of the metal itself goes back to about 10,000BCE. It appears that gold and lead are the only two metals that were identified and adapted for practical use before copper. Its natural inclination to bind to other metals in the subterranean was not overlooked either. Soon after its discovery, artisans and craftsmen began to alloy it with tin and zinc to produce bronze and brass, respectively. In Egypt, use of the metal was multifarious, It was fashioned into mirrors, statues, vases, pendants, weapons and a great many other ornaments. The Egyptians also employed it for therapeutic purposes like the purification of water and the sterilization of wounds and burns. Verdigris, the green oxy-acetate of copper, was used to soothe afflictions of the eyes but also as a pigment in artwork. In the case of the Greeks we know that it was used widely for military purposes, for Homer reveals in the *Iliad* that Achilles' shield was an amalgamation of silver, gold, copper and tin. Between the sixth and third centuries BCE, the Romans initiated a trend in which copper was rendered into local currency. Both Julius Caesar and Octavian Augustus had their own coins minted in brass or an amalgamation of copper, lead and tin. Under Imperial Rome the metal was known by the Latin *aes Cyprium*, a term which denotes its autochthonous state as an alloy and its concentrated existence on the Mediterranean isle of Cyprus, incidentally the abode of the love goddess Aphrodite.

MERCURY OR QUICKSILVER



In contradistinction to the other four planetary forces and their metals which symbolise unique ruptures in the *prima materia* or first substance, the volatile and elusive mercurial power is a synonym for the entire cosmological process of becoming—in other words the coming-to-be of pure forms, of intellect or incarnated light from the receptive and creative mirror of the *prima materia*. Just look at corporeal mercury, a mysterious menstrual-like metal whose being and behaviour defy all logic. It is highly volatile and transformative, mobile and elusive in character, encompassing magical powers of amalgamation, separation and purification. Baffling to most is how mercury retains its indigenous state of repose as a liquid without losing density. This is truly a mystery! Together with the element of water, the metal in question can exist in three distinct states—as a

liquid at room temperature, as a solid when the latter drops below 38.8 degrees Celsius, and as a gas when it exceeds 356.73 degrees Celsius. These unique chemical properties no doubt motivated esotericists to conclude that its ethereal counterpart was an explicit expression of the *prima materia* as the androgynous autogenerator of gold and all other metals. Just as corporeal mercury could liberate pure gold from its quartz matrix, so too does ethereal mercury extract the vital breath or sulphurous fire of spiritual gold from the cosmic sea of life. This conviction, primordial in age, was held by a vast majority of alchemists. In fact it was the *primum agens* of their lifelong plight.

Only in the mobile and vital mercurial force do we find the solar and lunar principles along with the four elements reconciled and cohabiting the same cosmological condition like a synthesis of body, soul and spirit, all of which are eternal determinants and arrangers of the human being. The esoteric symbol for this quality, comprised of geometrical shapes like the circle, the semicircle and the cross, definitely corroborates its inherent nature. Those tutored to the language of alchemy should be able to discern the entirely volatile condition of the mercurial spirit in the arrangement of the shapes themselves. The four ethereal elements of fire, air, water and earth are grounded, crystallized into two elemental couplets by the dry, masculine and seedy solar force fixed directly above it. The presence of the solar principle or aspect betrays ontological potential for manifold forms in the manner that a eucalyptus seed contains within itself the Platonic form of a eucalypt as well as its culmination. But in mercury one

can see that the circle is capped by a semicircle, meaning that the solar principle or active force is predominated by the lunar principle or passive force. Confidentially the symbol is merely transcribing a state of being in which all forms of matter that have been, are coming to exist or will exist in the future coexist as germs in the *prima materia*. It is also asserting that mercury is the menstruum or womb of all formative forces that garner active or passive expression through their associate planets and metals. The potential for differentiation and development is undoubtedly there, but as the symbol suggests, the inertia of receptivity has not yet been overcome.

Nowhere has the metal enjoyed a more vibrant career than in China, India and Tibet. In those parts of the world cinnabar—the mercurial ore or sulphide—was usually cooked on an iron saucer to liberate the quicksilver. Iron was used as a medium given that it was the only metal known that resisted dissolution when exposed to metallic mercury. Once reduced to quicksilver, it was used for therapeutic purposes such as accelerating the healing of wounds and prolonging life indefinitely, or so they thought. This rudimentary process for liberating volatile from fixed substances, otherwise known as distillation, was to become foremost of the chemical operations carried out in laboratory settings when it diffused into the consciousness of Alexandrine alchemists centuries afterward. On another note the ancients were somewhat mistaken in their beliefs; they were convinced that the red sulphide ore of mercury known as cinnabar and the red calx or mercuric oxide which was obtained by heating it were one and the same substance. Hence many alchemists were able to impress their

incredulous audiences with a chemical recipe in which the metal's reactions were shown to be reversible; when subjected to a continual cycle of sublimations, the metal passed through manifold transformations before seemingly reacquiring to its indigenous, preheated state as cinnabar.

Recipes reciting the preparation of quicksilver extend back to at least the second century CE, though it probably wasn't until the Arab conquests of the seventh century CE that a full-fledged investigation into the properties of the metal were conducted. Under the auspice of a progressive and intellectual climate, the prominent Arab alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan (c. 721-815CE) took chemico-operative and practical alchemy to an unprecedented level. Besides introducing innovations to existing laboratory apparatus, pioneering in the fabrication of certain acids and tinctures and implanting novel theoretical premises into the dual art, Jabir described the chemical processes through which cinnabar was reduced to red calx or mercuric oxide as well as the preparation of mercury perchloride through sublimation. Moving the intense focus away from the four ethereal elements, he also inaugurated the Sulphur-Mercury theory into alchemical dogma. According to this cosmological schema, the four ethereal elements of the initial rupture segregate into two philosophical principles, Mercury and Sulphur. In turn the polarisation of the two principles spurs inimitable combinations and stellar arrangements in the four elements and in one another, which in turn gives rise to all earthly metals under the aegis of the seven planetary powers. Roughly eight centuries after the life and times of Jabir, Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus of Hohenheim

(1493-1541CE) added a third principle to the Mercury-Sulphur theory, that of Salt. He also rendered a practical use for the salts of mercury, administering minute quantities to his patients' wounds and burns to accelerate the healing process or alternatively disinfect them.

MARS OR IRON



Comprised of active planetary and passive metallic energies, the Martian formative force stands near the centre of a cosmological schema in which the masculine aesthetic, symbolized by the Sun or gold, and the feminine aesthetic, symbolized by the moon or silver, inhabit each end as polar opposites. Quite like Venus or copper, Mars or iron is a blunted expression and impure reflection of the supernal incarnated light that suffuses the active

pole. In the Venusian force we discerned that the spirit or embodiment of life force crystallized the elements under the aegis of the solar power. Furthermore the cosmic condition was personified by the configuration of the symbol itself. In the case of the Martian force, the opposite certainly holds true. Governing this cosmological condition is the re-submergence or entombment of spirit in the obscurity of a fourfold elemental differentiation—fire, air, water, and earth. Mars's traditional symbol, the circle surmounted by the cross, exoterically expresses this chaotic position. In the alchemical opus the Martian formative force is ascribed rulership over *cauda pavonis* or Peacock's Tail, the stage in which putrefied matter in the alembic of the alchemist miraculously generates iridescent blues and greens, a reinvigoration of matter which immediately precedes the coagulation of a new form that unravels under *leucosis* or albedo, the whitening phase.

The metal came to prominence during the Iron Age when it was used together with steel to inveigle, exploit and destroy nature, but unanimous opinion in scholarly circles has it that its properties and usage have been known to human beings since at least the mid second millennium BCE. This is vindicated by ancient Egyptian bas reliefs portraying the metallurgical procedure of iron smelting which dates to approximately c.1500BCE. In African countries like Egypt along with the Middle East iron was looked upon with immense awe and reverence and held a much grander and dignified position in metallic hierarchy than gold because the first samples identified were meteoritic or celestial in origin. Iron was divine in origin, the metal of the gods. Hence to pamper the

ego and pacify any budding political unrest what greater and nobler gift could the war-loving Hittites have sent King Ramses the Great (II) than an iron sword and a lump of meteoritic iron? These profound sentiments extended classical Hellenistic consciousness, for Homer reveals that the meteoritic iron was bequeathed to competition winners of the Olympic Games. During the classical period of Greece proper use of the sky metal extended to therapeutic medicine. In the *Iliad*, for instance, Homer relates how rust of iron obtained from a spear that injured Telephus was applied to his wound to facilitate the healing process. In another classical myth the legendary seer and physician Malampus cured Iphiclus, the King of Phylacea, of extreme bodily weakness or anaemia by encouraging the daily ingestion of a tincture combining wine with the rust of iron.

This therapeutic value attributed to the metal by the ancients influenced its practical use during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. Deeply impressed by the deep-rooted qualitative and emotional connection between the sky metal and the astringent, restless nature of blood and war, sixteenth and seventeenth century physicians prepared tinctures of iron as remedial therapies for debilitating physical conditions. Three of these gained widespread exposure: a black oxide known as *aethiops martial*, a sesquioxide of iron called *Crocus martis*, and an ammoniated chloride named *flores martias*. All three are united by the epithet of Mars (the Hellenistic Ares), betraying their primordial connection with the Graeco-Roman god of war and the fiery qualities of strength, urgency and activity. In retrospect one should never forget that the endeavour of war is

underpropped by iron, a metal that has always served as the base material from which all cutting-edge weaponry is fashioned. Hence the god Mars or Ares, the metal iron, the act of war and the primary qualities associated with all three quintessentially express the same formative force at work in the cosmos.

JUPITER OR ZINC



The formative force of the cosmos actively expressed by the planet Jupiter and passively by the metal tin represents a rupture that stands much closer to the feminine aesthetic pole of lunar consciousness than to the masculine aesthetic pole of solar consciousness. We know this by looking at the relative position of the geometric figures on the esoteric symbol that expresses this power; the lunar crescent sprouts from the level arm of the cross,

meaning that the Jovian force actually manifests between that of the Saturnine and Lunar. Sitting between the two just mentioned the Jovian influence facilitates retainment of the original paradisaal state of receptivity and purity. Under the little energetic pocket symbolised by the Jovian force the soul awakens, incarnates, acquires sentience and begins to emerge from the chaos and density of the elementary quartet. The initial upward movement that breaks the spell of paralytic inertia, an indigenous condition of the *prima materia*, is generated by the intellectual and spiritual powers of the unconscious and raises the coagulating soul out of the abyssal depths wholly regenerated and transformed. Alchemically speaking, this stage can be equated to the chemical process of distillation or sublimation which seeks to extract the volatile spirit from its base matter by subjecting the entire body to sweltering temperatures and vaporising it into a condensate. As a rule of thumb, refinement is hinged upon the total amount of distillations that the condensate is subjected to; a greater number of cycles will always harness a purer substance.

The properties and uses of Jove's metal have been known since about the third millennium BCE. The ancient Persians incorporated it into their jewellery whilst the ancient Egyptians made ample use of its salts as a mordant for dyeing materials. Acting as its principle advocate in the ancient world, the Phoenicians imported tin from the Near East along with the British Cornwell, a place both revered and renowned for its tin deposits since the dawn of the Bronze Age. Homer himself, no

doubt cognizant of the qualitative connection between the planetary god Jupiter and the metal tin, alludes to it in his epic poem *The Odyssey* when the protagonist Odysseus beaches ashore the enchanting shores of Conwell. Interestingly the etymological root of our contemporary term for the metal can probably be traced back to the eighth century BCE, a date which is also agreed upon by the existing scholarly consensus to encompass the life and times of this great epic poet. Living in an area of Italy which constitutes modern-day Tuscany at this time were the Etruscans, a panentheistic and polytheistic race either from the indigenous Villanova culture or the Near East who called the Jovian emanation Tins and Tinia. Consequently, ample trade and with the British Isles enabled cultural exchange and linguistic adoption of these terms by the Anglo-Saxons.

Many centuries afterwards the Romans ascribed to tin the name *plumbum album*, a Latin word meaning ‘whitehead’ and proceeded to mastermind an innovation of the highest calibre. Firstly the metal would be unearthed from the ground and separated from its ore through searing fires harnessed by metallurgical purification. Following the extraction metallurgists would render the metal into tinfoil and subsequently pass it onto glass-makers whose dexterous hands would work it into the face of mirrors. After the Romans, practical use of the metal gradually dwindled and died out. It wasn’t until about the late Middle Ages that tin experienced a resurgence, spawned to life by the operative ambitions of many alchemists like Paracelsus and Johannes Agricola. Of interest to most of these was the

alchemical preparation of the metal's salts, a procedure which involved drenching calcined salts in vinegar and then heating the entire admixture in an athanor (alchemical furnace) to produce salt crystals. Igniting these with charcoal produced the metal oxide. Alchemists of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance were acquainted with both the stannic chloride or tin tetrachloride, called *sal jovis*, and the metallic binoxide or dioxide, known as *calx jovis*. Their association to the Jovian planet and deity, as well as to the Jovian qualities of expansion, cheerfulness, wisdom and preservation is implied in their shared use of the epithet *jovis*. Tin was sometimes sublimated with mercury, sulphur and sal ammoniac to create a golden crystalline powder called *Aurum musivum* (mosaic gold) which was used for the treatment of nervous disorders like chronic hysteria and muscular convulsions.

At around this time the metal was also found suitable for incorporation into pewter, a pliable alloy that could be fashioned into a great many implements including household utensils and nearly all church paraphernalia. Like its celestial equivalent which radiates with a brilliance and nobleness that seem eternal to our ephemeral eyes, corporeal tin radiates light and resists deterioration. Divers who examined eight tons of pewter within a fifteenth century Portuguese shipwreck off the coast of Namibia some time ago claimed that the alloy gleamed in such a way that abetted the illusion that it had just sunk.

SATURN OR LEAD



Saturn or lead represents the first rupture of the *prima materia*, the initial expression of manifesting consciousness. This we can discern by looking at its esoteric symbol, a cross mounted atop a lunar crescent. In the pictorial representation the fourfold differentiation of elements latent in the *prima materia* are in a state of passive abasement and have not as yet succumbed to the influence of the lunar or feminine aesthetic and receptive force for the purging of psychic impurities. Moreover the insurmountable position of the four elements reveals that the formative force of Saturn or lead stands at the nethermost end of the ladder of consciousness. The metal lead, its passive expression, exhibits the qualities of heaviness, softness, toxicity and chaos whilst the planet Saturn, its active expression, is the farthest of the seven planets from the center of our solar system

as well as the most 'sluggish' in terms of the time take to complete a revolution around the Sun (29.7 earth years). These exemplify an intrinsic condition both at odds and light years away from the ethereal qualities of incorruptibility, nobility, eternity and splendor embodied by the Sun and its golden metal.

From a spiritual and psychological perspective, Saturn or lead denotes the conscious dependence upon and identification with the detritus and dross of material existence. In the alchemical opus, the Saturnine formative force is rendered potent during the lesser circulation or creation of the 'white stone' and mediates *necrosis* or nigredo, a primary stage in which the base substance in the alchemist's retort or alembic blackens and putrefies. On a psychological and spiritual level, this state of physical corruption denotes the inversion and turning inward of the senses. The seventh woodcut emblem from Basil Valentine's *Azoth* series offers a pictorial depiction of this phase as an elderly man in an entombed state of decomposition. Perched atop his hands is a raven, a bird frequently used to symbolize necrosis or nigredo (The others are the skull and grave). Two winged entities, the man's soul and spirit, are vividly portrayed in the act of absconding with his last breath.

The metal lead has been known to humanity since at least the seventh millennium BCE. This we know from metal beads unearthed at the Neolithic settlement of Çatalhöyük in modern-day Turkey which date to about c.6400BCE. Millennia afterwards, the ancient Egyptians explored the metal's properties and their artificers designated minium, otherwise known as lead oxide, and

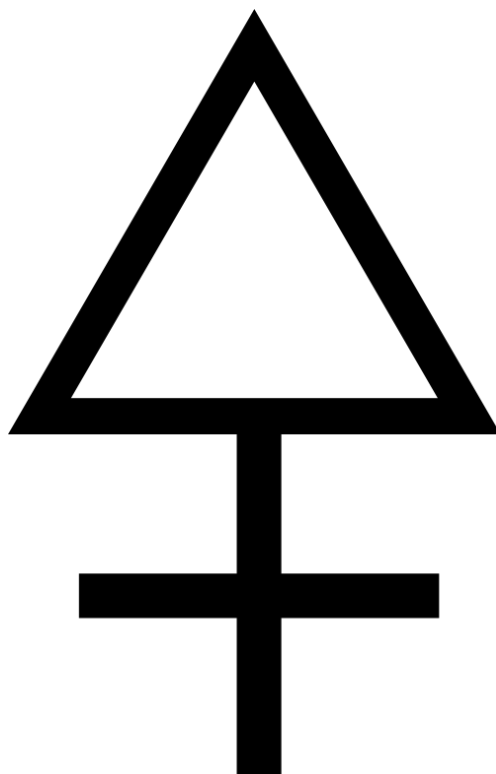
litharge, the protoxide, suitable for use as pigments. They also worked with white lead or lead carbonate which was extracted by subjecting metal sheets to the evaporating fumes of vinegar. The classical Greeks, who obtained much of their lead from the smelting of silver ores, associated the metal to the Titan Cronus, or Father Time, the youngest of the children born to the preeminent deity of the sky, Uranus, and the Earth Mother, Gaea. To this Graeco-Roman god of the harvest we owe the contemporary conception of death as a grim reaper that razes lives with his scythe. Use of the metal became widespread during Roman times, when many of the emperors had it worked into pipes, coins and the system of aqueducts that nourished Rome with water for drinking, bathing and flushing sewerage. It is alleged that the first century Roman Emperor Titus had some fifty thousand or so men delivered to the Spain lead mines for the sake of laboring until they dropped dead from exhaustion.

Popularity of the metal doesn't seem to have waned at all. During the Middle Ages its practicality was all too apparent in the construction of roofs, water tanks and in the synthesis of pewter. Seventeenth century alchemists and physicians were acutely aware of its use as a curative agent too. Many of them prepared a solution of lead acetate and potassium carbonate from which a metallic preparation known as the *Magistry of Saturn* was engendered. This became the basis for an alchemical precipitate called the *Powder of Saturn* which was supposed to relieve respiratory ailments like asthma and tuberculosis of the lungs. Nowadays, the physiognomy of highly insoluble and stable lead compounds makes the metal a perfect candidate for the

sheathing of electrical wires, acid tanks, cable hangers, as well as the primary composition for the weights and cable coatings on marine vessels. Despite its established toxicity to the human nervous system and lethal nature, the metal is still used in batteries, glassware, automotive tire balancing, the coloring of ceramics, and for the manufacture of weights used by recreational divers.

On the Three Alchemical Principles

SULPHUR OF THE TRIA PRIMA



Sulphur first appears as a generative force in an eighth to tenth century tractate entitled *Liber misericordiae* within the alchemical compendium *Corpus Jabirianum* attributed to the Arab polymath Jabir ibn Hayyan, the Pseudo-Geber (c. 721-815). According to Pseudo-Geber's theory, all substances in the cosmos are comprised of Philosophical Sulphur and Mercury (termed Philosophical to distinguish them from the crude elements of the same name) acting on the *prima materia* or first substance. In this cryptic system of knowledge the action of combustible Sulphur, composed of the elements fire and air as well as the

secondary qualities of hot and dry, reacted with fusible Mercury, composed of the ethereal elements water and earth along with the qualities of wet and cold, to produce the bodies of the seven metals under the respective influence of the seven planets.

In order to correctly denote the meaning of Sulphur, we must adhere to an animistic interpretation that sees the world as a living organism contained of intermingling and interconnected fragments. On the *Tabula Smaragdina* or Emerald Tablet, Hermes Trismegistus draws attention to thirteen precepts that garner an idealistic impression of the alchemy as the quintessential law or process that enables all creation. Hence we should abstain from any attempt to grasp or understand this esoteric symbol using a purely mechanistic or reductionist approach. Looking at creation from a dualistic perspective then, Sulphur might be described as a volatile, fiery and active masculine 'spirit' which confers 'form' to all things by binding their vital essence to the corporeal realm. In this way, Sulphur enters into the sublunary sphere of generation to act upon substances and partake in the transformation process without ever suffering any violation or fundamental change to its own anatomy. This formative energy behaves rather elusively; it remains concealed when coagulating the 'body' of a substance or object to render it dry and hard and will only reveal itself during the retrograde stages of un-creation, namely during chemical trials heeded by distillation, putrefaction or dissolution. The latter is sparked by ethereal Quicksilver, a generative force that compliments philosophical Sulphur by rendering itself into a purer and more receptive plastic-like substance for the fixation and coagulation of superior forms

during each *coniunctionis* or new marriage between the two. It mirrors physical attraction between male and female in that the aesthetic beauty of the feminine aesthetic temporarily disables its opposite before prompting the former to tap into a wellspring of unknown pristine strength and liberate itself from its own conceptual margins. Final causes decree that Sulphur will evolve into pure action potential, otherwise known as gold or 'spirit' through the agency of Quicksilver in quite the same way that a fertilised egg morphs into a human child inside the mercurial womb of its mother.

It goes without saying that the sulphuric 'seed' can inhabit a great many 'forms', perfected or otherwise; Philosophical Sulphur can act as a stand-in for planetary bodies like the Sun, the condition of incarnated light, the state of waking consciousness, the day, the ego or personality, the metal gold, and the mineral diamond. When speaking of the ethereal element, many alchemical treatises will warn against the acidic, corrosive properties of its rudimentary state. Philosophical Sulphur, they claim, will char, corrupt, destroy and even invoke the devil within you if you do not arm yourself with the appropriate prophylactics. Clearly, the allegory dissipates before our very eyes if Philosophical Sulphur is substituted for one's ego or personality. Ego consciousness is rather short-sighted and has a tendency to associate exclusively with its own needs and wants, as well as with its own feelings, doubts and predicaments. Left unchecked these can balloon into devils that will infuse themselves into the axes of our souls, incite polar reversal there so that we're thrown into the nuclear winter of a fiery Hell, and

subsequently cannibalise us from the inside-out. The only way forward is through purification, a chemical distillation aimed at purging the personality of its carnal drives, or at the very least shifting the axes of our conscious worlds so that they point to the higher constellations of our unconscious minds. In so turning our attention elsewhere we are attaining two milestones on the road to self-actualisation; firstly, we're acknowledging that the cosmos is much grandeur and all-encompassing than our own inwardly-turned and ephemeral egos, and secondly, we're detaching ourselves from our caustic sentiments and even subjugating them. In retrospect, one might say that the alchemical symbols act as individual ciphers that map out an entire hidden system of knowledge regarding the processes of creation and can thus impart a wealth of information to anyone with the intuitive talent to construe them correctly.

Matter also works on quite the same principles. Contrary to the short-sighted view of our twenty-first century crude science and medicine, alchemy has always been of the opinion that everything that exists possesses a vital principle or life-bestowing essence. This should ring true to any inquiring intellect given that it is quite impossible to reduce any living body—mineral, animal or plant—to its physical composition without the loss of its animating principle. The life essence or blueprint is none other than Philosophical Mercury and Sulphur combined and can be separated from base matter by subjecting it to ordinary chemical processes like maceration, distillation and decoction. Originating from a mother matrix, this powerful and active dual force is identical in all adherents of one particular hierarchy but proceeds

to manifest at a different vibrational frequency in each of the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms. In its pure state Philosophical Sulphur appears as a delicate oily substance and can be separated from Philosophical Mercury through ordinary distillation. Knowing how to alchemically separate these principles from ordinary plant matter or the like and then resynthesise them produces homeopathic elixirs whose medicinal powers exceed that of any pharmaceutical one hundredfold. In China and Tibet these 'occult' principles adhere to a body of conventional scientific knowledge that came into existence roughly two thousand years ago under the aegis of macrobiotics, a denomination of Eastern inquiry which also sought the Elixir of Life.

The esoteric symbol for Sulphur is comprised of two rudimentary shapes; a cross surmounted by a triangle. The first represents the four cardinal directions and the ethereal elements, whilst the second is an exponent of masculinity, generation and action potential. In the arrangement the triangle is shown in an ascendant position in relation to the elements meaning that the generative force is always acting, fixing and colouring individual combinations of the latter into new forms.

MERCURY OF THE TRIA PRIMA



In hindsight, the external articulation and vibrant eccentricity of a vital essence for all living things in the universe is an innovation that probably originated with the Swiss physician, alchemist and philosopher Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim or Paracelsus (1493-1541). In championing an alchemy that imparted cyclic conversion to the Aristotelian structure of matter and was fundamentally interconnected with astrology, natural magic, and an 'occult' cosmology, Paracelsus deduced that the progenitor of the cosmos had resorted to a succession of large-scale distillations of dense matter to produce different hierarchies of being or tiers of consciousness. This was followed by an

assimilation of the Jabirian concepts of Sulphur and Mercury into his cosmogony, to which a third was added—Salt. These three concepts comprised a threefold anatomical division of the base substance or *prima materia* of the cosmos which could allegedly be manipulated using chemical methods in a laboratory to delimit natural processes and create herbal elixirs with miraculous healing properties.

For Paracelsus and his followers, Philosophical Mercury is ‘spirit’, Philosophical Salt is ‘body’, and Philosophical Sulphur is ‘soul’; the first happens to be positively charged, the second is negatively charged, and the third exhibits a neutral charge and acts as a binding force. Mercury or ‘spirit’ is the intangible essence of any organism or object that mimics corporeal vapour or water and eludes direct observation and quantitative analysis, Salt or ‘body’ binds or fixes the physical form together so that it doesn’t dissipate and adheres to the ashes once the organism or object is alchemically burned, and Sulphur or ‘soul’ is the mediating principle between ‘spirit’ and ‘body’ that fuses the polar opposites together for the complete life cycle whilst concurrently accounting for physiognomy and growth. Now, it just so happens that whilst Philosophical Mercury derives from the *prima materia*, it manifests at different vibrational frequencies in each of nature’s three established kingdoms. It is lowest in the vegetable kingdom and highest in the mineral realm. The ‘rate’ for humans and animals stands somewhere between the two just mentioned and is a rational esoteric deduction from the perspective that their ‘soul life’ is generally longer than that of plants but falls way short of the durability and longevity

characteristic of rocks, minerals, crystals, and other inhabitants of the subterranean. Frater Albertus Spagyricus (1911-1984) transcribes these Paracelsian sentiments verbatim in *The Alchemist's Handbook* and goes on to connect the alchemist's Mercury with the notion of *prana* in Vedantic philosophy and the Chinese *Qi*. Mercury provides sustenance to the body and can be found in blood and breath, with more concentrated amounts pervading semen and vaginal fluid.

Alchemical esotericism has it that Philosophical Mercury is both a fiery and watery generative force responsible for the transformation of energies within an individual, or alternatively in the physical matter which exists around us. It is the *prima materia*, the base substance in which the solar 'germ' is nourished and transmuted but it is also the teleological pursuit to perfect all natural 'forms', the *ultima materia*. Both Western and Eastern alchemical treatises sometimes personify Mercury as an aerial spirit, cloud or fumigation. For instance, in the Taoist Chinese text *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, Mercury takes centre stage as a hermaphroditic soul with heavenly aspects that manifest as a masculine cloud demon and an earthly facet that appears as a feminine white ghost. The universality and sweeping nature of the image recalls the primordial ocean of chaos to be found in all creation myths, and implicates Mercury to be the animating feature of the entire cosmos, otherwise known as the *anima mundi* or the Platonic World Soul. On the plane of archetypal psychology, the demon and ghost could be interpreted as the anthropomorphic *animus* and *anima* of the subconscious that can reveal the individual stage of development each individual psyche

has achieved on the ladder of spiritual integration (which Jung called *individuation*).

Jung, whose interpretation and commentary of this ancient Taoist text bridged Eastern mysticism with his own analytical psychology, deduced that spiritual attainment was dependent upon the reacquaintance of one's ego with the transpersonal realm and the subsequent projection of its drives and needs away from day-to-day consciousness. This transpersonal realm, described by the Taoist text as the 'roots of consciousness and life' and 'the blessed country close at hand', hides the archetypal Self, a totality and unity of being that reconciles all inner conflict, harmonizes any friction caused by desires, impulses and urges that could sometimes be described as subpersonalities within oneself, and imbues life with a deeper meaning and purpose. When correctly interpreted, dreams will provide a small window through which the intercourse between the personal conscious and unconscious within oneself can be witnessed, as well as offering a symbolic transcription of the journey from ego-based existence to the superior personality. As any alchemist would tell you, it is the corrosive and disintegrating properties of the 'poisonous dragon', Philosophical Mercury, that makes it all possible; there can be no generation and crystallization of a new 'form', in this case an integrated psychic entity, if a dismemberment, putrefaction and dissolution of the old 'form' doesn't occur first. The alchemists would also aptly disclose that this conflict and unification of autonomous psychic entities that spurs oneself on to self-actualisation or individuation and its perceptibility in dreams forms part of a much larger cosmological

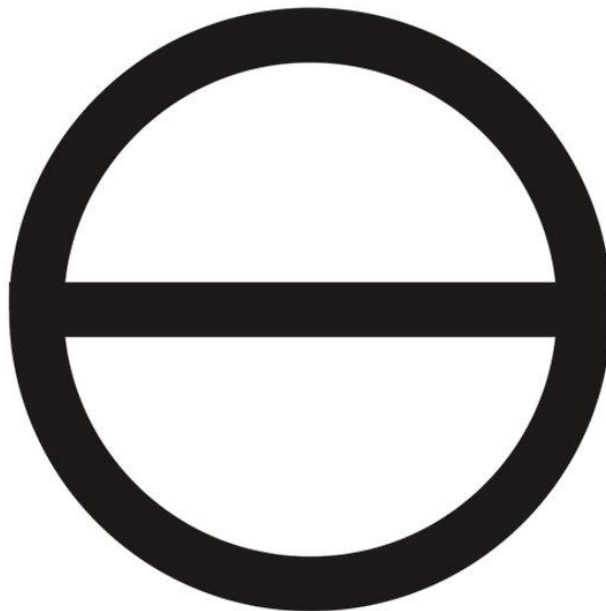
system upon which all processes of creation, rudimentary or complex, are based.

In some instances Philosophical Mercury is described by the alchemists as 'spirit' and in others as 'soul'. This does not indicate a contradiction of sorts, but rather an individual preference for either one of the terms when describing exactly the same concept. Most are predisposed to seeing the *anima* or 'soul' as the psychic 'form' or resonance of the individual psyche whilst 'spirit' isn't any intellectual and transcendental agent, but rather the vital essence that binds together the ethereal 'form' to the corporeal 'body'. Both are relevant and intimately linked to the concept of Philosophical Mercury given that their sphere of influence does extend into the realm of the personal ego. On a psychological level, the latter is none other than the hermetic 'fire' which continually shapes the *materia*, the developing ego, as the fire of the oven roasts dough to produce bread.

The esoteric symbol for Mercury is comprised of all three rudimentary shapes; the circle, the semicircle, and the cross. In this particular arrangement the solar circle coagulates and fixes the cross of the four ethereal elements, but is itself dominated by the lunar crescent. This hermaphroditic constitution, unique amongst the esoteric symbols, delineates the inner friction between the fiery masculine and moist feminine generative forces upon which all processes of transmutation, or the transformation of all base matter, are dependent. It is base matter or *prima materia*, the *ultima materia* or ruby-red Philosopher's Stone, and the electric-like spark that spurs the wheel of creation into

motion, mediating and pertaining to every stage in the evolutionary development of the 'germ' or 'seed' but exclusive to none. It is the protean vital essence of all animals, plants and minerals that, by virtue of its state of eternal evolution, eludes quantification and compartmentalization, as well as the fluid, virginal menstruum or plastic film that encompasses the dynamism and possibility of all 'forms' and their final causes without ever entering into the process of creation or becoming. The unique properties and chemical behaviours of corporeal Mercury do much to elicit the true nature of its philosophical and alchemical counterpart.

SALT OF THE TRIA PRIMA



Maria the Jewess, a legendary alchemist of the first centuries CE, reputedly quoted that "One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth." While the Swiss

psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) localized the axiom to the sphere of analytical psychology as symbolic recognition of the lifelong process of individuation or self-actualization, most esotericists and occultists have understood it as the cosmic schism initiated by the friction between the active, masculine “Sol” and the passive, feminine “Luna” to enable a third state. The third denotes a condition of creative unity through synthesis, but also the fallen Adamic state of conceptual limitation, inertia, petrification, devolution, stagnation and neutralization. One could call it the inverse of Jungian individuation; an annulment of the two volatile formative powers hastened by their conflicting charges. The cross of the elements and the quasi-historical crucifixion of the Christ are figurative transliterations of this mode of existence.

In defiance of the Jungian perspective, the just mentioned condition is not exclusive to the psychological realm but extends to encompass all processes of creation. The Swiss polymath Paracelsus (1493-1541) named these three principles of primal matter Philosophical Sulphur (soul), Mercury (spirit) and Salt (body). Proceeding from this Neo-Platonic-flavoured division of the cosmos Paracelsus argued that the first exhibited a neutral charge, the second a positive charge, and the third a negative charge. Sulphur or ‘soul’ is the mediating principle between ‘spirit’ and ‘body’ that fuses the polar opposites together for a complete life cycle of the organism or object whilst concurrently accounting for physiognomy and growth, Mercury or ‘spirit’ is the intangible essence that mimics corporeal vapor or water and eludes direct observation and quantitative analysis, and Salt or

'body' binds the physical form together so that it doesn't dissipate and adheres to the ashes once the organism or object is alchemically burned.

Frater Albertus's (1911-1984) spagyric method for the isolation of the life principle or vital force of a particular plant or herb is based on the same theoretical premises. In his vivifying, concise, and instructive work *The Alchemist's Handbook*, Frater Albertus reintroduces practical alchemy to a hitherto untutored American audience and makes a startling revelation in the process; the blueprint, signature, life principle, vital force—call it what you will—can in fact be isolated from an organism or substance through conventional chemical procedures. According to Albertus subjecting a fresh or dried herb to the distillatory process generates a twofold division of matter into oil and dead residue. The latter can be charred to black and light grey cinders; this is physical Salt. Unlike Mercury whose characteristics and vibrations are uniform across each of the three primary kingdoms, the fundamental makeup of Salt is different in organisms or substances that share a particular classification. The reason for this might lie in the fact that Salt carries the individual qualities of the organism, the outward and inward features which make it unique in the cosmos.

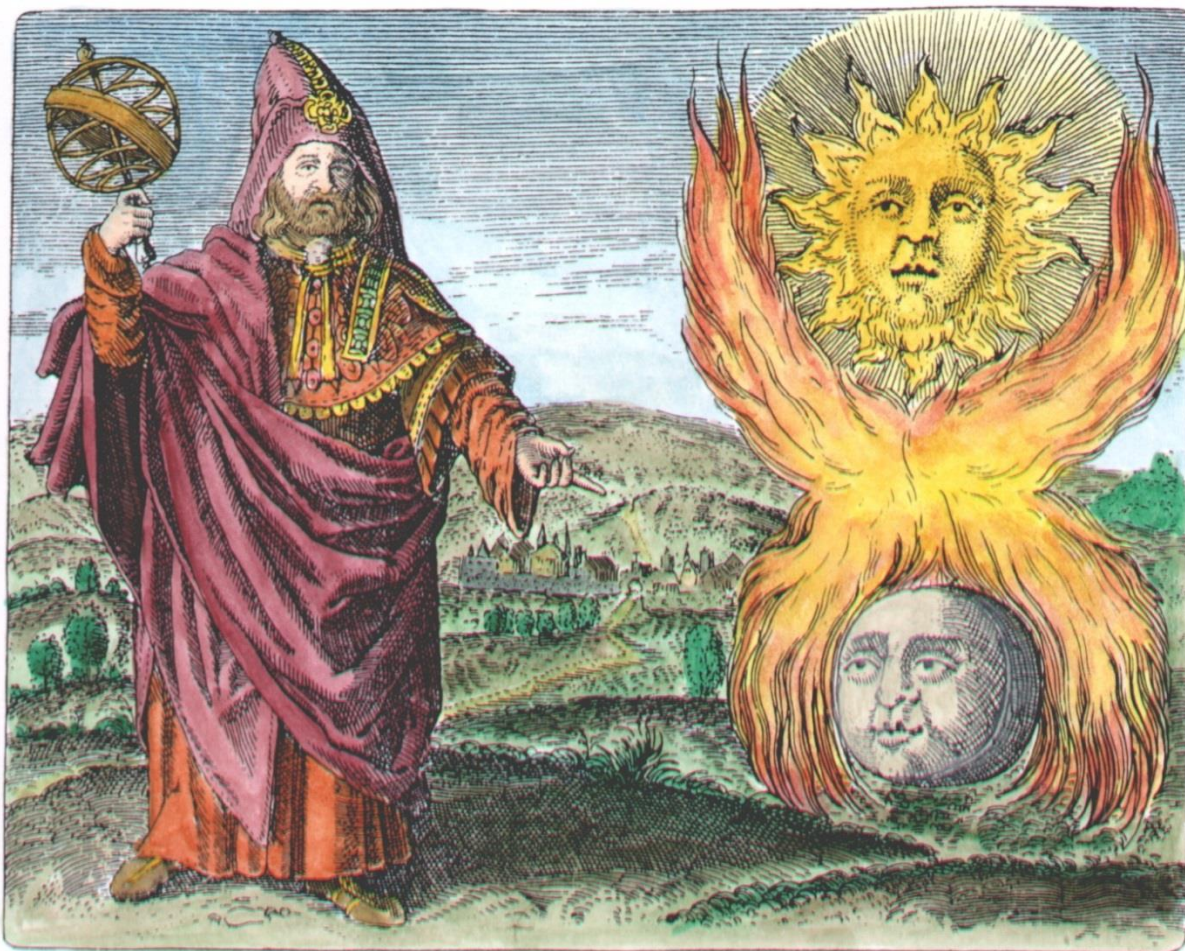
When transposed to the microcosm Salt assumes multiple forms and possesses a double meaning; it is the corporeal vessel itself, the human body and brain in which the mind and unconscious will are confined, as well as the corpus of physical senses that keeps one bound to carnal pleasures and conditioned

to archaic perceptions which inadvertently withhold the widening of individual consciousness. Its power of inertia disables the conjunction of ego with the parapsychical multiverse that illuminates an underlying cohesion to all life and facilitates meaning, like a transistor delimiting the passage of electrical signals to an electronic gadget. If watery Mercury acts as a dissolving and evaporative agent and fiery Sulphur as a combustive and coagulative one, then Salt, like its purely physical constituent, must be the calcined ashes that delineate the contemporaneous form of the volatile spirit.

In the repeated conjunctions of Sulphur (soul) and Mercury (spirit) that enable the alchemical movement from *prima materia* to *ultima materia*, Salt (body) serves as the mold enabling the limitless and eternal powers to intersect and creatively unite in quite the same way that the rungs of a ladder allows one to vertically ascend along the wall of a multistory building. In transposing this cosmic state to the human microcosm and macrocosm we see that, when hermetically purged of its egoisms, its self-centered and self-gratifying urges and its sexually-orientated lusts, the mind-body interaction facilitates contemplation of these individual 'fixative' states by incarcerating the multifaceted field of suprapersonal psychic energy emanating from the primordial abyss of the collective cosmic psyche. One could compare Salt (body) to a stone bridge arching over a torrential waterway, enabling a bird's eye view of the subjectively experienced kaleidoscope of consciousness, or a digital camera which captures portraits of the same individual as he or she traverses the eternal sands of time. Much like the stone bridge or

digital camera, Salt permits the divine intellect to objectively sense and perceive, to interpret and comprehend the causal interaction between an outer, natural world existing in time and space and an inner, spiritual and psychic realm of forms and ideas in which time and space are nonexistent. It is, without a doubt, an intuitively felt, objectified and clearly demarcated echo of cosmic anatomy.

In alchemical esotericism, Philosophical Salt is exemplified by a circle bisected by a horizontal line.



In contemporary times the word 'alchemy' is most often connected with a transformation or change of some sort and has even been used in a pejorative sense by the scientific community as a synonym for 'pseudoscience', but lying deep inside the kernel of the word itself is both the potentiality of a quest and the fulfilment or culmination of that quest. It is an archetype wedged so deeply within our unconscious minds, as deeply rooted perhaps as giant cypress trees are to the windswept cliffs of Samaria Gorge in Crete, that we remain ignorant of the reality

unless it is purposely brought to our attention. The same is true of the dynamic historical tradition that is loosely termed 'alchemy' (rather than 'alchemies') by the scholastic establishment. For an infant the culmination of a search better known as the Philosopher's Stone is the acquisition of a beautiful toy castle on the shelf of a local boutique store, or a Cornetto ice cream in the freezer. For a teenager, on the other hand, a year-end trip to the European Alps might signify the attainment of the Stone in the form of a lifelong desire to experience snow. For a young businesswoman it is the promotion that will relieve her of financial burdens and render her dream of attaining a designer dress possible. Alternatively, for a decrepit old man wasting away in a nursing home it is an unprecedented visit from his only son and his daughter-in-law that bequeaths a youthful livelihood and elation not felt in years. In this sense alchemy is an unconscious and diligent striving towards a condition, reality, or state of being perceived to be better or more appealing than the existing one, irrespective of whether the goal is ever attained or not.

The constituent elements of the alchemical sphere—an unconscious seeking and searching through both qualitative and quantitative means—cannot be localised to the individual, for it has existed in collective consciousness for time immemorial. Naturally, the question begging to be answered is what kind of search would persist for so long in persons from such a variegated group of disciplines as astrology, medicine, mysticism, science and philosophy? What kind of search might possess human beings to peer under stones, to pick Mother Nature apart and to subject her mineral, animal and plant matter, as well as

the metals of her womb, to extreme heat and chemical processes in laboratory and other artificial settings, over and over and over again? What kind of search might prompt one to exhaust all their possible resources, avenues of critical inquiry and thought; to part with their wealth, to become estranged from their families or risk excommunication from their respective religious factions and the like? Simple really. An encounter and union with the numinous and formative force of the cosmos known as God, giving the proselyte intimate knowledge of the 'hyle' of the cosmos, the prime substance or *prima materia* that would enable imitation of nature's teleological striving to perfect its own created forms, engage their multiplication and allow one to become God. If the final cause in the ethereal world of being is God, the Empyrean, then its material constituent is undoubtedly gold, the eternal and incorruptible metal. The ultimate quest, then, might be seen as the perfection of nature—the World Soul or *Anima Mundi*—in her triune mineral, animal and vegetable aspect, the fabrication and multiplication of God's material flesh, gold, and the discovery of an elixir or medicine which might confer the condition of immortality upon mere mortals, a condition both indigenous and exclusive to the Godhead. This fascination will undoubtedly remain at the helm of worldly imagination until we actually achieve it, or until the sands running through the hourglass of our existence expire and we are inevitably wiped from the cosmic slate of the universe.

Herein lays the practical concerns of those who have styled themselves 'alchemists' through the ages. Foremost of their pursuits were *chrysopoeia* (gold-making) and *argyropoeia* (silver-

making) through metallic transmutation, the preparation of drinkable gold used as an antidote against many ailments known as *aurum potabile*, and the discovery of the chemical signature or vital essence of all substances through a repeated cycle of distillations. *Spagyria*, the production of potent herbal medicines through alchemical processes, was also a popular exponent of work carried out in a laboratory setting. So too was the attempt to create artificial life forms or embryonic manikins known as *homunculi* in the womb of the alembic. Of course the magnum opus of all alchemical endeavours was the synthesis of the two constituents of the Philosopher's Stone; the scintillating white and red powders that could transmute any base metal to silver and gold, respectively.

The plausibility of such transmutational feats rested precariously upon a primordial belief that belongs to the animistic and vitalistic tradition of the pre-Socratic philosophers, namely that all is one (*hen to pan*) and that everything, from the inanimate and inert to the animate and reflexive—is alive. In an eternal cycle of becoming and unbecoming, the formed “matter” or the individual nature of objects that makes up the shadow play of the universe is all composed of the same *prima materia*, the same basic substance. What differentiates the universal hierarchy of eternally-evolving “forms” from one another is the composition of their individual ‘souls’, to be understood through an Aristotelian teleology where the qualitative essence or ‘type’ crystallises under a unique combination between the first four differentiating elements of the *prima materia*: fire, water, air, and earth. Of course, the just mentioned do not denote the material

elements and should not be understood as such. They are merely four principles which underpin a wholly fundamental plan to the universe. Water and earth combine to form sulphur, the combustible masculine principle, while fire and air form mercury, the fusible feminine principle. This dualistic viewpoint remained steadfast until about the sixteenth century, until Theophrastus von Hohenheim or Paracelsus (1493-1491CE) extended it to include salt, the solidifying neutral principle or conferrer of form.

As with all elements in the natural world, the physical base which underpins all metals is identical; only their invigorating essence, their 'soul' differs. If the ethereal sulphur (linked to the principle of fire) represents the wholesome and immaterial 'form' of God, then it must be completely unfixed and expressive in gold, whose "form" is jovial and immortal. Conversely, it must be severely inhibited and blunted in lead given that its own 'form' exhibits quantitative and qualitative markers the are the antithesis of gold- heavy, lacklustre, and temporal in that it is easily tarnished by air. The implication of such a philosophy is that the metallic transmutation is indeed possible through the manipulating of the metal's respective essence or 'soul'. Most alchemical treatises speak of the destruction of an old "form" of a particular substance or metal, its reduction to pure receptivity that is the *materia prima*, and the subsequent conferral of a purer, nobler "form" that cures it of its 'sickness' and elevates it on a universal hierarchy of purposes that understands God as primal mover and cause. In such a teleological cosmogony where above and below, inner and outer, and consciousness and matter are all One in God, the chemical processes occurring in the

alembic are not only mirrored in but also facilitated by analogous conditions that must be present in the 'soul' of the alchemist for the endeavour to be successful. Hence we can be certain that alchemy has been a dual tradition from its humble beginnings; both a practical and chemico-operative science based on theories borrowed from Greek natural philosophy, as well as a transcendental and mystical art.

Perhaps the best exemplifier of the alchemical process is a geological phenomenon that has existed since the formation of our planet; the manner whereby a diamond comes into being. This precious stone is but an allotrope of carbon, one of the most abundant minerals on the planet. Being a base substance it is characteristically black and forms the chemical basis of all life, a notion which draws striking parallels to the nature of the *prima materia* which is itself the passive and dark principle of uncreation, the undifferentiated agglomeration called chaos or 'hyle' (matter) from which all things take their intended form or become. Carbon is also inert and lacklustre, the dross and detritus standing at the lowest end of the divine hierarchy of purpose. The same can be said of the *prima materia*, which is amorphous and thus rock bottom on the evolutionary ladder of consciousness. In an event that seems to defy all logic, carbon subjected to searing heat and pressurised forces deep in chasms of the earth's mantle magically transforms into a scintillating and supernal stone called diamond. Its defects and impurities are minimal, and it can inflict damage without suffering any physical detriments in the process. Furthermore, diamond is colourless and transparent yet it is more than able to disperse light in

different colours and hues. By comparison to all other stones, it is flawless. If an eternal incarnation (or re-incarnation I should say) of this sort could come of such a sullied substance as carbon by subjecting it to intense fires within the hermetically sealed womb of earth, then shouldn't it also be possible for the 'souls' of other dross substances to be purified in an artificially created one, in the alembic and the athanor (the alchemical furnace) of the laboratory, with exactly the same outcome? Deductive logic of this kind and calibre is quite indigenous to alchemical thought, a tenet vindicated by the fact that diamond is both an epithet and a synonym for the idealised concept of the Philosopher's Stone; the alchemists sought to create indestructible 'forms' through natural processes that were to be imitated, perfected and augmented.

Despite the fact that alchemy formed a single, coherent theory over time by assimilating aspects from ancient Egyptian temple literature, Aristotelian nature philosophy, Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism, the collective alchemical tradition in the Western world is as variegated and broad as the Gnostic cults of late antiquity. Alchemy has shaped and has been shaped by the ancient philosophical traditions, mysticism, the banal and mechanical craft practices of metallurgy and glass-making, religious, political and social movements, literature and the fine arts, as well as having laid the foundations for the emergence of chemistry in the eighteenth century. This miscellaneous and dynamic tradition is rivalled only by the beliefs and concerns of the individual alchemists whom belong to it. There was never any consensus on the number of stages in the alchemical opus, or what the *prima materia* or first matter actually was. Some

thought it was mercury, others lead, and others still niter. The Philosopher's Stone was the *ultima materia* in powder form and the Elixir of Life the liquid version, though the two were often confounded. Some alchemists regarded them to be the same substance, whilst others insisted that the contrary was true.

The Greek alchemists of late antiquity who represent the inauguration of alchemy in the Western world appear to have been mystical and operative alchemists, intensely concerned with the theological implications of chemical processes in the laboratory. In the fifth century, Neo-Platonist philosopher and astrologer Olympiodoros the Younger (495-570CE) engaged the tradition from Alexandria as a liberal philosophical art involving the ascension of the soul. The Arab alchemists Jabir ibn Hayyan (721-815CE) and Rhazes (865-925CE) were intensely sober, exoteric, and practical in their attitudes towards the art, setting aside salvific quests for illumination and introducing the concept of a panacea or universal elixir and its preparation from mineral, plant and animal products. Both Jabir and Rhazes were of a disposition and mentality that saw alchemy as the magical gates to an alchemical world of endless feasibilities; for them, metallic transmutation was a certainty.

Standing at the frontier of the scientific revolution, Theophrastus von Hohenheim or Paracelsus (1493-1491CE) denounced this belief but engaged spagyrics and pioneered iatrochemistry, the revolutionary application of alchemy to medicine and physiology. Writing in the nineteenth century, British writer Mary Anne Atwood (1817-1910CE) argued in favour

of a purely spiritual interpretation in which the soul of the alchemist was ennobled with demiurgic powers through mesmeric trances. For the Italian esotericist Julius Evola (1898-1974CE), alchemy and Hermeticism were quintessentially one. He understood the tradition in terms of a holistic cosmology which correlated physiological changes with psychological processes. A contemporary of Evola's, the psychiatrist and founder of analytic psychology Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961CE), interpreted the alchemical opus as an unconscious transcription of psychic interplay between conscious and unconscious elements. For Jung, the *ultima materia* of the Philosopher's Stone was simply the integration of the ego and the true Self in a psychic process he described as individuation or self-actualisation. Evola rejected this as a reductionist and monocular approach towards what he perceived to be a numinous phenomenon relating to all processes of creation, not just the psychic.

At about this time operative alchemy also experienced a short-lived revival. In 1832CE, practical alchemist from France named Cyliani published a manuscript in which he claimed to have succeeded in synthesising the heavy red powder, the Red Stone. Cyliani was also apt in asserting that the scrupulous and drawn-out endeavour lasted thirty-seven years before he finally succeeded. A similar claim was made by Albert Richard Riedel (1911-1984CE), the self-styled 'Frater Albertus' who founded the Paracelsus Research Society in Salt Lake City, Utah. During the time that the facility was operational, Albertus declared to have extracted the 'essence' or 'oil' of lead, copper and gold. When occultist and writer Israel Regardie (1907-1985CE) visited Albertus

at his research centre, his purely spiritual conception of alchemy went out the window. Whatever he saw or experienced clearly exerted a profound effect on him, enough at least to reignite his faith in alchemical craft practice.



Much emphasis nowadays is placed upon Ptolemaic Alexandria as having provided the cultural humus out of which alchemical theory and practice arose. However a frequently ignored fact is that during this time the dual quest for the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life had already evolved into a full-fledged denomination of inquiry for the Chinese. As a matter of fact, it just so happens that when Hellenistic scholars and philosophers busied themselves drawing together the practical and theoretical aspects of a tradition delineated by chemical stages as well as an end result in the Stone, Chinese alchemist Li Shao Chun was already attempting the first metallic transmutation at the Imperial Court of the Emperor Wu Ti (140-86BCE) using cinnabar,

an ore of mercury as his *prima materia*. Just like their Western descendants, the Chinese were intensely drawn to the mechanical art of *chrysopoeia* (gold-making) too, although not for the same purposes of posterity, immediate providence and fame (or notoriety in most cases) that motivated many European charlatans between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Instead, their practical pursuits were underrun by a heartfelt conviction that synthetic gold was of a magical essence and would grant life eternal to all who consumed it. For the Chinese, the golden metal was merely a secondary by-product of an alchemical process whose primary intent was the conferral of immortality upon 'form', and above all the human form.

The Chinese alchemical treatises are intensely interesting. Most are characterised by motifs and ideas that didn't crop up in the Western tradition until after the Arabic incursions of the sixth and seventh centuries. These facilitated another cross-cultural dissemination of philosophical thought between medieval Europe, the Near East and Asia via the maritime trading ports and intellectual centres of both Alexandria and Byzantium. Hence, some of the theoretical innovations that entered the alchemical cosmogony of the Christian-West through the Islamic world may not have been original Arabic contributions at all, but rather a reshuffling and recasting of ideas borrowed from the Chinese. Such a notion might also be vindicated by the fact that the Arabs traded with the Chinese and their missionaries attended the Court of the Chinese Emperor in Shensi, a place where transmutational endeavours had been tried innumerable times over.

Chinese alchemists also wrote their alchemical manuscripts using an apocryphal language that included (but was not exclusive to) acrostics, allegories, metaphors and other ciphers to cloud chemical formulae, processes and mystical secrets from those deemed inept, ignorant or downright unworthy. The first instance of allegorical encoding of alchemical knowledge in the West came centuries afterwards, when Egypto-Greek alchemist and Gnostic mystic Zosimus of Panopolis (c. 300CE) made rampant use of it to shroud his inwardly felt conviction that the transformation of consciousness and the purification of metals were esoteric and exoteric aspects of the same transitory, redemptive and cosmological process through which the human soul apprehended and reunited with the immaterial world of spirit. From this point onwards, the majority of alchemical writings proper in the West become so riddled with word play, allegory and verbosity that any uninformed attempt to make sense out of them or read their intended message—chemical, psychological or spiritual—mimics the endeavour of trying to pinpoint the planet Uranus in the night sky without a star chart and twelve inch refractor telescope.

The great lengths the Chinese went to personify individual chemicals and elements infers an intensely practical approach to the art. Thus the mineral pigment vermilion became known as the 'Fair Lady', the arsenic sulphide mineral realgar as the 'Masculine Yellow' and the mother-of-pearl as the 'Cloud Mother'. The medieval alchemists of Europe who came along centuries afterwards followed in their stead, attributing to the ore cinnabar the image of the Red Lion and to the golden metal the Red King;

the metal silver they called the White Queen and mercuric sulphide or quicksilver the Hermaphrodite. The latter has been intimately bound up with the mysteries of the Grand Arcanum from the earliest of times. Its paradoxical, miraculous and illusive qualities connote a world full of boundless feasibility and demiurgic power, making it an attractive central symbol for a magical and transformative tradition such as alchemy. Lest we forget that the Chinese sought their elixir of immortality in a preparation of red mercuric oxide; conversely, the Western alchemists sought the Philosopher's Stone in philosophical mercury.

Perhaps the most interesting feature about Chinese alchemy is that it is based upon a vitalistic and animistic conception of the cosmos that presupposes that the reality of formed matter has come about through an eternal battle between 'love' and 'conflict'. These are described as Yin, the wet and cold feminine principle, and Yang, the hot and dry masculine principle, depicted symbolically in Chinese art as the White Tiger and the Green Dragon. The Chinese Yin and Yang is none other than the alchemical Sol and Luna, the philosophical Mercury and Sulphur, whose successive chemical marriages birth the Philosopher's Stone. Here, one would be remiss not to mention that this dualistic notion wasn't assimilated into Western alchemy until about the seventh century, when Arab alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan (721-815CE) acquired an anonymous treatise titled the *Secret of Creation* that made mention of a speculative Mercury-Sulphur theory. In any case the husband and wife pairing of Yin and Yang and Sol and Luna are obviously the feminine and masculine

aesthetic formative powers that generate inner friction, an internal struggle between 'yes' and 'no' that eventually brings forth one's true 'essence' or astral body. The attainment of this inner fusion and the creation of 'essence' depend largely upon one's ability to transcend suffering through concentration. As an entelechy this 'essence' is pure animating spirit, the immaterial form of God wishing to unfetter itself from cumbersome laws imposed at the moment of one's incarnation or birth. It's nothing unique to the psychic or spiritual realms, for it occurs in and defines all processes of creation. Does a diamond body not arise from the detritus of carbon?

The most prominent and earliest known literary composition concerning alchemy comes from China and deals with the creation of a universal elixir. The protagonist of the narrative was a real historical figure, a Taoist philosopher and alchemist named Wei Po Yang, who thrived sometime in the second century CE. According to legend, Wei Po Yang spent many years studying the elementary imbalance in human physiology that disrupted a natural state of equilibrium such as the one that obviously exists in the eternal metal, gold. A widespread belief of the time was that the riddle of immortality could be solved through the manufacture of a herbal medicine that would restore equipoise to the unbalanced human condition. Eager to test his own theory, Wei Po Yang gathers three of his closest disciples and ventures into the mountains. The four of them labour ceaselessly by collecting the requisite herbs for the admixture, grinding them into a fine powder and then compressing small quantities into minuscule tablets which Yang calls the Pills of Immortality.

In a succession of events mildly reminiscent of contemporary scientific methodology, Yang has their efficacy tested on one of his travelling companions—a white dog. Within seconds the results vindicate that Yang’s Magnum Opus is no elixir at all, but rather a potent poison. Distressed at his own incompetence, Yang swallows one of the pills and goes the way of the dog. So too does his closest and most faithful disciple, who considers it a dishonour not to submit to the same fate as his own master. But the remaining two neither share the same morals nor are they as dauntless as their brother, so they return to their homes and make no further mention of the incident. One can only imagine their astonishment and ensuing disappointment when they receive a letter stipulating that all three victims have miraculously revived, and that they are now amongst the immortals. This tale, a clear allusion to the Elixir of Life, was told in China centuries before analogous ideas appeared in “The Hundred and Twelve Books” of the Corpus Jabirianum, a work attributed to Arab alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan. Moreover, stories based on successful transmutations conducted by putative and legendary figures (i.e. Nicholas Flamelli) didn’t emerge in the West until about the sixteenth century.

Unlike the Chinese variant, the origin of Western alchemy appears to be a much more convoluted and ambiguous affair. The art appeared in Alexandrian Egypt as a dual concern, with both a chemical-operative aspect and an auxiliary philosophical and mystical perspective at a time when the cultural melting pot was fusing together mystical and philosophical alloys of every imaginable texture and hue. From what has come to light thus far,

the technical side was obviously based on ancient Egyptian metallurgical practice, an artisanal craft which extends back to at least c.2500BCE. The Egyptians were intensely practical in their ways, and used knowledge of chemical processes to overlay metals, dye coloured glass and linen, synthesise emeralds and other artificial stones, as well as applying mercury and antimony as solvents to extract gold from impure ores. Step-by-step recipes and how-to technical prescriptions were inscribed on papyrological documents (i.e. Leyden Papyrus X and Stockholm papyri of c. 500-300BCE) and temple stelae within the inner temple sanctuaries. Likewise knowledge of the seven metals, their respective planetary rulers and the astrological emphasis on favourable and unfavourable timing assimilated into alchemical ontology might also be regarded an autochthonous inheritance (via Chaldean art). In short, the alchemical fascination with heating, distilling and redistilling substances and subjecting them to intense heat in *athanors* (alchemical ovens or furnaces) goes so far as to reveal just how influential Egyptian metallurgical and glass-making practices were on the art. What is known of the earliest Egypto-Greek alchemists also attests to such. In their respective compositions, Bolus of Mendes (c. 300BCE) and Zosimus of Panopolis (c. 300CE) offer formulas and practical techniques on the imitation and preparation of precious metals like silver and gold. These particulars betray knowledge of a practical chemistry and metallurgy that probably came from intercourse with Egyptian priests whom oversaw the metal-workers and the smelting and working of metals in the cult temples of their respective nomes.

Sadly, the same widespread consensus does not apply to alchemy's philosophical inheritance. There are variant opinions in circulation, with the two most popular attributing what is supposed to mark a subjectively experienced spiritual endeavour either to philosophical speculations made by the Ionian pre-Socratics, or to an Egyptian animistic cosmogony and sacred science now lost. Nowadays academic inquiry has a propensity to deal unsympathetically with cultures that do not stand in a direct line of transmission with the socio-political and religious roots of its own origin. For that reason it is torqued towards classical philosophy and rejects the later as a subtle mythologization of the ancient Egyptian culture. In fact, anyone who bothers to delve into the issue inevitably sees that most scholars working in the field of Western esotericism today are unconsciously influenced by the impression that the Western world is predominantly a product of Hellenistic and Roman thought. Hence they will not budge from the perspective that the salvific quest *for unio mystica* which parallels, mirrors and internalises the technical aspect is derived from a *physis*, a Greek natural science couched in Platonic terminology.

Perhaps this modern-day enigma is best exemplified by the etymological route of the word *alchemy* itself, a term whose origin is still widely debated. While the earliest known adaptation of the word has been discerned in the Arabic *al-kimiya*, scholarly opinion concerning the etymological prototype remains divided. Some gravitate towards a Greek derivation in *chyma*, meaning to cast or smelt. *Chymeia* then, which forms a greater part of the word *alchymeia* would denote the craft of pouring metal. Others

see a much stronger and more authentic connection in the Egyptian *kemet*, a term which connotes black earth. This enigma may remain a polemical concern for a while yet, given that alchemy's cosmological perspective is intimately bound up with both the craft of pouring metals and with the theoretical framework that 'All is One' in the black base substance of creation known as the *prima materia*.

Let's attempt to piece together an Egyptian worldview based on pictorial images from surviving temple inscriptions and funerary texts, as well as other papyrological documents that comprise a much greater body of literature now lost in time. Just like our Palaeolithic and Neolithic ancestors, the Egyptians gravitated towards a polygonal experience of reality, a sacred universal science in which the invisible realm of spirit (heaven) and the visible realm of matter (earth) worked in eternal conjunction and cooperation with one another to bestow forms upon the *prima materia* or primordial chaos, as all Egyptian creation myths will affirm. In such a pre-rationalistic reality, the respective poles—negative and positive, active and passive, feminine and masculine, *eidos* (forma) and *hyle* (materia)—do not act as independent denominations on this beaded necklace of immutable consciousness or being, but mutually interpenetrate one another to create a cosmic shadow play. To understand it one must engage and contemplate the quantitative and qualitative aspects of its material forms, its spiritual centre, and its multiplicity of meanings which betray a fundamental interconnectedness for the entire universe. Unlike the Greeks who came after them, the Egyptians never ascribed dialectic

expression to this multidimensional cosmography nor did they officialise any of their beliefs in writing. Pictograms, hieroglyphics and any other forms of writing could not capture the rich and numinous essence of such a sacrosanct reality. Being much more subtle in their ways, they implied it with ample use of literary techniques including *paranomasia* (puns), metaphors and word play.

In the Egyptian mystery religion, the triad Nut-Hathor-Isis embodied the formative forces of the aesthetically feminine. Her body was the World Tree that united the Heaven, the Earth and the Underworld; the sun and the astral bodies, the corporeal ego, and the eternal soul passed through the respective denominations of her body in an cycle of eternal recurrence, of dismemberment and reintegration, of purification and illumination, and of death and rebirth such as the one we seen in the alchemical ontology of *solve et coagula*, a term which literally means to dissolve and coagulate. She was the sycamore or African palm that offered her mortal children sustenance yet she was also the hulk of wood known as the sarcophagus, the bloodthirsty ‘flesh eater’ that encased and devoured the departed. In the heavens her numinous spirit expressed itself as the star Sirius, both inaugurating the increase and decrease of formative forces and measuring the eternity of time. Her star was the harbinger of the Nile Inundation, an event of utmost importance seeing as it ordered the Egyptian seasons and civil calendar, and thus their entire lives.

On the earth, a place where everything is a debased reflection of everything above, her powers were much more subtle and occult. Here, seeds of detritus and dust grew in the rich, fertile humus of her subterranean form-giving womb and flowered into metals like gold, copper and silver, and precious stones like diamonds, emeralds, turquoise, malachite and lapis lazuli. In ancient Egypt, the depiction of a woman tugging on a pig's tail was a manifold symbol. It customarily alluded to a solar eclipse, but it was also a pictorial pun for 'blue', a colour whose intrinsic and qualitative connection to the lapis lazuli stone and the Nile River underpins the Egyptian motivation to group all three concepts under the same name-'blue'. What should be evident here is that we have begun to scratch the surface of a sacred science which makes use of symbols to illuminate a quantitative connection, in this case a confluence between the mother goddess as Her Majesty Hathor, the woman, the moon, the colour blue, element of water and a semi-precious stone. If the just mentioned holds true then the tendency of Western alchemical treatises to make use of the same symbol, emblem or name when referring to multiple concepts or substances must be an Egyptian inheritance. What is more the purely monocular, mechanistic and soulless vision ascribed to the Egyptian temple arts by scholars of Western esotericism is beginning to wear thin, and fast.

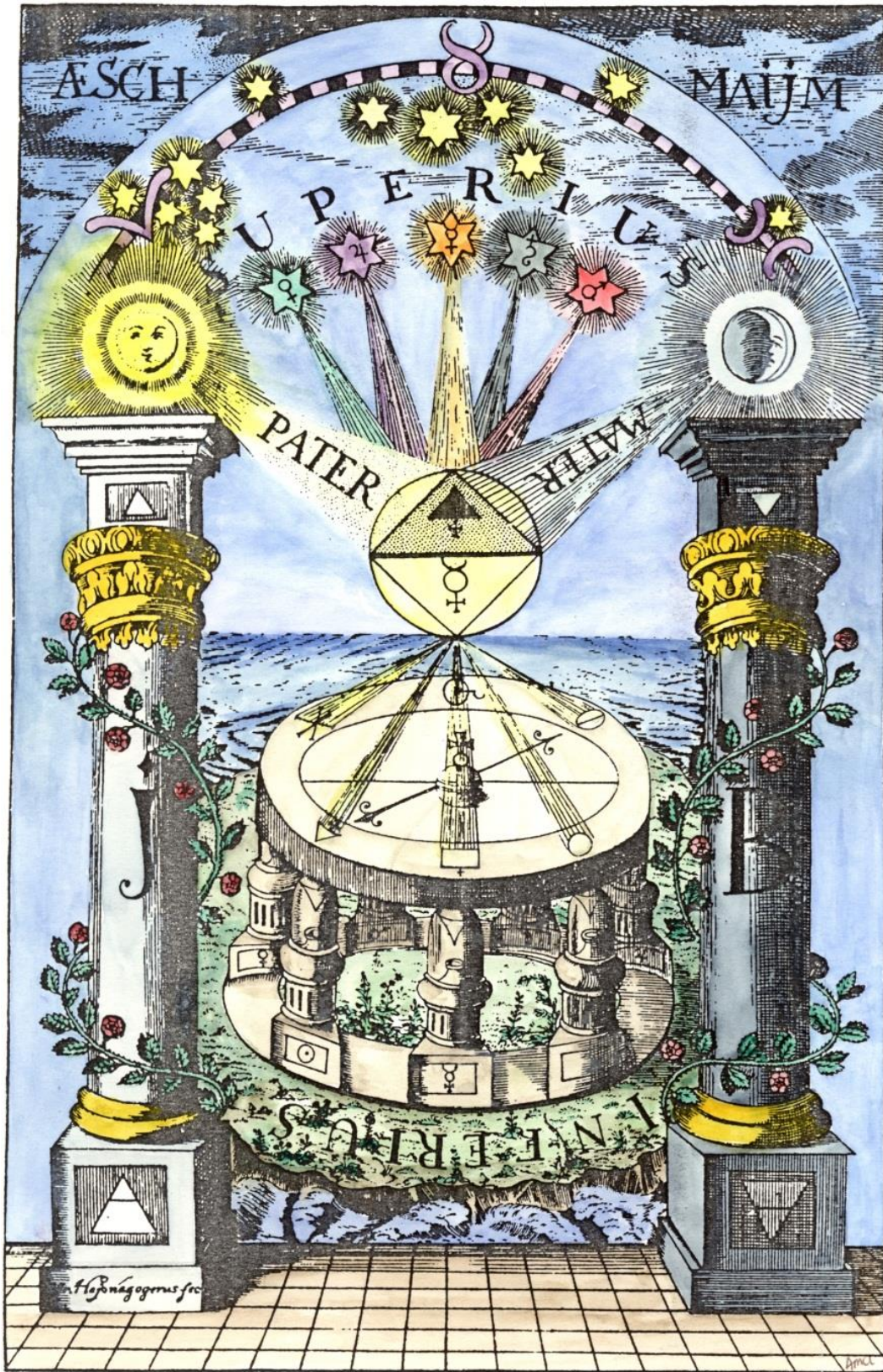
Let's look for a more tangible example of the Egyptian view of life in a cosmographical text to be found in the second transverse chamber of the Osireion in the Upper Egyptian city of Abydos, *The Book of Night*. In a pictorial sequence relating to the

passage of the dead through the sixth hour of the night, we encounter four androgynous beings arching backwards. All appear to be deeply engrossed in the bliss that only orgasm can bring. A red dotted line connects the mouths of these figures to an image of Khephera, a scarab symbolizing the morning sun, while another connects their phalluses to a red human child. The first is a clever allusion to the Heliopolitan birth of Shu, the god of the earth, and Tefnut, the goddess of the heavens, from the spittle of Atum. The second draws attention to the act of creative expression that occurs spontaneously during the separation of sky and earth. A solar orb rolls along the chest of each androgene, warming the heart area and spurring the ejaculation of semen which contains the seed encompassing the potentiality of new life, in this case a human child.

Accompanying these sixth-hour symbols of life coming-to-be are three furnaces overseen by three female figures called 'Seizers'. These names are not incidental for they recall a specific stage of Egyptian smelting where metal-workers must 'seize' a crucible of molten metal and facilitate its transfer to a supporting mold before rapidly cooling temperatures can spur crystallization. The metallurgical connotation draws attention to several conditions requisite for the creation of life itself. As the metal-worker expels vast quantities of air into blowpipes to raise the temperature in the furnace and separate gold from its impure ore, so too must air or expulsions of 'breath' be present in the womb for the 'gold' (i.e. the human soul, the miracle of life) that comes of procreation to be successful. Did the mighty Isis not facilitate copulation by beating her supernal wings vigorously to

revivify the dead Osiris? The metallurgical act of 'seizing' on the other hand emphasizes fiery conditions that must be controlled for the hermetically sealed product, the developing embryo, to reach full maturation in the womb. Most palpable here is the appropriation of metallurgical practice to highlight, complement and draw the reader's attention to the essentials of human transformation, if not the transformation of consciousness as a whole. Lest we forget that the goddess Hathor was the mother goddess who mediated the birth-giving process, but she was also the patroness of mining who entrusted sacred stones and metals like lapis lazuli, turquoise and copper to her mortal children together with serendipity in their diligent quests. (Some of Hathor's titles were Golden One, Mistress of Turquoise, Mistress of Malachite, etc.) If this isn't a perfect example of a spiritual and polygonal outlook which draws together a nexus of meanings through external correspondences to better contemplate the unbounded wholeness of Spirit and its numinosity in all created things then I don't know what is.

THE MAGNUM OPUS



To understand the motivation behind alchemy we must travel back to the second century CE, a time when pseudepigraphic writings aimed at nurturing a philosophical and theosophical coherence of the world were ripe. The majority of these syncretised Gnostic, Stoic, Platonic and Aristotelian elements and were attributed to such historically unverifiable figures as the thrice-greatest Hermes Trismegistus and Moses; deities like Isis, Horus and Agathodaimon; and legendary figures like Ostanes, Pammenes and Cleopatra. The most pivotal to our study is the opening text of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a tractate entitled 'Poimandres'. In it the anonymous author lays bare the conviction that the essence of microcosm and macrocosm, of the human being and the cosmos as a whole, are made comprehensible only through revelation or mystical insight. This Gnostic system of thought attributes the creation of the universe to the interaction of two principles; pure spirit, otherwise known as God, and matter. The former is fiery and active, the latter reflective and passive. According to the frame narrative the process of becoming was mediated by two sentient beings that differentiated from the virginal spiritual-noetic substance. First was the demiurgic spirit or 'nous' which proceeded to order the fixed sphere of the stars, the seven planetary spheres with their respective daemons, and the sublunary realm. This was followed by a disembodied protohuman who recapitulated the entire order on a much smaller scale.

Evident thus far should be a welcomed departure from conventional renditions of creation such as the ones we might read in Biblical Genesis or the Sumerian account of Ulligara and

Zalgarra. The disembodied protohuman, the ethereal model of man in other words, wasn't subordinate to God; he was one with God, God's sibling or brother. Unencumbered by the density of incarnation, ethereal man was loved by God "as his own child" and bestowed all the honours and privileges that went with such a favourable sentiment. He was omnipotent, transcendent and immortal, with demiurgic powers of cogitation that made him the envy of the celestial and earthly beasts. In the end it was his own curiosity that rendered him impotent. Wishing to examine the created essence of matter more closely, he descended along the multidimensional rungs of the cosmic scale until he reached the last realm, the sublunary. Here, he peered upon the supernal face of Mother Nature and became enamoured of her. She reciprocated these feelings and, acting upon her own lower and involuntary impulses, pulled him across to her side. The consequential act transformed him into an entirely composite being; his newfound corporeality imposed a condition of mortality yet his soul-spark derived from the Empyrean, the ethereal fire of heaven, and remained immortal. He was also hermaphroditic in nature, consisting of both male and female parts.

A second century non-Christian text from the Naq Hammidi Library entitled, *The Apocalypse of Adam* expounds this aspect through an expository narrative between Adam, the first human being, and his son Seth. In the story Adam equates the condition of paradisaal perfection and knowledge of original gnosis with a hermaphroditic constitution, revealing that the 'fall' only occurred after the enraged god Yaldabaoth, the "ruler of the aeons of the powers," divided the corporeal androgynous

protohuman into male and female. Alchemy appropriates this Gnostic viewpoint and ascribes salvation to the reintegration of the feminine and masculine powers within oneself. The purpose then of anyone who awakens to this higher call is to reascend the seven planetary spheres, fragmenting as it were the anatomy of his or her soul and giving back parts to the respective daemons, to reconcile the integral 'Adamic' state of uroboric wholeness and finally to commune with and become one with the Godhead in the eighth, the Empyrean. A pictorial representation of this idea is immortalised in the opening plate of the *Mutus Liber*, where two angels trample up and down a Jacob's ladder and blow into their trumpets in an attempt to awaken a sleeping figure at the bottom. From this perspective the alembic or vessel is the human body and the Philosopher's Stone is consciousness purified of its physical drives and carnal desires through a repeated cycle of conjunctions, or chemical marriages if you like, between the masculine and feminine powers—Sol and Luna.

Just as you might experience reality through the mediation of your five physical senses, so too does alchemical esotericism strive to comprehend the psychoneotic realm through elements, properties and organic processes manifest in the natural world. The idea is embodied in the Hermetic tenet, "As above, so below," which might be taken to mean that everything existing on the material plane is a flawed variety of an ideal equivalent on the next whirl of the cosmic spiral (i.e. think Platonic metaphysics). Similarly, "As inner, so outer" expresses a fundamental correspondence between the laws of macrocosm and microcosm, or the demiurgic spirit (*nous*) and the ethereal protohuman if you

prefer. An attempt to validate these laws prompted the early alchemists to seek out and identify a material constituent for the *prima materia*—the protean, volatile, ever-vacillating and elusive base substance of which the cosmos and the human soul has been hewn. Two that seemed to fit the mould were water and mercury. The first was soon excused on the premise that that it was way too abundant in nature to encompass the quintessence of an immutable substance which had not partaken in the irrational eruptions of creation. Furthermore, it had already been implicated as one of the first four qualities or principles to differentiate from the primordial chaos by both Empedocles (492-432BCE) and Aristotle (384-322BCE). This left Mercury as the sole candidate. Whilst alchemists of all ages have emphatically claimed that, “Their mercury is not the mercury (Hg) of the vulgar herd,” we can be more than certain that the latter’s miraculous and mutative properties is what inspired it.

Let’s take a brief look at the central and pivotal role of Mercury in the Magnum Opus. When alchemical treatises speak of Mercury or Mercurial Water they are referring to the menstruum and matrix of the cosmos, the undifferentiated first matter comprised of both the hot, dry and active masculine principle and the moist, cold and receptive feminine principle. Both are expressed exoterically under the rubric of elemental sulphur and argent vive. This paradoxical duality defines the differentiating aspect of the *prima materia*, but it can also be seen during painstaking procedures carried out in the alembic and in the end result, the *ultima materia*. Given that Mercury was the only known substance which demonstrated an inherent talent for *solve*

et coagula (meaning to dissolve and coagulate, or separate and join together) by amalgamating other metals, it came to be seen as the *rebis* or hermaphrodite, as well as symbol for alchemy in its entirety.

Mercury's numinous and animating spirit was protean; it couldn't be seen or touched, yet it pervaded elementary processes which unravelled through a twofold struggle between philosophical sulphur and argent vive. On one hand it was the vitriol, the poison or the vinegar that killed the plant, mineral or metal in the alembic and reduced it to a putrefying mass, and on the other it was the water that washed over the dead residue or ashes and resurrected it anew. If anything, the Mercurial nature was a living contradiction, akin to an African lioness mothering a lamb or an atom being in two places at the same time. The she-man or he-woman couldn't quite make up its mind about what it wanted to be, what its name was or for how long it wished to assume the intended role for that matter. It would show up during chemical operations as a duplicitous male trickster that released poisons and dissolved substances one minute and as a faithful female servant who contrived elixirs and coagulated substances the next. Unlike everything else on the planet Mercury had no stabilising form, weight or temperature; it reasoned through impulse and acted covertly.

The early alchemists never ascribed Mercury to a particular stage of the alchemical opus because it was the formative force behind the whole work, mediating an entire process which consisted of repeated separations and coagulations between

sulphur and argent vive, Sol and Luna. The degree of purity attained was shown through each new marriage or *coniunctionis* of these two elements. Pictorial representations of these conjunctions reveal in chronological and ascending order the couplings of hen and cock, dog and bitch, a red man and white woman, and finally, the Red King and White Queen. This dual struggle occurred within a threefold division. In this, the earliest known model of alchemical transmutation, transformation and exaltation of the *prima materia* (base substance) into *ultima materia* (preparation of gold, or the Philosopher's Stone) was marked by four distinct phases of colouration that served as exoteric markers of a reduction process instigated by the laws of cosmic sympathy and antipathy. Thus the *ultima materia* was conferred form only after having undergone putrefaction through *melanosis* or nigredo, bleaching through *leucosis* or albedo, yellowing through *xanthosis* or citrinitas, and finally, reddening through *iosis* or rubedo. Purple sometimes took the place of red in the last of these stages, hinting at the royal and spiritual scheme bubbling directly beneath a process which at first appeared to be nothing more than a descriptive transcription of the colouration and purification of metals. In alchemical literature *melanosis* was symbolized by a black raven, *leucosis* by a white dove, *xanthosis* by a yellow flower and *iosis* by a red dragon or phoenix.

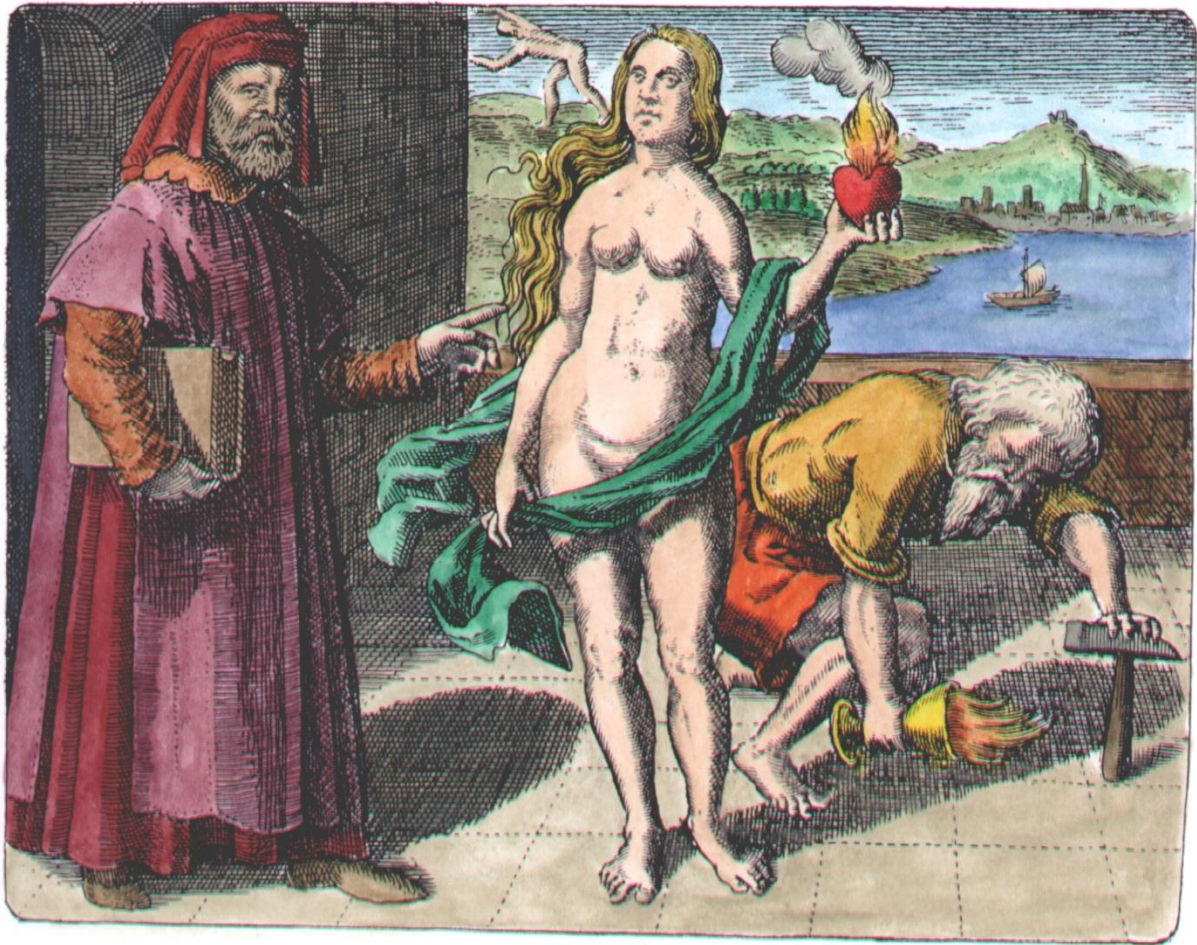
Both the recurring chemical marriages between philosophical sulphur and argent vive and the threefold coloured division were underpinned by a sevenfold schema based on the planetary powers and their constituent metals. The Saturnine,

Jovial and Lunar forces lunarised the base matter by initiating chemical processes such as calcination, solution and putrefaction which brought about *nigredo* and *albedo* in the sealed vessel. Many alchemical treatises mention an intermediary stage known as *cauda pavonis* or the Peacock's Tail between nigredo and albedo in which the decomposing matter in the glass comes back to life by forming a kaleidoscopic skin that resembles the iridescent blues and greens of a male peacock's tail feathers. In any case successful completion of this stage and the *albedo* bestowed upon the alchemist the gift of the 'white stone'; the power of healing and of transmuting base matter like lead or mercury into silver. Successive operations were then carried out by Venusian, Martian and Solar forces, which solarized the just formed 'white stone' through chemical reduction, sublimation, coagulation and fermentation. These subsequent reactions in the sealed vessel or glass brought about *citrinitas* and *rubedo*, culminating in the synthesis of a glittering red powder of significant weight known as the 'red stone'; this was the *ultima materia* or Philosopher's Stone, with the power to transmute base metals to gold and impart immortality. The creation of the 'white stone' under the aegis of the first three planetary powers comprised what alchemists termed the Lesser Work and the creation of the 'red stone' under the aegis of the last three the Greater Work, respectively.

There can be no doubt that much of the Magnum Opus, its stages and the colours produced were inspired by the mutational aptitude and miraculous properties of mercury or quicksilver. The Chinese, the Indians and the ancient Egyptians were all

intimately acquainted with the glistening red sulphide ore of mercury, called cinnabar, as well as its experiential methods of reduction from the earliest of times. The purified mercury could be used to extract gold from auriferous rocks or gold-containing quartz by cooking the two together in a stone vessel. Once all the gold was leached out the entire amalgam would be squeezed through a leather apparatus and distilled to exorcise any residue of mercury. If mercury could liberate the eternal metal, then it made perfect sense that philosophical mercury, its idealized form, was the undisputed mother of the *ultima materia*, spiritual gold or the Philosopher's Stone. What's more is that when mercury was heated in an alembic it produced a reddish orange precipitate that resembled its primitive and unrefined state as cinnabar. In former times there was no chemical analysis able to identify or differentiate between mercuric sulphide and oxide, and their quasi-characteristics were convincing enough to seduce the early alchemists into believing the two were one and the same substance. For anyone whose experience of reality was precariously hinged upon this solely qualitative vision, it would appear that the metal recovered its original 'Adamic' state after suffering acute passions and agonies, an empirical 'fact' which added significant weight to the alchemo-mystical conviction that each virgin soul came from the Emyrean as an extension of God and would eventually return there. Interestingly, the extraction of mercury or quicksilver from cinnabar and its subsequent oxidization through heating was a favourite procedure of medieval alchemists whose primary concern was to perpetuate the credibility of their royal art.

Some of mercury's other distinctive reactions motivated specific ideas and symbols. For instance heating an amalgam of salt and mercuric oxide produced mercuric chloride or corrosive sublimate, a molecular compound which appeared on the upper echelons of the alembic in the form of bleached white crystals and proceeded to grow downward. This was sublimation, the stage between *citrinitas* and *rubedo*, but it was also material 'proof' of the ethereal mercurial power that evoked the violent reactions necessary to raise the vibrations and precipitate the chromatic red of *rubedo*. Moreover when it was heated together with sulphur it produced red sulphide ore, cinnabar. The first to launch a critical inquiry into metallic properties of natural mercury such as the just mentioned were the eighth century Arabian alchemists, particularly Jabir ibn Hayyan from whom alchemy inherited the philosophical Sulphur-Mercury theory. For that reason we can be more than certain that this dualistic conception of the cosmos was based entirely upon crude observations made in the laboratory. Not surprisingly we also see the inheritance of mercurial properties in the *ultima materia*, gold or the Philosopher's Stone. Natural mercury tends to be quite dense and demands storage in either stone or iron bottles given its highly reactive and volatile state. Glass, for instance, is unsuitable because it would break and all metals save for iron would dissolve. By the same token, the Philosopher's Stone is described as a heavy red powder (or heavy liquid) that could vanish into thin air or diffuse through its retort or phial if the hermetic fires are not regulated or if alchemical operations are carried out too far. Sounds a bit like mercury, doesn't it?



For centuries the Hellenes had busied themselves with the *technai*, the crafts, and specifically the endeavour to mimic the handiworks of their gods, the twelve Olympians. In classical myth the god responsible for the crafts was Hephaestus, the lame son of Hera. He was, amongst other things, a goldsmith, an armorer, a builder, an architect, a worker in bronze, and an inventor of mechanical devices or automata.¹ Some of the most awe-inspiring and formidable implements used by the Olympian gods and goddesses were ensouled by Hephaestus's abyssal and multi-coloured imagination. These include, but are not exclusive to, the

¹ Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York City, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), pp. 36.

grand Olympian palace, Helios' gilded chariot, Hermes' winged petasos and helmet, the girdle of Aphrodite, Eros's bow and arrows, as well as the weaponry of famous Trojan heroes like Achilles and Heracles. More significant feats were the assembly of automatons as personal assistants, the fabrication of indestructible and immortal dogs to serve a divine master in Alcinous, King of the Phoenicians, and the fabrication of a Herculean man of bronze named Talos whom he placed on Crete to patrol the shore and safeguard Europa, a Phoenician princess loved by Zeus, from hostile foreign adversaries.²

The Greeks perceived their gods to be immortal versions of themselves, and so the traits of this god were transposed to the legendary figure of the craftsman Daedalus. Better known for his construction of a Cretan labyrinth to harbour the dreaded Minotaur and a wooden cow used as a contraption for Queen Pasiphae to mate with a white bull, Daedalus' quirky and admonitory inventions included automata of every type and description. In his *De anima* Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the preeminent polymath of classical thought, makes mention of a Daedalian creation—a mobile simulacrum of the goddess Aphrodite whose movement could be attributed to a quantity of quicksilver that lay inside. Some of Daedalus' inventions were even employed as props by Aeschylus and Euripides in their satirical plays to illustrate points about the nature of reality.³ What the Greeks sought to illuminate through these tales of clever imitation was that the human intellect partakes of the

² Katerina Servi, *Greek Mythology* (Athens, GR: Ekdotike Athenon, 1997), pp. 50.

³ Sarah P. Morris, *Daedalus and the Origins of Greek Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 217–223.

divine intellect because it can successfully and convincingly replicate anything it sees in the natural world.

Save for being a product of the marriage of the technical crafts with Greek philosophy in an Alexandrine milieu that was as deep and complex as it was variegated and broad, Western alchemy was the discipline that best captured the Hellenistic plight to perfect and compete with Nature herself. It appropriated many of the ideas that were around at the time—speculative nature science, Stoic philosophy, Gnostic soteriological notions of purification and illumination via contemplation, Egyptian symbolism of the Osirian rebirth cycle⁴—and in doing so offered a new point of reference pertaining to perspectives on the nature of matter through which the relationship between the ethereal and material, the divine and corporeal, and the natural and artificial could be scrutinized. Alchemy was different from the Hellenistic and Egyptian *technai* of metallurgy, glass-making, pottery, chemistry, dyeing, jewellery-making, and generating lifelike automata because it went beyond the cosmogony of superficial imitation to a perfective one in which a different atomic structure could be imposed onto the existing blueprint of a created object or substance, thus altering its inherent “form”. Adopting the role of a secondary or inferior deity, the alchemist could fashion gemstones, metals, elixirs and other products by first reducing them to primal chaos or *prima materia*⁵ in a manner reminiscent

⁴ Bernard, D. Haage, ‘Alchemy II: Antiquity-12th Century’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), I, pp. 22.

⁵ The passive, receptive, unformed basis known as the *hyle* from which all matter, be it immaterial and of the soul or material and of the world, is formed.

of God's *creation ex nihilo*, an act of creating something out of nothing. This fanciful list of natural replication would later evolve to encompass artificial procreation in the homunculus⁶, a rudimentary proto-cloning of human beings with biotechnological consequences and ethical concerns much more relevant now than what they were back then.

Even though the origins of Western alchemy are ambiguous, ill-defined and shrouded in mystery, we must attempt at least a superficial demarcation of its development in Hellenistic Egypt for the sake of pinpointing which Hellenistic ideas it entered into dialogue with and when this might have transpired. Nevertheless, what is clear beyond reasonable doubt is that prior to its confluence with Hellenistic philosophy, the proto-alchemy of the Egyptian Late Period was closely related to the chemical arts and the metallurgical crafts which sought to counterfeit precious stones and dyes.⁷ Hence in its formative stage, a historian of science or Western esotericism would not be wrong in claiming that alchemy was purely a mimetic endeavour. According to Andre-Jean Festugiere (1898–1982), the French philosopher who descried a threefold division of surviving historical documents pertaining to alchemy, this initiatory period of the discipline's evolution lasted until about 200BCE and conceived of technical prescriptions purely in a mechanical and quantitative manner. Such is obviously the case with the Leyden X and Stockholm papyri which give a plethora of instructions for the counterfeiting

⁶ Bernard, D. Haage, 'Alchemy II: Antiquity-12th Century', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff et al., 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), I, pp. 28.

⁷ Stanton J. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 46-49.

of gold and the synthetic replication of silver, pearls, and textile dyes.⁸ The trajectory of its outlook allegedly changed between 200BCE and 100CE, when substances, metals, and natural processes were understood in light of qualitative animistic interactions; everything that existed in the cosmos was arranged or configured according to the polar forces of “love” and conflict”, which forged “sympathies” and “antipathies” between individual objects or substances. Festugiere argued that this phase was embodied par excellence by Bolus the Democritean’s (c. 200BCE) alchemo-mystical treatise *Physika kai Mystika*, though it is now contested that the text in question dates to the first centuries CE and was probably reworked a number of times.⁹ Finally, the fragmentary works of Gnostic alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis (c. 300CE) complete the implanting of Hellenistic philosophy into the chemical technologies of ancient Egypt.¹⁰ The dream-like visions described at length in *Visions* transcribe purifications of the soul and Nature in Gnostic and Stoic terms¹¹, drawing attention to the notion that alchemy was a viable avenue through which Nature and the human soul, both of which had their origin in the *prima materia*, passed through a cosmic distillation apparatus in order to emerge regenerated from their fallen and accursed state.

Scholars of Western Esotericism today believe that the feasibility of transmutational endeavours indigenous to the

⁸ Ibid, pp. 46-49.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 38.

¹⁰ Joseph L. Henderson and Dyane N. Sherwood, *Transformation of the Psyche: The Symbolic Alchemy of the Splendor Solis* (East Sussex, UK: Routledge, 2003), pp. 9.

¹¹ Albert de Jong, ‘Zosimos of Panopolis’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), I, pp. 1185.

discipline of ancient alchemy is only discernible in the context of Aristotelian nature philosophy. While this may be true, concepts vital to an Aristotelian teleology hinged on the relationship between “matter” (“hyle”) and “form” (“eidos”) are no doubt cogitations of earlier Greek thought. The most important of these is the ubiquitous *prima materia*, a synonym for what the ancients understood as the undifferentiated first matter from which everything in the corporeal world was made and to which it would eventually return. The alchemists themselves believed that transmutation as a world-creating and self-actualization process was impossible without a return to the primordial state of Oneness. They were also convinced that the virginal, unformed essence of the soul and unactualized matter were both projections of the *prima materia*, and *prima materia* was often equated with the culmination of the opus, the *ultima materia* or Philosopher’s Stone.¹² Thus for a base substance or “soul” to be transmuted into silver and gold it had to be reduced to its primal state first. This marked a formative stage in the alchemical opus known as *necrosis* or *nigredo* in which the old form or matter putrefies, dies and is supplanted by a much purer and virginal one that ignites from its ashes. As both the matrix and fruition of the Stone, it seems natural that the *prima materia* would be imbued with epithets that are variegated yet qualitatively linked:

¹² Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Shaftesbury, UK: Element Books, 1986), pp. 97.

moon, sea, mother, mercury, water, earth, virgin, menstree, poison, chaos, water, dew, and *hyle*.¹³

So where exactly did the idea of an underlying interconnectedness for the universe, the insinuation that all is One, actually come from? The Greeks have always been a curious and seafaring peoples, and there is ample evidence to suggest that they were travelling to Egypt as early as the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.¹⁴ Their adventures in the land of the Nile would have brought them face to face with the Egyptian priesthood, and a great many Greek travellers would have been entrusted with intimate details of the Heliopolitan creation myth. The state myth makes use of a dramatic metaphor to descry how the universe came into being. It speaks of a primeval ocean of undifferentiated mass called Nun which existed for time immemorial before its self-generated vortices pushed up a mound of fertile silt. In turn, the silt differentiated into a conscious and self-engendered creator god who proceeded to masturbate and ejaculate a pair of substances, air and moisture, from whence all created matter emerged.¹⁵ Being of an overtly curious and investigative disposition, the early Greeks would have brooded upon the homogenous substance of un-creation which the Egyptians defined as primeval chaos (χάος). They would have wanted to tear aside the metaphoric veil and know its true nature,

¹³ Lindy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 156.

¹⁴ Michael Rice, *Egypt's Legacy: The Archetypes of Western Civilization 3000-30BC* (London, UK: Routledge, 1997), pp. 178-179.

¹⁵ Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin, *Ancient Egypt* (New York City, NY: Hermes House, 2002), pp. 301.

an obsession which bamboozled the Ionian pre-Socratics for centuries on end.

Smyrna-born poet Homer (c. 850BCE) stayed faithful to the Egyptian conception, describing the primordial substance as “River Ocean, a deep and mighty flood, encircling land and sea like a Serpent with its tail in its mouth.”¹⁶ A pictogram of this image would appear much later in an eleventh century Hellenistic manuscript together with the slogan *hen to pan*, the notion that everything is one.¹⁷ Thales (c. 630-546BCE), on the other hand, visualized a flat earth floating atop a base substance which resembled a vast and desolate ocean. He too aligned himself with the view put forth by the Egyptian creation myths and Homer. A pupil of his, Anaximander of Miletos (c.610-546BCE), called it the *apeiron*, a term which means “boundless” and recalls the mutability of water. Anaximenes (584-28BCE), also of Miletos, was the first philosopher to initiate a departure from the established convention, visualizing the base substance of the cosmos as a kind of vapor or air but not of the physical type. Meditating on the problem at hand, he reasoned that condensation of the primal substance produced physical air, water and earth while its rarefaction formed fire. His emphasis on transformation of one substance into another formed the foundation of Empedocles of Acragas’ (ca. 490-430BCE) doctrine of the elements which was henceforth absorbed into Aristotle’s nature philosophy. Of all

¹⁶ Charles Mills Gayley, *The Classic Myths in English Literature and Art* (Boston, USA: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), pp. 3.

¹⁷ Bernard, D. Haage, ‘Alchemy II: Antiquity-12th Century’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), I, pp. 18.

pre-Socratic philosophers it was a contemporary of Anaximenes in Heraclitus of Ephesus (535-475BCE) that probably came closest to what many contemporary esotericists believe to be true. Seeing that the active mover behind the rotation of the elements is fire, it made sense to him that the underlying cause of all phenomena must be an ethereal fire of sorts.¹⁸

In his instructional poem *On Nature*, a philosophical work written in hexameter, Empedocles made an important contribution to Aristotelian nature science regarding the doctrine of the elements. Unlike the pre-Socratics who believed that each element was a primary substance in its own respect, Empedocles posited that it was the *prima materia* that differentiated into the four elements under the influence of four auxiliary qualities. It should be evident that the four elements in question are not to be confused with the four corporeal manifestations of the same name; they are merely principles comprised of immutable corpuscles that enable the *prima materia* to take on innumerable guises whilst remaining fundamentally unchanged. Hence many centuries afterward, the compressed summa or compendium of alchemical knowledge presented in the enigmatic *Tabula Smaragdina* or Emerald Tablet under the aegis of the legendary Hermes Trismegistus could staunchly claim that the Stone's father is the solar orb (also Fire or Philosophical Sulphur) and its mother the lunar orb (also Water or Philosophical Mercury). Conversely the wind or Air would be implicated as the womb

¹⁸ Emile Brehier, *The History of Philosophy: The Hellenic Age* (Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 208.

which carried it and the volatile and moist humus that is Earth would be cast in the presiding role of wet nurse.¹⁹

In the aforementioned cosmogony, Fire, an active, masculine principle with a propensity to rise, is dry and hot. Air, also an active, masculine principle but with a tendency to expand, is hot and wet. Alternatively, the feminine, passive principle of Water is wet and cold because of its inherent nature to expand and drop while Earth, also of the same cut as water but characterized by a condition of solidity that causes it to drop towards the naval of the earth, is cold and dry.²⁰ Each element shares a secondary quality with two others, aligning them into an eternal cycle known as elemental rotation where a succeeding condition is potentially latent in an existing one. As had been posited by Heraclitus the only active mover in this assembly is Fire, an element whose physical constituent spurs the protean transformation of chemical water from a liquid to a gas and whose absence enables its transition back into a liquid and a solid. By this virtue, it made perfect sense to the ancient alchemists that the underlying cause of phenomena, the manifestations of the noumenal world, as well as the inner workings of Mother Nature whose ways could be observed through chemical processes like calcination, coagulation,

¹⁹ Stanton J. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 28.

²⁰ Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Shaftesbury, UK: Element Books, 1986), pp. 94-95.

distillation, sublimation, and dissolution, could all be attributed to the subtle action of fire.

This brings us to the genius of Plato. In following century-old premises brooded upon by Ionic pre-Socratics, Plato borrowed their vision of the world as a living creature along with Anaximenes' vision of the First Cause as an ethereal fire and married them with Pythagorean mystical insights that defined the First Cause in strictly qualitative and geometric terms. If the uncreated was a spherical speck of light or fire which mysteriously took on a plethora of forms when it differentiated into other substances and qualities, and if everything that had been created was interconnected and infused with the same life force which emanated from the primeval time origin, then the obvious deduction would be to conceive reality as being two-fold; somewhere out there existed a world of Eternal Ideas, Forms, and Archetypes that stood apart from and underpinned the visible world of "becoming" or created Nature. Time and space, qualities of the latter, separated the two dimensions.

Further speculations were then made within the framework of an animistic ontology, placing the earth under the mediation of a Universal Soul (*psyche*) which united the human soul in its virginal state with the web of the cosmic animal that was Nature. The latter is a philosophical shard that blatantly recalls the famous Hermetic adage, "As Above, So Below". Both the universal and the human psyche were superior and inferior reflections of a Universal Spirit (*nous*) that stood above them on the cosmological totem pole and espied the first cogitation, a primeval and

benevolent act of self-love that was God. Directly beneath the Universal Soul was the earth and below that the formless *hyle*, the *prima materia*.²¹ Western alchemy would use logic proceeding from the threefold hypostasis of the Platonic cosmos to forge connections between the sickly metals of the mineral realms and the chaotic human soul seeking *unio mystica* with the Godhead, both having to be purged of their “sickness” and restored to an original state of perfection if the true essence of Spirit in all its glory (i.e. gold) was going to shine through. In hindsight, it appears that alchemy’s theoretical deduction of the existence of God, the animistic context through which it operates, the idea of a transcendental realm, the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, and much of its terminology derive explicitly from Platonic metaphysics.²²

At this point it should also be mentioned that Neo-Platonic philosophy exerted a profound influence on practical aspects of the alchemical process, though it wasn’t until the sixteenth century that manuscripts circumscribing this confluence come to light. Strictly speaking, the Neo-Platonic cosmos was merely a system of orthodox Platonism that congealed under Plotinus (205-70CE), a Greek-Egyptian from the Deltaic Lycopolis in Lower Egypt. His closest disciple and biographer, the Lycian-born Porphyry (232-305CE) consolidated and amplified a cosmological system whereby the Aether-filled spheres of the seven planets and the four Empedoclean elements of the earth separated Man from the Empyrean of God and the *primum mobile*, an etheric

²¹ Ibid, pp. 116.

²² Ibid, pp. 115.

substance which permeated space and facilitated the heavenly rotation.²³ It's likely that the sevenfold astrological schema through which incarnating souls picked up their rudimentary character traits was extended to the corresponding metals.

Hence when alchemists relayed details of practical work, they could speak of it in the context of a three or four coloured division that was underpinned by a sevenfold schema; the Saturnine, Jovial and Lunar forces lunarized the base matter by initiating chemical processes such as calcination, solution and putrefaction which brought about *nigredo* and *albedo* in the sealed vessel.²⁴ Successful completion of latter bestowed upon the alchemist the gift of the “white stone”; the power of healing and of transmuting base matter like lead or mercury into silver. Further operations were then carried out by Venusian, Martian and Solar forces which solarized the just formed “white stone” through chemical reduction, sublimation, coagulation and fermentation.²⁵ These subsequent reactions in the sealed vessel or glass brought about *citrinitas* and *rubedo*, culminating in the synthesis of a glittering red powder of significant weight known as the “red stone”; this was the *ultima materia* or Philosopher's Stone, with the power to transmute base metals to gold and impart immortality. The creation of the “white stone” under the aegis of the first three planetary powers comprised what alchemists termed the Lesser Work and the creation of the “red stone” under the aegis of the last three the Greater Work.

²³ *The Heart of Plotinus: The Essential Enneads (Perennial Philosophy)*, ed. by Aldis Uzdavinys (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), pp. 248.

²⁴ Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Shaftesbury, UK: Element Books, 1986), pp. 185-189.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 189-191.

Mercury, a planet-metal that would have comprised the preliminary stage, was never ascribed a definitive position in its own right because it was considered to be the formative force behind the entire alchemical opus.

Perhaps the single most influential aspect of Hellenistic philosophy on alchemical theory was conferred by Plato's student Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who amplified the teleological concern of Platonic cosmogony. His hierarchical schema of higher purposes tended to define created matter, an individual object or substance, in terms of four primary quents including the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final.²⁶ The first two relayed its material composition and unique anatomical configuration, the third attempted to delineate the moving force behind it, whilst the fourth and last had to make do with the ultimate purpose for its existence, a principle that had been programmed into the individual object or substance by the Platonic prototype that existed in the higher essential world of Forms and was itself a thought of God. According to Aristotle, everything that incarnated on the corporeal plane came equipped with a congenital *nisus*, an intrinsic desire to become the Platonic Form existing in the Empyrean of God upon which it had been modeled. In this eternal cycle of change to be understood as a see-saw interaction between fiery activity or “form” and passive potentiality or “hyle”, the baby desires to become a full-grown human, the egg a chicken, the seed a tree, the caterpillar a butterfly, and the element carbon a diamond. There were far-

²⁶ Andrea Falcon, ‘Aristotle on Causality’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/aristotle-causality/>> [Accessed 24th May].

reaching implications for the mineral kingdom under the mediumship of such logic; base metals weren't the monolithic, inert or dead reagents they appeared to be but ensouled embryos in variant stages of gestation deep in caves and pockets of the earth that comprised the subterranean womb of the Great Mother Goddess.²⁷ Measured against gold, a metal that was perceived to be the material reflection of the immaterial, spiritual prototype of God, the other six known metals were essentially embryonic gold that had yet to ripen. This was the natural process which the alchemist sought to accelerate under artificially simulated conditions.

We see a confluence of many pre-Socratic, Platonic, and animistic ideas surrounding minerals and metals in Aristotle's *Meteorologica*. In this particular treatise the Stagirite argues that the material occupying the space taken up by the *primum mobile* and the planetary spheres wasn't the four earthly elements but an indivisible, incorrupt and previously unidentified fifth substrate known as "Aether" or the "quintessence".²⁸ This was one and the same with *pneuma* or transcendental Spirit. He also lays bare the proposition that the inhabitants of the subterranean kingdom all originated from exhalations of moist "watery vapor" and dry "earthy smoke" deep in the loins of the earth. Those that could be dissolved, a category including gold and the imperfect metals,

²⁷ Joseph L. Henderson and Dyane N. Sherwood, *Transformation of the Psyche: The Symbolic Alchemy of the Splendor Solis* (East Sussex, UK: Routledge, 2003), pp. 5.

²⁸ Bernard, D. Haage, 'Alchemy II: Antiquity-12th Century', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), I, pp. 19.

were comprised of the wet substrate while those impermeable and resistant to change like fossils and rocks were creations of the dry one. When the Arab polymath Jabir ibn Hayyan (c. 721-815) described the growth of metals in the *Liber misericordiae* of the *Corpus Jabirianum* (8th-10th century) some eleven centuries afterward, he connected the first of Aristotle's exhalations to Sulphur, the active principle of flammability and combustibility, and the second to Mercury, the principle of fusibility and volatility. Jabir believed that the shape and physiognomy of metals corresponded to two qualities that were incongruent to the two prevailing qualities of their internal matter. Each metal congealed under the aegis of a particular planetary power acting upon a marriage or *coniunctionis* between Mercury, consisting of the passive elements of Water and Earth, and Sulphur, consisting of the active elements of Fire and Air. This was known as the Sulphur-Mercury theory, a model that would go on to dominate Western alchemy until the development of phlogiston theory in the latter stages of the seventeenth century.²⁹ Alternatively, in his renowned medieval alchemical treatise *Summa perfectionis*, the Latin Geber (ca. 1200) claims that exaltation of the Philosopher's Stone was feasible because Mercury was composed of minute corpuscles that would induce transmutation by diffusing through the perforated exterior of a base metal, an idea that was influenced by the Aristotelian idea of "least parts" as described in *Physics* and *Meteorologica*.³⁰

²⁹ Allison P. Coodert, 'Alchemy IV: 16th-18th Century', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), I, pp. 42.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 42.

The Stagirite's speculations encompassed far-reaching consequences for the aurific art by strategically positioning it on a pedestal of eternal feasibilities that would precariously balance between poles demarcating the good and the evil, the genuine and the fraudulent, and the natural and the artificial for centuries to come. In his *Physics*, Aristotle differentiates between the artificial and the natural by illuminating the former's condition of inertness and the latter's proclivity towards motion and change. He then explicates (at *Physics* II 8 199a15-17) the nature of mimesis by positing that artificial intervention on the part of the artist can either replicate the prototype or blueprint without changing its inner composition (*mimetai*), or more importantly, accelerate the entelechies of formed matter or substances in ways which violate the teleological cycle (*epitelei*). In his treatise *Meteorologica*, Aristotle uses verbs associated with the artificial activity of cooking like "roasting" and "boiling" to implicate that both the technical operations seeking to mimic natural processes and that the natural processes themselves are reflections of one another, fundamentally the same.³¹ Over and beyond the fact that these words constitute women's work, an synthetic activity that was used to describe the synthesis of the Philosopher's Stone by Michael Maier (1568-1622) and some of the later alchemists, the couching of a natural process in artificial terminology betrays Aristotle's conviction that artificial methods could still generate a natural product.

³¹ Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, ed. and trans. H.D.P.Lee (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), IV 381B3-9.

The first union between Greek natural philosophy and the “proto-scientific” technical recipes occurred during the life and times of Bolus the Democritean, an active Pythagorean who lived in the Deltaic Egyptian city of Mendes during the second century BCE.³² Known for his mystical approach to the artisanal crafts, Bolus wrote a rather lengthy alchemical treatise entitled *Physika kai Mystika* of which only segments have survived. While revealing a deep preoccupation with both the physical and paraphysical, Bolus’s work delineates a process whereby a base substance or the *prima materia*, usually lead or mercury, is used to prepare gold, the Great Work or Philosopher’s Stone. In this, the earliest known prototype of metallic transmutation, transformation and exaltation of the “stone” is marked by four distinct phases of colouration that serve as exoteric markers of a deduction process instigated by the laws of cosmic sympathy and antipathy. Thus the “stone” or noble metal is conferred form only after undergoing putrefaction through *melanosis* (nigredo), bleaching through *leucosis* (albedo), yellowing through *xanthosis* (citrinitas) and finally reddening through *iosis* (rubedo). Purple sometimes takes the place of red in the last of these stages, hinting at the spiritual ennoblement bubbling directly beneath a chemical process which Bolus no doubt understood as changes to colour and properties that went beyond that of the superficial.

The full grafting of Hellenistic philosophy onto the technical and chemico-operative prescriptions of the proto-alchemical period in Egypt is clearly discernible in the work of the Gnostic

³² Stanton, J. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 38.

Zosimos who tended to view alchemy as a soteriological method whereby Nature as a whole could be transformed. In his fragmentary commentary titled *On Virtue*, Zosimos describes a series of dream-like visions and accompanying interpretations in which he implicitly alludes to the idea that the intangible principle of zestfulness, colour, character, distinctiveness, and ensoulment that is the *pneuma* (Spirit) can be separated from its corporeal prison through ordinary evaporation processes like sublimation and distillation.³³ His clever use of metaphor to draw parallels between base metals and human beings; between the distillation apparatus and temples and altars; and between the liberation of the spirit-soul from the human body and the transformation of the volatile substance in base metals is intentional and draws attention to corresponding processes of creation reflected in the Divine Intellect or the One.

Proceeding from these symbolic correspondences, a secondary dream transcribed in “Visions” involving the ritual torture, punishment (*kolasis*) and death of a horde of men inside an alchemical flask can be equated with the liberation of *pneumata* from their restrictive matrix through heat and the application of corrosives, their purification with rudimentary transformation into a nobler form, and the resurrection or reanimation of their mutilated bodies the crystallization of a new form. Zosimos first discusses this alchemical allegory in the context of individual reagents before augmenting his parameters to include created Nature as a whole. He postulates that success

³³ *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths About Science*, ed. by Noretta Koertge (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 221.

in transmutation is entirely contingent on the individual alchemist, who, in seeking success must permit for Nature (*physis*) to be “forced to the investigation” (*ekthlibomene pros ten zetesin*) by regressing to a primordial state of confusion and suffering (*talaina*) where her instinctual reaction will be to assume variant intermediary states of being until she wafts closer and closer to death.³⁴ Only through this arduous trajectory can she ever hope to multiply her conscious and become more pneumatic. According to Zosimos, the manipulation of the invigorating life principle or *pneuma* and its reintegration with the lifeless physical base through these practical techniques resulted in genuine transmutation.

Several sections in the thirteen opusules of Zosimos’s *Authentic Memoirs* deal with distillation equipment in a pneumatic capacity.³⁵ He describes several apparatuses intended for sublimation; numerous multi-piped alembics fashioned from glass and fitted with clay or terracotta stems that were used for either distillation or the fixation of mercury; and a sophisticated, cylinder-like vessel called a *kerotakis*. As an implement of sublimation the last of these was especially significant because it facilitated changes in colouration and properties that were no doubt construed as a genuine recombination of *pneuma* and body. The *kerotakis* tower was a closed vessel comprised of three cubicles: a lower compartment in which the material to be sublimed was placed, a perforated plate near the top of the vessel on which a lead of metal or ore was placed, and a hemispheric

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 221.

³⁵ *Les Alchimistes Grecs: Zosime de Panopolis*, ed. and trans. by Michele Mertens (Paris, FR: Les Belles Letres, 1995), pp. 4:130-152.

cap which collected the vapours. Sublimation was performed by fixing a substance, usually arsenic sulphide, mercury, or sulphur, on the lowermost compartment directly above a burning furnace and letting the vaporous fumes react with the metal or ore resting on the middle of the plate. Once the fumes reached the hemispherical lid on the top they would condense into liquid and sluice their way back to the compartment containing the liquefied substance. Eventually, the sublimate would infuse itself into the metallic base rendering modifications to external colours and patinas that were perceived by Zosimos to be fundamental changes in the structure of matter.

In retrospect, the imitative arts have a very long and illustrious history in Western civilization. Irrespective of their innate gravitation towards a particular craft, all artists were primarily interested in the amalgamation of synthetically fabricated features that either rivalled that of their natural prototype or excelled over it. For Plato, Plotinus, and the Neo-Platonists, there was an immaterial world of Forms, a realm of being that stood apart from and underpinned the sphere of created Nature or “becoming”. The fundamental principles of time and space separated the two worlds; time set forth the wheel of change, and change was understood to mean an adherence to the cycles of birth, growth and death which enabled everything natural to strive for perfection, to seek its ultimate “form”. Assuming the role of a miniature Demiurge, an artist could replicate natural products through mimesis. Often the products themselves would be impressive and aesthetically pleasing yet they lacked the intrinsic principle of movement and the inner

qualities that characterized their prototypes. An example par excellence of the counterfeiting of natural products like gold and silver as well as natural dyes and precious stones pervades the technical prescriptions of the Leyden X and Stockholm papyri, both of which represent a mechanistic or “exoteric” proto-alchemy.

Later, when the alchemical writings fused with the philosophical musings of the Greeks and above all the nature philosophy of Aristotle, the Hermetic Art reorientated itself in the Alexandrine world as a *techne* that could modify the underlying structure of matter and hence influence teleology. By the time Zosimos of Panopolis (c. 300CE) started writing his twenty-eight volume corpus which encompassed his own innovative insights and earlier texts, alchemy was no longer just a perfective and chemical operation seeking to create the *ultima materia*, the worldly panacea, or gold. It was a dual art imbued with a redemptive and mystical soteriological aspect in which the human soul, also *prima materia*, forged a new personality for the alchemist and in doing so mirrored the torture of matter in the alembic as it was purified, cleansed, and refined through repeated cycles of *solve et coagula*. One could argue that this, a *techne* that sought to perfect the embryo-forms in the womb of the earth by causing them to ripen prematurely, to spiritualize the human body and spur an embodiment of the Spirit most typical of illumination, constituted the last of a series of stages in the evolution of ancient alchemy that was inherited by the Arabs and the Christian West. Alongside medicine, alchemy claimed an illustrious and exalted place in the hierarchy of ancient *technai* by

claiming to recapitulate the processes of creation in whole and down to the last bit of detail. The production of stones, metals, substances, powerful elixirs, and even human life itself, actions that had originally stemmed from divine cogitation itself, were now viable and seduced people from all areas of intellectual inquiry as well as those who styled themselves alchemists. Of course, none of it would have been possible had alchemy not borrowed its authoritative looking glass from Greek philosophy.



Contrary to what the occult dilettante or historical romanticist may think, the esoteric undercurrent known as Hermeticism has never been a distinctive philosophical edifice in its own right, nor has it competed for cultural prominence against the major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Perhaps the best way to grasp it is to return to the cultural milieu in which it originated, the world of Graeco-Roman Egypt. If Hermeticism

was an equilateral triangle, the principal characteristics conferring form to each of its three corners would be revelation, secrecy and initiation. Alternatively, one can think of the discipline as a cosmogony that acknowledges God's absolute transcendence, a reality made partially comprehensible to human beings through an intellectually stimulated and intuitively felt participation called *gnosis*.³⁶ The obligatory oath of silence as well as the initiatory rites which accompanied and governed the whole endeavour was no doubt inherited directly from the mystical Pythagorean tradition during the cross-cultural efflux that emanated from Alexandria between c.300BCE-300CE.

Following literary devices that typified the wisdom literature of the autochthonous culture, Hermetic discourse was usually didactic and instructional; teachings were usually imparted from higher moral and ethical ground by a pseudopigraphical persona, usually a semi-divine father or teacher to his pupil or son, for the purpose of realigning oneself with a salvific quest which sought to reconcile the soul with its divine source, the Sphere of the Fixed Stars, and the Empyrean of God. The philosophical and theological protoplasm brewing in Alexandria after the third century BCE also generated a fusion between the ibis-headed moon god Thoth and the Hellenistic Hermes, whereby traits belonging to either one – the invention of writing, mercurial thought, the enforcement of physical and divine law, the authorship of knowledge, as well as the mediumship between worlds – were

³⁶ Roelof van den Broek , 'Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaf and others, 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), I, pp. 402.

eventually recast under the aegis of the composite Hermes-Thoth. Sometime during the second century onwards the deity also acquired the epithet “thrice-greatest” and became known as Hermes Trismegistus.³⁷ This was the champion of Hermeticism, or at least the *egregore* to which its adherents payed homage. Just as the moon reflects the supernal light from the sun during the nocturnal hours so too did Hermes Trismegistus possess the minds of the literati so that the genealogy of primordial knowledge would be transcribed onto parchments of papyrus, or so they thought.

What made a text Hermetic wasn't the philosophical or theological tradition to which it adhered, but rather an outright appeal to the Egyptian sage himself and a conviction that the primeval knowledge, which by some lamentable lapse was lost some time ago, had existed for time immemorial. Therefore the authenticity and validity of the Hermetic institution was precariously hinged on emphatic claims that were fabricated and bundled into legitimation legends before being inserted into texts for the sole purpose of perpetuating that conviction. Moreover, they all advocated the same animistic and vitalistic perspective; the divine, which can anatomically be divided into physical and parapsychical elements, infuses all levels of creation. In such a holistic worldview where created nature is considered a living entity, everything is qualitatively and quantitatively connected to everything else through cosmic sympathies and antipathies.

³⁷ Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, trans. by Lorton, David (London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 6.

Standing on the uppermost echelon is the wholly transcendental and benevolent God, the *hen to pan* (one is all), who ruminates in perfect solitude. Emanating from that One is a hierarchical order of beings or formative planetary forces that encompass ethereal intelligences and bestow incarnating souls with particular powers or qualities (i.e. the Mercurial sphere grants cunning, the Venusian desire, the Jovian ambition and so forth).

In this way the macrocosm, the cosmos at large, and the corporeal protohuman, the microcosm, are inextricably linked through a system of correspondences that both reflect and coherently express the divine Intellect, the Empyrean of God. Further still the texts implicate a practical approach to the primeval knowledge which enabled adherents to either bend nature to their will, accelerate its perfection through *chrysopoeia* (gold-making) or discern time frames decreed by the heavenly arrangement to be auspicious for certain activities like divination. Hermeticism, then, was akin to the Egyptian sacred science from its humble beginnings, a *philosophia pia* that syncretized theology, philosophy, mysticism, natural science and medicine with the dignified disciplines of alchemy, astrology and theurgy posing an intensely practical and operative approach. The French philosopher Andre-Jean Festugiere (1898-1982CE) categorized the heterogeneous texts according to their content, a division which remains valid to this day.³⁸ On one hand there were the “philosophical Hermetica” that concerned themselves with

³⁸ Roelof van den Broek, ‘Hermetic Literature I: Antiquity’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (see Broek, above) ,pp. 487-488.

philosophical speculation, and on the other there were the “technical Hermetica” that reinforced philosophical knowledge of God through practical means. Both denominations belonged to a curriculum which actively sought *regressus ad uterum* for its postulants, a consciously generated reaccession through the seven celestial spheres and reunification with God in the eighth.

Alchemy itself, the epitome of operative Hermeticism, seems to have emerged from the Alexandrine marriage of Aristotelian natural science to Gnostic and Egyptian mythology as well as Neo-Platonism.³⁹ The quintessential *entelecheia* at the heart of the alchemical teleology stems from *hen to pan*, the notion that all matter, tangible or intangible, originates from the base substance of the universe, the *prima materia*. Only through such a cosmology do outlandish feats of perfecting nature including the synthesis of the Elixir of Life or the scintillating ruby red Philosopher’s Stone make any sense. According to alchemical doctrine, the qualities of spirit and matter, in addition to ether or quintessence and *prima materia*, stand opposite to one another on the cosmological totem pole. The ether prompts a fourfold differentiation of the latter into the elements of fire, air, water, and earth, all of which are comprised of two auxiliary qualities; fire is dry and hot, air is hot and wet, water is wet and cold and earth is cold and dry. Each element shares a secondary quality with two others, aligning them into a forward-moving cycle known as elemental rotation where a succeeding condition is

³⁹ Bernard, D. Haage, ‘Alchemy II: Antiquity-12th Century’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (see Broek, above), pp. 22.

potentially latent in an existing one. This makes possible a realm of endless feasibility; the transmutation of metals, the creation of precious stones, the purification of substances, and, dare I say it, the “raising of vibrations” or consciousness. The square born from the circle, or the number four which segregates from the One, is an exoteric expression of the conferral of form from the amorphous base substance. There were four ethereal elements and seasons (Nature, inferior) that proceeded from a fourfold celestial arrangement (Empyrean, superior) to generate a unique equilibrium of four cardinal humours in the human being (Man, inferior-superior); phlegm (phlegma), black gall (melancholia), yellow gall (cholera) and blood (sanguis). Thus the correct mixture of elemental corpuscles facilitated the restoration of health and the materialisation of gold – corporeal, spiritual or otherwise. There was even a latent chemico-medical formula for life eternal.

By the second century CE, alchemy had emerged in the West as a syncretised mystical and chemico-operative art. The life and testaments of an active Pythagorean named Pseudo-Democritus or Bolus of Mendes who lived in the Deltaic Egyptian city of Mendes during the second century BCE certainly attests to such.⁴⁰ Known for his mystical approach to the artisanal crafts, Bolus wrote a rather lengthy alchemical treatise entitled *Physika kai Mystika* (Physical and Mystical Matters) of which only segments have survived. What remains of this text reveals a deep preoccupation with both the physical and paraphysical; *spagyreia*, a principle concern of the Chinese and later of the

⁴⁰ Stanton, J. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 38.

Arabian alchemists, is given special prominence here. He transcribes the therapeutic and medical competences of many herbs along with the propensity of some to evoke the voice of the gods and cause psychedelic visions. While eliciting an understanding and awareness of word intonation and breathing techniques in the casting of magical spells, Bolus's treatise delineates a process whereby a base substance or the *prima materia*, usually lead or mercury, is used to prepare gold, the Great Work or Philosopher's Stone. In this, the earliest known prototype of metallic transmutation, transformation and exaltation of the "stone" is marked by four distinct phases of colouration that serve as exoteric markers of a deduction process instigated by the laws of cosmic sympathy and antipathy. Thus the "stone" or noble metal is conferred form only after undergoing putrefaction through *melanosis* (nigredo), bleaching through *leucosis* (albedo), yellowing through *xanthosis* (citrinitas) and finally reddening through *iosis* (rubedo). Purple sometimes takes the place of red in the last of these stages, hinting at the spiritual ennoblement bubbling directly beneath a chemical process which at first appears to be little more than the transcription of the colouration and purification of metals.

Given that Hermetism⁴¹ and alchemy foster esoteric monotheism and fiercely resist dogmatic compartmentalization of the divine, one would expect their assimilation by Christianity as a propaedeutic to the first truths revealed in the New

⁴¹Antoine Faivre, 'Hermetic Literature IV: Renaissance – Present', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (see Broek, above), pp. 534.

Testament to have been a straightforward and harmonious affair. In actual fact, alchemy partakes of the same Aristotelian empirical methodology which would henceforth entwine itself around Christian dogma to produce a highly resistant strain of Middle Age deductive reasoning known as Aristotelian Scholasticism. This is yet another reason why it should have evaded the vehement polemics of the early theologians. Lamentably the opposite holds true. Writing at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, the Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo (354-430) decried the Hermetic *Asclepius* for its reinforcement of Platonic demonology and theurgic conjuration which sought to ensorcel spirits into statues for the sake of listening to prayers and granting wishes. For Augustine Hermes was a pagan sorcerer whose idolatrous ways could not be reconciled with an alternate image of him as the harbinger of God the Son in Jesus Christ. Paramount to early Christian apologetics, these sentiments naturally extended to *chama*, the operative art. Tertullian (160-220), Clement of Alexandria (150-215) and a horde of other apologetical narrators were convinced that knowledge of the chemical arts were compiled into books by fallen angels who'd embarked on indecent liaisons with corrupted mortals.⁴² Secondly, alchemy's ambition to recapitulate the wonder of the cosmos before the fall ran too close to the heresy of Gnostic revelation which postulated that original *gnosis* was lost when the androgynous protohuman ruptured into its male and female constituents, Adam and Eve.

⁴² C.J.S. Thompson, *The Lure and Romance of Alchemy* (London, UK: Random House, 1990), pp. 11.

The Gnostic affiliation was the last straw. When Constantine inducted Christianity into the Roman Empire as the official religion, he outlawed *cherna* and submitted all texts referencing it to the fate of a giant conflagration. But the art was not extinguished; it subsisted in the progressive Arab world and returned, albeit in modified and exalted form, through Latin translations of texts made in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries from Toledo in Spain.

Right up until the twelfth century, the operational knowledge contained in alchemy was faithfully left to the Arabian polymaths who ascribed it to the tutelage of Hermes Trismegistus. In a lost ninth-century frame narrative called *Kitab al-Uluf* it is revealed that there were in fact three sages called Hermes.⁴³ The first, an antediluvian ancestor, transcribed the primeval Adamic knowledge onto stelae inside the Upper Egyptian temple of Akhmim (Panopolis). The second, on the other hand, rediscovered the knowledge for the betterment of humanity and the third authored a plethora of alchemical treatises. A supernal legitimation legend from the Arabic frame narrative *Treasure of Alexander the Great* tells of a golden book that had been locked into a chest and subsequently smuggled into the walls of a monastery by Antiochus I. Inside the book is a passage intimating that the King of Macedon had been initiated into the Adamic knowledge by the third of these figures, King Hermes the Alchemist. At the prompting of his tutor Aristotle, Alexander had meticulously studied the primeval wisdom through ten Hermetic volumes composed chiefly of chemico-operative and medical

⁴³ Ebeling, pp. 45.

content. The aforementioned treatise was in widespread circulation during the early modern period under the title of *Liber de Compositione Alchemiae* (Book on the System of Alchemy), having been translated into Latin by Morienus the Greek. We can be certain of this because the Hermetic legitimation legends based on Alexander the Great were emphatically retold in *Praefatio Castrensis*, a prefatory note to Morienus's work written by Robert of Chester, the translator's preface accompanying the *Septem Tractatus Hermetis* (Seven Tractates of Hermes) as well as the preface to the *Liber Hermetis Mercurii Triplicis de VI rerum principiis* (Book of the Triple Hermes-Mercury on the six principles of things).

Another ninth-century legend, this one from Greece proper, reveals that Alexander once had a beautiful sister called Gorgona.⁴⁴ At one time the beloved siblings conspired to steal the Elixir of Life from a gruesome dragon that lived in the subterranean. They eventually tasted success but it was short lived, for Gorgona dropped the flask onto the ground whilst fleeing from the fiend and splattered its contents onto the ground. Alexander's cussing was so potent that it turned her into a gargantuan mermaid. The character of Alexander the Great as an archetypal world hero held widespread appeal in the Middle Ages, just as Prince Khaemuas, the fourth son of Ramses the Great, gained a dignified place as the mythologised protagonist of many fables which adhered to the magical demotic literature of Egypt's Late Period. Alexander's tutor Aristotle was also a very

⁴⁴John, L. Tomkinson, *Haunted Greece: Nymphs, Vampires and Other Exotica*, (Athens, GR: Anagnosis Books, 2004), pp. 68.

popular subject in the Arabic world, so popular in fact that he was hailed as the author of treatises whose belief systems were incompatible with his empirical methods. Foremost were *The Theology of Aristotle* and *Liber de causis*, texts that conceived of the universe as an interacting realm of physical and paraphysical forces partly intelligible to revelation. This worldview was closely adhered to by the Muslim philosophers Al-Kindi (c.801-873), Al-Farabi (c.872-950/1), Avicenna (c.980-1037) and Averroes (c.1126-1198). The incessant juxtaposition of alchemical doctrine with Platonic metaphysics in the Arabic interpretation of Hermeticism had a profound effect on the discipline of alchemy, which returned to the Latin West after a marked absence couched in Neo-Platonic terminology.

By far the most pivotal document regarding the transmission of the Hellenistic and Arabian operative art was the *Tabula Smaragdina* or Emerald Tablet, an apocryphal summa of alchemical knowledge set within a philosophical treatise titled *Book of the Secrets of Creation*. Ascribed to Balinas, the Pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana, and translated from Arabic into Latin by Hugo von Santalla in the late twelfth century,⁴⁵ this text endeavours to anatomically dissect the cosmological principles which underpin the universe. It explores, among other things, the many names which define the intangible sphere of God and blatantly recapitulates the birth of the cosmos within the context of Aristotle's theories of matter. The etheric bodies or planets of the *primum mobile* just below the Empyrean spur ontological differentiation of the primeval matter into three separate realms;

⁴⁵ Ebeling, pp. 49.

the mineral kingdom with its stones and gems, vegetable kingdom with its plants and trees, and the animal kingdom with its dogs and dears. Being a miniature replica of the macrocosm, the human being possesses a very exalted place in this hierarchy and is particularly susceptible to interlinking forces of mutual attraction known as cosmic sympathies. The latter describes a condition of mutual attraction, correspondence and fundamental interconnectedness where everything below is caused by and is a debased reflection of everything above. Concluding Balinas's *Book of the Secrets of Creation* is the enigmatic prose of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, which offers an abridged summa describing natural processes in the context of entelechy. Emphasis is placed on the dependence of all life on the two celestial luminaries and fire or heat is implicated as the primal mover and root power of chemical processes like sublimation, dissolution, and calcination. A great many philosophers like Albertus Magnus (c.1193/1206-1280) and Roger Bacon (c.1214-1294) attempted to decode this cryptic text in the thirteenth century with little to no success. The most comprehensive and memorable interpretation, at least the one which encompassed far-reaching consequences for Renaissance alchemy, was given by Hortulanus in the fourteenth century who postulated that the vague doctrine alluded to the creation of the Philosopher's Stone. His perspective graced nearly all early modern publications of the text.⁴⁶

I would be remiss not to mention two other Arabic texts that played a crucial role in the highly furbished version of alchemy that flowed into the early Renaissance. These were the *Secreta*

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 51.

Secretorum, a tenth-century Arabic text that was translated into Latin in c.1120 by John of Seville and then again in c.1232 by Phillipus Tripolitanus, and the *Turba Philosophorum* or *Assembly of Philosophers*, a late-thirteenth-century Latin translation of a tenth-century Arabic text tentatively ascribed to Uthman ibn Suwaid of Akhmim (c.900). The first of these, a spiel on a syncretic occultism combining alchemical, astrological and theurgical concepts, is presented within the literary framework of a pseudopigraphical letter from Aristotle to Alexander the Great. Native to the text are select commentaries on the *Tabula Smaragdina*, an early translation of the latter itself, and a meticulous transcription outlining the process whereby the “red stone” is brought into existence. The second, the *Turba Philosophorum*, implicated pre-Socratic and classical philosophers of the calibre of Pythagoras, Socrates, Anaxagoras, Democritus and Parmenides to have been individual beads forming a theological-philosophical necklace known as the *prisca theologia* that stretched across the sands of time, a concept which would flower and gain widespread acceptance during the early Renaissance with the humanist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499).⁴⁷ More importantly, the text preserved the kernel of the Hellenistic tradition in fragments of Pseudo-Democritus’s *Physika kai Mystika* without bringing to light innovative concepts inlaid into the esoteric art by the Arabian polymaths. In the *Turba*, for instance, synthesis of the elixir or panacea does not mirror the

⁴⁷ Antoine Faivre, ‘Ancient and Medieval Sources of Modern Esoteric Movements’, in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. by Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), pp. 47-48.

sex act whereby the sulphurous male and the mercurial female, otherwise stand ins for Sulphur and Mercury, are subjected to a sequence of *solve et coagula*, or dissolutions and coagulations until the matter in the alembic can jettison all impurity. This dualistic and animistic conception of matter was first described by a contemporary manuscript in the *Corpus Jabirianum*, a cache of over five hundred alchemical texts attributed to the Arab Geber, or Jabir ibn Hayyan (c.721-815).⁴⁸

It appears that alchemy's intercourse with the empirical and rationalistic outgrowth of Islamic world melted and reformed its Aristotelian nucleus into something much more exotic and flamboyant. Over and above modification of its practical and exoteric aspects there was a major shift in its philosophical perspectives. Extending the Aristotelian vision of nature philosophy, the Arab Geber postulated that the four ethereal elements of the *prima materia* further differentiated into philosophical sulphur and mercury or *argent vive*. The fusion of the latter two crystallised a particular balance of elemental qualities which created the metals under the aegis of the seven planetary powers. With this came the genesis of the empirical method and quantitative analysis, heeded by chemico-operative alchemists who promptly shifted their attention away from the synthesis of material gold to a far more ambitious endeavour—the preservation of life. Many Arabian polymaths sought to apply their knowledge of chemical processes to manufacture alchemical tinctures and medicines for the restoration of bodily health, giving credence and paving the way for the subsequent

⁴⁸Thompson, pp. 60-61.

emergence of Paracelsian iatrochemistry. According to Jabir these potent medicines could be prepared using base matter from any of the three kingdoms.⁴⁹ He also consolidated upon Aristotle's teleology and entertained roads frequently travelled by the romanticism of possibilities in reasoning that if man were indeed a microcosm, then he should in fact possess intrinsic powers enabling him to imitate or recapitulate the natural processes of the macrocosm or cosmos on a smaller scale, perhaps even to artificially manipulate matter's elemental corpuscles in his hermetically sealed flask. Many Arabian alchemists believed that under auspicious stellar arrangements, achieving chemical equilibrium in animal matter might in fact generate diminutive artificial creatures in their image called *homunculi*. Creating life, curing ailments, palingenesis, and the prolongation and prevention of human expiry comprised some elite avant-garde alchemical pursuits that eventually entered mainstream thought.

From the twelfth century all the way up until the dawn of the early Renaissance in the fourteenth, all theologians and philosophers advanced along a theoretical and practical path hewn out by their Hellenistic and Islamic forebears. Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon both conducted extensive research into the chemical processes of the operative art and searched diligently for the panacea, detailing their findings in the publications *Libellus di Alchemia* and *Compendium Philosophiae*, respectively. During this period Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was

⁴⁹ Bernard, D. Haage, 'Alchemy II: Antiquity-12th Century', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (see Broek, above), pp. 27.

of utmost importance to the dignity of the tradition, given that he made feasible attempts to marry the revolutionary experimental method with Christian dogma. With respect to the latter there were some inroads made by Iberian physician and alchemist Arnold of Villanova (1235-1312) who juxtaposed necrosis (nigredo), a stage in which matter in the retort or alembic blackens and putrefies, with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In layman's terms, Arnold was alluding to the passion of Christ as exemplar par excellence of *solve et coagula* or the dismemberment and creation of a new unity between the ethereal elements. Attributed to this personage is also the idea of a coveted vital life principle,⁵⁰ otherwise known as an essence or a quintessence, for all that exists that can allegedly be isolated through chemical processes like infusion, distillation, and maceration. This notion was enchanting and novel to Renaissance thought, inspiring fourteenth-century Franciscan monk Johannes de Rupescissa who related his lifelong quest for it in a treatise entitled *De consideratione quintae*. The all-encompassing tenet infused Renaissance alchemy with an unprecedented poise and remains anchored to the collective subconscious until this very day, most notably in the spagyric method of Dr Albert Richard Riedel or Frater Albertus (1911-1984).⁵¹

Changes to the cultural and intellectual climate of early modern Europe wrought by the Renaissance were not uniform, yet scholars have established invisible markers to draw a

⁵⁰ Thompson, pp. 83.

⁵¹ Frater Albertus, *The Alchemist's Handbook* (Boston, MA: Weiser Books, 1974), pp. 18-19.

definitive distinction between the former and the late Middle Ages the way distinctive borders on a political map may anatomically divide two countries. Three main developments in the fourteenth century symbolise the passage from one era to the next. The first was Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press which fundamentally enabled translations of Hellenistic, Arabic and Latin texts from all disciplines to transcend the niche monastic circles to which they were usually confined and achieve a much wider distribution. In this way they would become far more influential. The second is inextricably linked with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, a lamentable collapse that saw many Byzantine scholars desert their posts and move to Western Europe, particularly Florence. One might say that the seed of transformation was carried there in the form of a Greek manuscript titled *Corpus Hermeticum* by a monk named Leonardo de Pistoia. Translated into Tuscan Italian by the scholar Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the philosophical-theological cosmology underpinned by the first fourteen treatises that comprise this Hermetic text added considerable weight to the holistic schema as described by Neo-Platonism. This newfound consonance was ammunition for a system of thought that was in vehement politicisation against Aristotelian Scholasticism;⁵² it enabled a conduit for esotericism to enter mainstream thought and served as the light source for the flowering of the sixteenth-century reformation that saw the emergence of what would

⁵² Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: a Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, trans. by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (London, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2005), pp. 49-50.

become contemporary science. The third was a by-product of the intellectual re-emergence of classical sources; Ficino's translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Platonic dialogues, the Orphic Hymns, and other Neo-Platonic texts made gel the diffusionist ideology of Renaissance humanism, the *philosophia perennis* or *prisca theologia* which treated Hermes Trismegistus as one of its sages and the Christian revelation its final cause and culmination.

Without a doubt the induction of Man or microcosm, into the prestigious and opulent cosmic hall of fame as hermetic archmagus to the transcendent God would have seduced the Renaissance humanists. The promotion can be traced to Neo-Platonic ontology which blatantly asserts that the realms above the sublunary and below the Empyrean – the Sphere of the Fixed Stars, the *primum mobile*, and the seven planets – were subject to transitory states and the condition of becoming. Their newfound accessibility to intermediary spheres that adjudicated over the inferior world of generation explicitly empowered humans with the ability to manipulate natural processes through a system of correspondences. Hence together with dignity, the reawakening of active imagination, willpower, reprise and mystical extravagance, the Neo-Platonic vision gave back to humanity part of the original inheritance and glory hinted at by Alexandrian alchemy. In themselves, plants, trees, minerals, stones, and animals were little more than elemental corpuscles of detritus and dust, an amalgamation of the four elements revealed through the key qualities of hot, cold, dry and moist in addition to secondary ones like soft, hard, sweet and sour. What spirited them to life was an

auric, ethereal and occult web of vital life force that derived from the stars and was qualitative in nature. Known as the *anima mundi* or World Soul, this intangible energy infused itself into created matter and adhered intrinsically to the anatomical features of each object or substance. In addition it inveigled the *spiritus mundi* or World Spirit, and the material realm, the *corpus mundi* or World Body, into an indissoluble cosmic triangle, not only mediating between them but conferring form upon the latter.

Ficino's treatise *De vita coelitus comparanda* reconciled Aristotle's theory of matter with Platonic metaphysics by implicating that the *spiritus mundi* and the alchemical quintessence or vital force described by both Arnold of Villanova and Johannes de Rupescissa to be one and the same entity.⁵³ Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486-1535) faithfully added to and cultivated Ficino's promising innovation, painting the elements in an alchemical light and further asserting that the endeavour of natural magic was precariously hinged on understanding the threefold anatomical structure of the elements. In his *De occulta philosophia* he reasoned that the unknowable and ubiquitous essence of the *anima mundi* manifested in five different hypostases – in the four Aristotelian elements as well as the fifth, the quintessence. In the mineral realm it worked through ethereal earth to garner expression through mathematical principles, whilst in plants and trees it manifested as the associative

⁵³ Newman, William, R. and Grafton, Anthony, 'Introduction: The Problematic Status of Astrology and Alchemy in Premodern Europe', in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Newman, William, R. and Grafton, Anthony (London, UK: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 24.

kingdom's formative force under the aegis of ethereal water. Alternatively, it morphed into ethereal air to express itself as the carnal drive of all animals and spontaneously toiled through ethereal fire as the torch of human reason. In the first four hypostases the *anima mundi* acted as a universal curative or panacea, but in its fifth and purest incarnation, otherwise known as ether or spirit, it attained full expression as a formative force to be reckoned with. Here it became *spiritus mundi* or the Philosopher's Stone, a power able to attract and influence the planetary intelligences, transmute metals, and create or recreate corporeal life. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century interpretations of the *Tabula Smaragdina* as a cryptic and hallowed ode to the World Soul attest the popularity of this cosmological revelation.

Comprised of an unruly union between Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian ontology, this newborn hybrid of Renaissance alchemy remained deeply embedded in holism and fixated on understanding the inner regularity of all created forms. These philosophical premises would go on to dominate the sixteenth and seventeenth-century outlook of Hermetic philosophy.⁵⁴ One would not be unjust in claiming that the climactic moment or *apotheosis* of this syncretic alchemy finally came with Paracelsus of Hohenheim (1493-1541), a man who harmonized with the cosmological footprints impressed upon the rapidly crystallizing alchemical clay by Marsilio Ficino and Agrippa. Adhering to conventional alchemical thought and terminology Paracelsus believed in the causal differentiation of the *prima materia* into the elements of Spirit, Soul and Body and the quintessence or

⁵⁴ Ebeling, pp. 80.

panacea which interpenetrated and hypostasised itself within nature's threefold kingdom in alternate states. These he assimilated into his chemico-medical interpretation of the world under the designations Sulphur, Mercury and Salt, as well as *archeus* for the latter.⁵⁵ Like all progressive minds, Paracelsus was inclined to view the cosmos as a by-product of large-scale operations carried out by the supernal being of God. But God wasn't just any alchemist, he was 'The Alchemist' who unravelled *creation ex deo* by distilling the agglomeration of chaos in his alembic, over and over, until the gold of consciousness had been set free. Every substance, every particle of matter that existed represented a particular stage in his cycle of distillations.

Just like Agrippa, Paracelsus also agreed that the anatomy of the universe, the meaningful connections between objects or substances as well as their fundamental makeup had to be understood before one could exact a cure for a disease or simply spark knee-jerk reaction on nature's part. Of course the key to unlocking nature's cryptic hieroglyphs, Paracelsus argued, lay in the correct interpretation of individual signatures or occult virtues that originated from the cupola of the heavens and pertained to each corporeal object or substance. Knowing the occult property of each one enabled the Hermeticist to directly affect others which lay in a direct path of sympathetic correspondence. Let's proceed with an example. If Paracelsus was alive today he'd interpret the kava kava root's ability to induce euphoria and psychedelic visions as tangible proof of its subordination to the generative forces of the lunar sphere. Hence

⁵⁵ Kocku von Stuckrad, pp. 68-69.

rendered into a tincture of sorts it would make a potent remedy for an ailing organ ruled by that planetary power, in this case the brain. A true testament to his ingenuity was a spagyric-based method of fabricating metal-based detoxified drugs and homeopathic tonics to correct chemical imbalances caused by celestially-derived parasites and poisons. These practical developments were made from theoretical premises that causally linked the wellbeing and auric life force of the body's anatomical features to the vacillating energies of planetary intelligences, a Paracelsian stance which completely rejected the highly resistant strain of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine based on a disproportion of the four humours and temperaments. From this perspective the chemical composition of the microcosm was, so to speak, a corporeal reflection of energetic temperaments emanating from the planetary spheres.

In hindsight, what we have with Paracelsus is a man with one leg planted in the early paradigm of empirical science with its objective methodology and the other firmly entrenched in a spiritual world pervaded by hidden intelligences. The latter, soon to be confined to the occult dustbin as an eclectic eccentricity of the criminally insane, dictated Paracelsian reasoning to a substantial degree. With respect to the synthesis and administration of antidotes, for instance, Paracelsus monitored the astrological movement. Planetary conjunctions, oppositions, or eclipses involving those celestial bodies ascribed rulership over plants or metals intended for use had to be monitored, for certain times and arrangements were more likely to garner potency (or lack thereof) for a herbal elixir than others. Therefore timing, a

qualitative measure under rug swept by mechanistic analysis, was everything to the endeavour. Paracelsus's panentheistic cosmogony was based on an unwavering intercourse of subtle energies between the planets, the human body, and the anatomical parts of nature herself for the sake of equilibrium, forcing three distinct disciplines (i.e. astrology, medicine, alchemy) which had existed in symbiotic *enantiodromia*⁵⁶ during the Middle Ages to finally conjunct.

The philosophical and speculative contributions bestowed upon Renaissance thought by alchemy were not novel, for they had subsisted and survived in variant forms during the Middle Ages. In fact, a full-fledged mystical and chemico-operative alchemy had arisen from the Alexandrian marriage of Aristotelian natural philosophy to Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and aspects of Egyptian mythology as early as the second century BCE. Built upon a solid theoretical framework, its practical objectives encompassed everything from *chrysopoeia* and *argyropoeia* to spagyrics and the fabrication of precious stones. Lamentably the coming of the Christian dispensation scattered the technical art from the Latin West. Christianity's foremost theologian of the time, Augustine of Hippo, painted a heretical picture of Hermes as a pantheistic sorcerer and his teachings the inspiration of demons. Consequently *chema* was guilty by association. Remarkably, the seventh and eighth centuries were something of a godsend for they enabled the tradition to continue its evolution under a more progressive Islamic milieu. Islamic polymaths of the

⁵⁶ Term coined by Heraclitus of to denote a similarity in core values despite differences in aim, the term is widely discussed in Phillip Wheelwright, *The Presocratics* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966).

calibre of Jabir, Rhazes and Avicenna pioneered chemico-operative methods, invented a crude form of the contemporary scientific method and extended theoretical premises to include the Mercury-Sulphur theory, a dualistic interpretation of matter, as well as the search for a universal elixir which hypostasised in three states. For the Arabs Hermes wasn't a god or demigod; he was a magician whose alchemical secrets had been discovered by Alexander the Great at the prompting of Aristotle. During this time many pseudepigraphical Arabic writings attributed to the latter were in wide circulation, with the vast majority inveigling alchemical doctrine into the occult cosmology and subsequently dressing it in Neo-Platonic terminology. The transcription of a great number of these Arabic manuscripts into Latin by the Toledo School of Translators during the twelfth century ensured the operative art returned to the Christian West wholly dignified and reformed.

Between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the philosophers and theologians practicing the art remained faithful to the theoretical premises made by its Arabic and Hellenistic forerunners while concurrently adhering to the sociol-political and religious conventions of the Middle Ages. Albertus Magnus and Robert Bacon explored transmutation and the Philosopher's Stone from a purely mechanistic perspective to avoid attracting the enmity of the church. Thomas Aquinas was also an avid believer in transmutation and wished to harmonise it with the Christian faith although it wasn't until Arnold of Villanova that theoretical inroads were finally made. Arnold not only equated the alchemical stage of *necrosis* (nigredo) with Jesus's crucifixion

but developed the idea of a vital life force for each substance or object that could be separated through chemical distillation. This novel train of thought would become the lifelong obsession of Johannes de Rupescissa and an alchemical overture during the Renaissance. An unlikely union between the Aristotelian theory of matter and Platonic metaphysics inspired the philosopher Hortulanus who garnered an enduring fourteenth-century interpretation of the *Tabula Smaragdina* as an allegorical exposition of the Philosopher's Stone. Two separate alchemical perspectives then met in Ficino and Agrippa, who added another twist to operative hermeneutics by causally overlapping the Platonic World Soul with Villanova's vital force. The overarching take of the aforementioned scholars was so popular that it supplanted Hortulanus's version and dominated alchemical esotericism until the end of the seventeenth century. Greatly inspired by this syncretised holism bent on understanding the inner regularity of created forms, Paracelsus developed his paradigm of iatrochemistry, the homeopathic approach to medicine. At this time the ultimate fate of alchemy and its doctrines was integration into the sacred science of Renaissance man, the new Adam. This multi-eyed microcosm, with each lens tuned to a different occupation -hermetic archmagus, physician, mystic, philosopher, alchemist, and astrologer-enabled him to bend nature, to coerce and correct it, to align it to the *heimarmene* or even pervert it. Regardless, the jack-of-all-trades approach gave him the Midas touch-officially divine, at last.



Before attempting to explain how alchemy facilitated the emergence of Christian theosophy, it would be wise to define what is meant by the term 'theosophy'. As an esoteric *gnosis*

within Christianity, the latter is a speculative system closely allied to Hermeticism and Platonism that perceives God's creation in the context of an emanationist cosmology.⁵⁷ In such a worldview, the transcendental One stands at the very top of the cosmos and emanates downwards along a wrung of celestial hierarchies usually guarded by planetary daemons. The bottommost wrung is the earthbound plane of matter, a tapestry of nature infused with God's supernal being that can be bent to accord with one's will when he or she attains requisite knowledge of the divine through applied psychospiritual awakening but also intellectual effort.

Following along roads frequently travelled by the Gnostic religions, theosophical doctrine proposes that the purpose of incarnation is reawakening to the divinity within, a salvific quest characterized by evolutionary ascent along celestial hierarchies to engage in *unio mystica* with the Godhead.⁵⁸ Theosophy also enables a greater degree of religious freedom than more rigid forms of exoteric Christianity by opening up an intermediary realm of disembodied entities for exploration through techniques of active imagination. Moreover, it recognizes that revelation isn't some historic transcendental event experienced by the apostolic 'elite' but a spiritual seed ready to sprout within each soul, putting the lucky recipient back on the royal road that leads to communion with the Holy Spirit. Quintessential to the fruition of

⁵⁷ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: a Historical Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 87.

⁵⁸ Antoine Faivre, 'Christian Theosophy', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, two vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), II, pp. 259.

the whole endeavour is the omnipresence of Sophia or Divine Wisdom.

Being a mystical exponent of the seventeenth century, theosophy ran contrariwise to the Lutheran Reformation as a reaction against a Christianity becoming too dogmatic, ascetic, and anti-ritualistic in its approach towards the divine.⁵⁹ The bridge interconnecting the two streams was inaugurated by a German cobbler of humble origins named Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). Of course what most people would like to know is how a man of Boehme's socio-political background could have ever become embroiled in more cerebral pathways to understanding nature and thus God. The answer to this question lies in the cultural milieu of the times and in fields of inquiry that may have posed as formative influences. Boehme was born in Germany's Görlitz, then a town of about ten thousand inhabitants in the geopolitical region of Upper Lusatia. The religious climate in areas north of the Alps in the alpenglow of the Renaissance and the Reformation was one that viewed Paracelsian pansophy as a keystone to lawfully unlocking the secrets of God's creation.⁶⁰ Having distanced themselves from Renaissance Neo-Platonism and the Hermetic suppositions of Italian humanist philosophers like Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), thinkers of this proto-theosophical school [i.e. Valentin Weigel (1533-1588), Heinrich Khunrath (1560-1605), and Johann Arndt (1555-1621)] perceived Latin and vernacular translations of

⁵⁹ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: a Historical Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 89.

⁶⁰ Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, trans. by Lorton, David (London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 90.

authentic Hermetic and alchemical treatises as remnants of genuine primeval knowledge that had passed into the torch bearing hands of both Hermes Trismegistus and Paracelsus (1493-1591). In their mind's eye, the physico-theology that made no distinction between the natural and the divine was the true path of Christian piety and had to be upheld at all costs.

In Boehme's day, the cognoscente of the town were all devoted to the theory and practice of this more mystical avenue towards objective truth and divine knowledge. Of paramount importance here is that Bartolomaus Scultetus (1540-1614), the mayor of Görlitz, was a Paracelsian aficionado.⁶¹ Two of Boehme's closest allies, the orientalist Balthasar Walther and the physician Tobias Kober, were active members of the '*secta Paracelsi*'.⁶² The former's own mentor, a physician called Abraham Behem, was also an adherent of the German mystical tradition and had once been decried by the townsfolk for being part of a Paracelsian cult. Another fact worth mentioning is that Boehme's Görlitz could be found on a commercial route in close proximity to Prague, a city transformed into an intellectual hub of astrological and astronomical fascination during the reign of Rudolf II (1552-1612). This would have made Görlitz something of a layover for travelling theorists wishing to spread the word about the latest developments in natural science and philosophy. The Scottish alchemist Alexander Seton (1566-1636), for instance, meandered

⁶¹ Pierre Deghaye, 'Jacob Boehme and His Followers', in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, two vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), II, pp. 211.

⁶² Ernst Koch, 'Moscowiter in der Oberlausitz und M. Bartolomaus in Gorlitz', in *Neues Lausitzisches Magazin* (Berlin, Germany: 1907), pp. 83-86.

about Central Europe for some time promoting a 'hidden food of life' in the element of air that could concurrently be found in a more stable form within physical saltpetre.⁶³ The striking similarities between this concept and Boehme's own idea of a divine *Salitter* definitely give credence to the notion that Seton sojourned in Görlitz and wooed the mayor and the literati with tangible chemico-operative evidence in support of his nitre theory before finally settling into the court of Rudolph II in Prague. These formative influences emerged in the vernacular dialect and go far in elucidating why the seventeenth century variant of Christian theosophy initiated by Boehme is infused with alchemical leitmotifs.

During the Early Modern Period the world was undergoing a major transition from a geocentric to a heliocentric cosmogony; from an animistic landscape to a mechanistic one defined by processes that operated independently of any conscious and creative force. Espousing beliefs that would later be condemned by the Catholic Church, Boehme gravitated towards Copernican heliocentrism and the more seductive notion of *creatio ex materia*. This dramatic assertion also flows translucently from the pages of *Aurora* (1612) when he postulates: "From what sort of *materia* or force did the grass, vegetation, and trees proceed? What sort of substance and circumstance [*Gelegenheit*] was involved in this creation? The simple person says that God made everything from Nothing; but he does not know this God, and does not know what He is. When he beholds the earth together

⁶³ Henry Guerlac, 'John Mayow and the Aerial Nitre,' in *Actes du Septieme Congres International d'Histoire des Sciences* (Jerusalem, Israel: 1953), pp. 332-349.

with the depths above the earth, he thinks “that is not God, there is not God”. He has formed the notion that God dwells only above the blue heaven of the stars...”⁶⁴

Faith in a divine substance of un-creation such as the one just mentioned had been indigenous to alchemical thought since late antiquity, and it was to this discipline that Boehme now turned for answers. During the seventeenth century the crux of scientific discoveries being made frequently featured nitre, a chemical compound parading nowadays under the label potassium nitrate.⁶⁵ Given its prominence in the chemical scene, a morbid fascination with its uses and properties ended up developing amongst circles of alchemists and emerging chemists, one that Boehme clearly wasn't exempt from. At some stage he married the organic compound and his notion of a divine substance together and the latter assimilated qualities belonging to the former. By drawing the formless yet forming *prima materia* into his theosophy under the name *Salitter* (the German word for nitre), Boehme was allying himself with a Platonic dualism that had woven itself in and out of the intellectual tapestry of all ages and attempting to comprehend a seemingly detached Christian conception of the universe in organic terms. This early engagement with alchemy appears to have enacted a grand influence on the formation of his speculative paradigm.

⁶⁴ Jacob Boehme, ‘Morgenröte im Aufgang (Aurora)’, in *Samtliche Schriften*, vol. 1 ed. Will-Erich Peukert (Stuttgart, Germany: 1955), pp. 308.

⁶⁵ Andrew Weeks, ‘Jacob Boehme’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, two vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), II, pp. 188.

Boehme transcribes his philosophy surrounding the nature of *Salitter* as a divine substance in *Aurora* (1612). So what exactly was the *Salitter* and in what context could it best be understood? According to Boehme it was the force of mutual attraction that infused all created matter in the spiritual and material realms with vital life force. It was concurrently visible and invisible and everywhere present; it was the unconscious origin and determined the *nisus* of all things. In describing its qualities Boehme posits that, “The corporeal drying is to be called in this book the Divine SALITTER. For the seed of the entire Divinity is in it, and it is like a mother which receives the seed and bears the fruit again and again, in accordance with all qualities of the seed.”⁶⁶ Hence it was in the sphere of the fixed stars; in the hydrogen powering the sun; in the planetary motions; in phenomena that facilitate an illusion of time; in vegetable and tree growth; and in human thought-desires, dreams, and mentation. In fact, it compelled the cosmic animal called nature to subject her children to the cycle of birth, death, and regeneration. It was the reason for life, self-awareness, and the spontaneous will of nature to want to subdue another extension of nature or its own inherent nature.

We could probably equate the *Salitter* with the mother membrane responsible for the emanation of a multiverse in modern superstring theory. Just as the splendid sun shine its rays and ensouls the entire solar system, so too does the *Salitter* permeate an ethereal septenary body of source-spirits named Dry,

⁶⁶ Jacob Boehme, ‘Morgenröte im Aufgang (Aurora)’, in *Samtliche Schriften*, vol. 1 ed. Will-Erich Peukert (Stuttgart, Germany: 1955), pp. 137.

Sweet, Bitter, Fire, Love, Sound, and *Corpus*.⁶⁷ Similar in function to Renaissance planetary daemons and serving as intermediaries, Boehme's primary purpose in conceiving them was to reciprocate a link between the spiritual and material through differentiation of the divine *Salitter* into an upper spiritual realm of perfection; a lower celestial realm where perception of opposing forces was possible; and a material plane plagued by sympathies and antipathies that had lost their fundamental harmony and were no longer in equilibrium. As a miniature replica of the entire cosmos, the human being was imagined a pitiful creature, a fallen angel and assigned by Boehme to the debased realm of material existence.

Representing a hierarchical ladder of devolution from an inchoate substrate to one qualitatively and quantitatively expressed by a dense condition of corporeal determinacy, the individual source-spirits were imagined to arise from the continual contractions of psychic ether or fluid of God's eternal nature. As the *Salitter* was transposed from one source-spirit to the next, it became polarized in composition and identified with either a sensate or animate property. In this way, each multiplication drifted further and further away from God. In *Aurora* (1612) Boehme continuously draws our attention to differences in the humus from whence the celestial and material planes emanate; the first is a child of a pure and translucent form of the divine *Salitter* whilst the second of a crude, defiled,

⁶⁷ Jacob Behmen, *Works of Jacob Behmen: The Teutonic Philosopher VI* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), pp. 73.

poisonous, and stinking version full of dissonance.⁶⁸ The creation of the unshakable laws and gatekeepers that are the everlasting angels are a by-product of the higher form; on the other hand, the cosmic totem pole with its animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms are the spawn of the lower form. Even though the second Salitter was a debased reflection of the first, it could still replicate heavenly perfection by synthesizing diamonds, gold, states of illumination, and other everlasting things. The impetus for this dual conception of *Salitter* can be found in organic processes whereby saltpetre was purified for commercial use⁶⁹; the first, the celestial version corresponds with the hard, translucent crystals generated by its subjection to repeated distillations whereas the second “earthly” form of the substance can be equated with an unrefined brownish filtrate called *sal terrae* that stunk because it was still undergoing purgation from organic animal matter. There is a vast corpus of evidence in support of the idea that qualities and corroborating aspects of Boehme’s *Salitter* are an idealised paradigm of chemical properties and reactions manifested by the chemical compound of the same name.

Salitter is the German word for saltpetre (*sal petrae*), earth salt (*sal terrae*), or sal nitre (*sal nitri*).⁷⁰ In Boehme’s time saltpetre was known as a prevalent compound in nature, making it an obvious choice for induction into an important role (as *prima*

⁶⁸ Jacob Boehme, ‘Morgenröte im Aufgang (Aurora)’, in *Samtliche Schriften*, vol. 1 ed. Will-Erich Peukert (Stuttgart, Germany: 1955), pp. 55.

⁶⁹ Please see Alan Williams, ‘The Production of Saltpeter in the Middle Ages’ in *Ambix* (London, UK: Maney Publishing, 1975), 22, pp. 125-133.

⁷⁰ Andrew Weeks, ‘Jacob Boehme’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, two vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), II, pp. 188.

materia) that had formerly been held by other naturally occurring substances like earth, water, mercury, lead, dew, and menstruum. Saltpetre was also a vital ingredient in the fabrication of chemical explosives like gunpowder and it's not difficult to see how a creative mind perceiving cosmogony through analogy might link it with claps of thunder, bolts of lightning, and other spontaneous acts of violence qualitatively allied to demiurgic powers. These associations would have been transparently palpable given that celestial thunder and lightning had been considered portents of divine displeasure for time immemorial. The spontaneous deflagration that nitre suffers when brought in contact with molten rock, black coals, or any other sweltering surface⁷¹ might also be apprehended as a corporeal expression of divine intervention and intent. On the other hand, when the compound is tossed into topsoil it enhances the growth and quality of trees, plants, flowers, and all agricultural produce⁷², recalling the fecundity of the divine seed in harnessing life from the most hostile of circumstances.

Saltpetre also exhibits some other uncanny features reminiscent of Boehme's divine *Salitter*. When calcined in an alchemical retort it transforms into a matrix of colourless white prisms. These have an astringent texture to them and are cold to the touch. Courtesy of chemico-operative alchemists like Basil Valentine (c. 1400) we also know that heating an amalgam of common salt and green vitriol produces hydrochloric acid, or the

⁷¹ G. Starkey, 'The Chymistry of Isaac Newton', *Alchemy Laboratory Notebooks and Correspondence* (2004) <<http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/newton/reference/glossary.do>>[Accessed 23 November 2012].

⁷² Jacob Boehme, 'Morgenröte im Aufgang (Aurora)', in *Samtliche Schriften*, vol. 1 ed. Will-Erich Peukert (Stuttgart, Germany: 1955), pp. 55.

‘spirit of common salt’. Similarly the confluence of vitriol (ferrous or cupric sulphate) and saltpetre generates the ‘fiery spirit’ of *aqua fortis* or nitric acid.⁷³ When these two are married they spawn an ultimate agent of dissolution in *aqua regia*,⁷⁴ named so because of its ability to liquefy the noblest and most incorruptible of all metals—gold. In the sixteenth century nitric acid was also famed for its propensity to yield ethyl nitrate or what the alchemists termed the ‘dulcified spirit of nitre’ when combined with ethanol or ‘the spirit of wine’.⁷⁵ The amalgamation of the two inverted the corrosive properties of the former and rendered the entire tincture saccharine so that it emanated an intoxicating odour that was at times reminiscent of honey-based fermented infusions like mead and at other times of sweet apples. In scrying the aforementioned, it appears that many qualities of the divine *Salitter* like transparency and purity of form as well as the primary characteristics of the septenary source-spirit system which sprouted forth from it (i.e. dry, sweet, bitter, and ‘hellish fire’)⁷⁶ must have been modelled from observations of chemical experiments involving saltpetre in a laboratory setting.

The seven source-spirits differentiating from the *Salitter* can also be understood from the perspective of the seven major alchemical operations comprising the Magnum Opus. The first,

⁷³ G. Starkey, ‘The Chymistry of Isaac Newton’, *Alchemy Laboratory Notebooks and Correspondence* (2004) <<http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/newton/reference/glossary.do>> [Accessed 23 November 2012].

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Jon Eklund, ‘The Incomplete Chemist: Being an Essay on the Eighteenth-Century Chemist in his Laboratory, With a Dictionary of Obsolete Chemical Terms of the Period’, in *Smithsonian Studies in History and Technology* (Washington DC, USA: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975), 33, pp. 18.

⁷⁶ Jacob Boehme, ‘Morgenröte im Aufgang (Aurora)’, in *Samtliche Schriften*, vol. 1 ed. Will-Erich Peukert (Stuttgart, Germany: 1955), pp. 85-88.

called Dry or *herb* by Boehme, denotes qualities like coldness, hardness, inertia, lamentation, and death and is connected to the Saturnian sphere. Its embodiment by the forces of chaos links it to the alchemical *solutio* or *nigredo*, a phase where old forms are annihilated and replaced by new and more comprehensive ones.⁷⁷ Following this is Sweet, a fiery, pleasant, and mild condition responsible for the mysterious and spontaneous irruption of life. Mediated by the Jovian force, its main purpose is to counter the polarized force set in motion by the first principle. His second quality is synonymous with the active, masculine principle of the Paracelsian triad called sulphur which wills itself to consciousness and corresponds to *calcinatio*⁷⁸, the chemical reduction of a solid into a fine, granular powder through the element of fire. The mutual interaction of the first two principles produces the Bitter energy ruled by Mars—a destructive and choleric force associated with elevation, penetration, and subjugation. Its inclination to rise upwards and permeate spatiotemporal dimensions links it to the *sublimatio*⁷⁹, a chemical reaction whereby solids are rendered straight into gases and vapours without passing through transitional liquefaction.

The continual action of forces upon the inchoate substrate of the *Salitter* produces a fourth quality mediated by the Sun and Moon called Fire or Hot. Boehme postulates that this spiritual force injects the vital life principle into inert matter and as such is inexplicable linked with the *nisus* of any object or substance

⁷⁷ Edward Edinger, *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy* (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court, 1994), pp. 47.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 17.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 117.

incarnating on the corporeal plane. Because it involves the aggregation of opposites and mystical union along with invigoration and insemination, the fourth principle can be equated to the lesser *conjunctio*⁸⁰, the conciliatory union of substances in an alchemical retort usually personified by sulphur and argent vive, the Sun and Moon, man and woman, and a horde of other couplets including male-female pairs of animals. Next along the chain of divine generation is Love, an extension of the fourth principle brought about through the concentration of warmth. According to Boehme, this power manifests consciousness through kinesthesia and sense perception and is facilitated by the Venusian sphere. A crucial prerequisite for the emergence of consciousness is the ability to discriminate, separate, and compartmentalize; to carve out the universe using the 'Logos-cutter' within ourselves. This first occurs at one's birth and recurrently transpires until the time of death. We should not then be surprised that Boehme chose the mythological goddess of birth, herself depicted as being born out of a scallop shell on the shores of the froth-filled sea, as keeper of the fifth quality. In alchemical terms this is the stage of *separatio*⁸¹ which always follows the lesser *conjunctio*.

Immediately before corporeal generation comes Sound, the principle of expression and illumination where incarnating beings receive the verbal gift of language, speech, and harmony. This sixth stage arises under the arbitration of the Mercurial sphere and renders melodies composed by the angelic forces audible.

⁸⁰ Ibid, pp. 154.

⁸¹ Ibid, pp. 187-188.

Looking at the alchemical cycle in its entirety, the only time when angelic and ethereal voices could be comprehended was during the deepest stage of blackening, the *mortificatio*⁸²; save for being a period of torture and lamentation, it also represented a dynamic psychophysical situation called by alchemists the 'black sun' in which divine wisdom or Sophia was temporarily enslaved by the bonds of *physis* (nature). Thus there is a palpable, qualitative link between Boehme's Sound principle and *mortificatio*. To end with we have the Corpus or Body, an embodiment of the other six qualities arbitrated by the Earth. In alchemy, the act of becoming earth can be equated with *coagulatio* or *fixatio*⁸³, a subdivision of the Opus concerned with the congealing of elusive quicksilver until it acquires tangible contours and consistent qualities within spatiotemporal parameters. Despite the feasible and sometimes obvious analogies and interrelationships, it's difficult to know to what extent operations of alchemical theory and practice influenced the speculative septenary system that Boehme conceived. The acquisition of such intimate knowledge would require the possession of a mind long expired. As this is unfeasible, we must remain contented with the conviction that divine *Salitter* and its septenary emanation stand at the intellectual crossroads of alchemo-Paracelsian natural philosophy and an empirical chemistry in the process of distancing itself from the esoteric and occult.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 158.

⁸³ Ibid, pp. 83-85.

Of course the alchemical leitmotifs remained a lifelong love affair for the Christian theosopher and featured prominently in his extensive treatise on the transfiguration of the divine Word into Jesus Christ, *De Signatura Rerum* or *The Signature of All Things* (1622).⁸⁴ The motivating factor behind this book was the animistic belief that all created matter—everything from unicellular organisms right up to the most intricate dynamic systems in the universe like speech production, language, mentation, and consciousness—was infused with a hieroglyphic ‘signature’ that revealed its quintessential nature and its exact interrelations with other objects and substances in a multidimensional tapestry of nature that was itself connected to God. These signatures contained within the Aristotelian *nisus* of the object or substance to which they pertained and were infused into the latter by the sixth ray of creation, a creative emanation demarcated by Boehme as the sixth mercurial source-spirit responsible for illumination and expression. Here we should recall that signatures, the notion that every piece of created matter contains within a vital life principle that reveals its subtle occult virtues or qualitative properties when properly deciphered, are a Paracelsian importation⁸⁵ and that Boehme deliberately assimilated them into his septenary theosophical system because they complemented and validated his own beliefs about a patterned creation from a single divine source.

⁸⁴ Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’, in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by William, R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (London, UK: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 387.

⁸⁵ For more on Paracelsian signatures See Lindy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 57.

Another Christian theosopher whose cosmological reckoning was alchemical in nature was Englishwoman Mary Anne South (1817-1910). She was, amongst other things, a leading figure in the reinvigoration of spiritual alchemy during a Victorian era where every layperson seemed to be captivated by the occult. Mary Anne grew up around her father, a wealthy and erudite gentleman who lived at Bury House, Gosport in New Hampshire and immersed himself in the psychic revolution of the nineteenth century. Thomas was a creative individual with both the confidence and the financial means to pursue metaphysical interests and investigate his own theoretical propositions. During the formative stages of their partnership, the two joined an occult-orientated secret society called the *Zojese* where they learned about and conducted experiments into hypnotic phenomena.⁸⁶ It also appears that they entertained metaphysical theories about the cosmos that had since been discarded by rational science and psychology. Thomas and Mary Anne also participated in group therapy sessions involving the alleged polarization of mesmeric fluid in the bodies of ailing individuals through the application of “magnetic” forces, a technique which had been pioneered by Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) late in the preceding century.⁸⁷ Both were highly competent in classical studies and their sound knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages was equally commendable.

⁸⁶ Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 511.

⁸⁷ Harvey J. Irwin and Caroline A. Watt, *An Introduction to Parapsychology* (London, UK: McFarland & Company Inc., 2007), pp. 12.

Before moving onto the crux of the Souths' interpretation it should also be mentioned that Mary Anne was an active member of James Pierrepont Greaves' theosophical circle⁸⁸ and was probably influenced by what she learned there. Greaves was a traditional Behmenist, faithful to the musings of Jacob Boehme which had been rendered accessible to the general public through translations and annotations made by the English philosopher William Law (1686-1761).⁸⁹ In scrying these it becomes obvious that Boehme employed an alchemical veneer to explicate his panentheistic vision of the cosmos, particularly in *The Signature of All Things* (1621) where he took the Paracelsian doctrine of signatures a step further by postulating that God worked through the reflective beauty of the Divine Sophia to infuse these seals into everything, even into the human soul and its transmutational substratum. This makes him a unique thinker, at least within the context of Christian theosophy. The inspiration for this thought can be traced back a single moment in the year 1600 when he was involuntarily flung into what transpersonal psychologists today call a 'peak experience'. Perusing the reflection of the sun's rays in a pewter dish one day, Boehme suddenly found himself without, caught in the waves of a psychedelic trance where the underlying principles of all things stood united under the universal language of geometry and coalesced under the insignia

⁸⁸ Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 511.

⁸⁹ Arthur Versluis, 'William Law', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter, J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, and others, two vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), II, pp. 677-679.

of divine love.⁹⁰ The epiphany enabled him to penetrate through the veil of appearances and experience the interconnectedness of all being, the mantle of creation as it stands unfettered by the compartmentalizing values projected by the perceiving mind. Given her avid participation in Greaves' circles and interest in English theosophy, there's no reason why knowledge of Boehme's visions shouldn't have reached Mary Anne South directly.

After having collected and examined evidence in light of their own predilections and biases, the Souths jointly came to the conclusion that alchemy wasn't a proto-chemistry based on false premises, but rather a transcendental and salvific operation through which the practitioner gained knowledge of the soul's immortality. Recent advances in psychical research added credence to their conviction that illumination probably occurred through altered states of consciousness like hypnotic trance states. The best possible way of understanding Mary Anne's interpretation of is to examine the contents of her book, entitled *A Suggestive Enquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* (1850). In the opening chapter, South presents a series of convincing anecdotes from such widely respected figures in alchemy as Paracelsus (1493-1591), Thomas Vaughan (1621-1666), Basil Valentine (c. 1600), and Raymond Lully (c. 1232-1315) to support the opinion that metallic transmutation is actually possible. South posits that the reason why only a handful of adepts have succeeded in this is because alchemical recipes "have been the means of surrounding many a literal soul with stills, coals, and furnaces, in the hope by

⁹⁰ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: a Historical Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 91.

such lifeless instruments to sublime the Spirit of nature, or by salt, sulphur and mercury, or the three combined with antimony, to extract the Form of gold.”⁹¹ What she’s basically saying is that chemical operations alone aren’t enough to get the job done. If the *prima materia* being converted into the *ultima materia* or the Philosopher’s Stone was an intangible ‘psychic ether’ of some kind, and if the human being was the mechanism involved in repeated distillations and concurrently the substance being distilled (as she herself believed), then success in transmutation must be contingent on the practitioner’s capacity to pour his or her own vitality into the crucible.

From this perspective we can infer that the Souths regarded the alchemical secret to be magical in nature. While some basic alchemical experiments like maceration and decoction could be performed in a laboratory by almost anyone, success in what is termed the Greater Work (i.e. synthesis of the ‘red stone’) required an in-depth understanding of concentrative energy and its effect on matter along with knowledge about the individual stages of the alchemical opus. To fabricate the splendour of eternal gold, the practitioner had to emit a burst of psychic energy into the base matter at a specific moment during the circulation. The energy would seep into volatile mass and effect changes at the subatomic and electronic levels. Mary Anne admits to the probability of such when she says: “It is not... that the Spirit is free from material bondage, or able to range the universe of her own sphere, that guarantees the truth of her revealments,

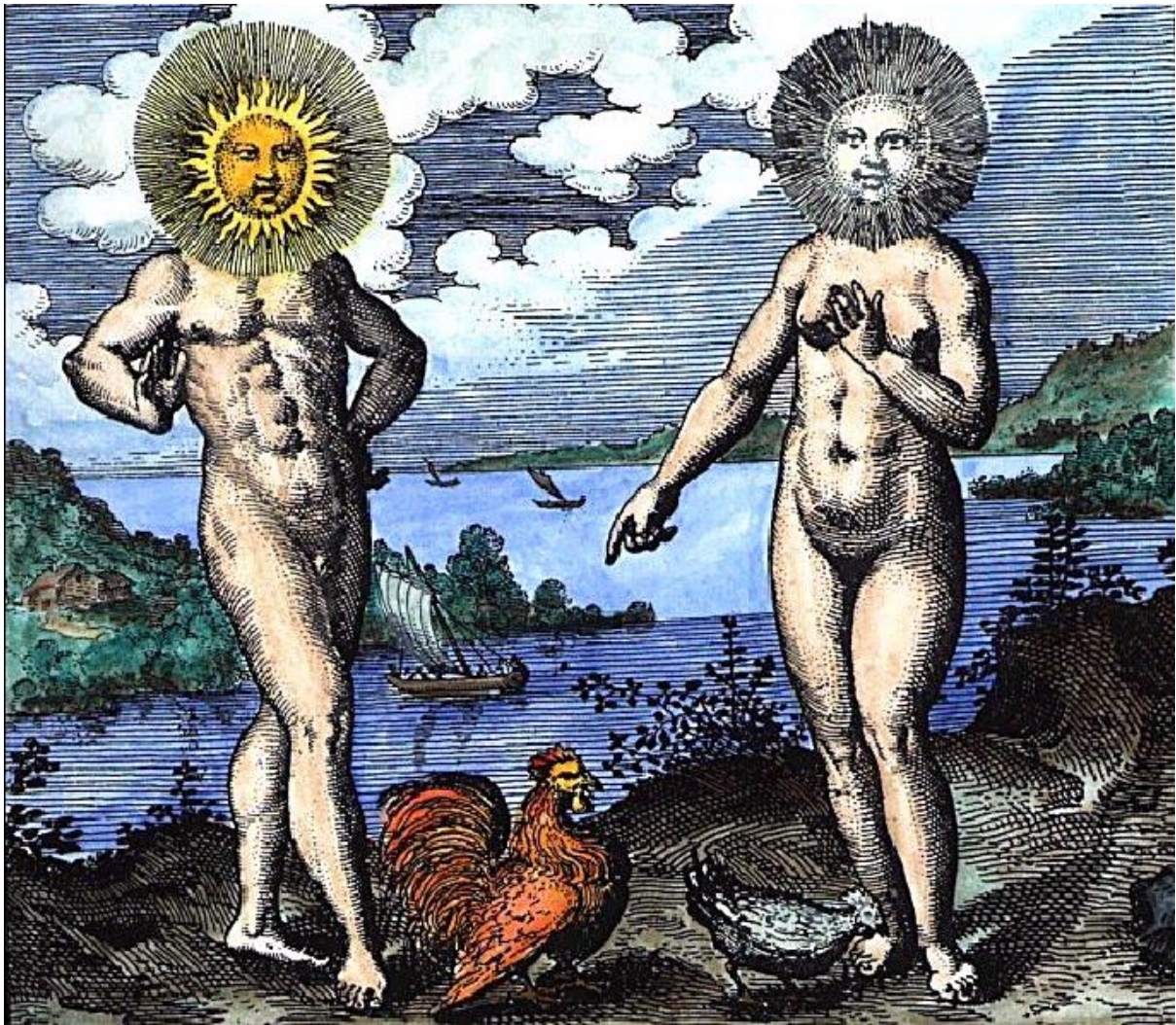
⁹¹ Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’, in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by William, R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (London, UK: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 390.

or helps the consciousness on to subjective experience; for this a concentrative energy is needed, and an intellect penetrating into other spheres.”⁹²

This ambiguous statement makes complete sense when viewed from the kaleidoscopic lenses of Mesmer’s and Boehme’s preternatural cosmogonies that were so very dear to her. Peering through these we see that in Victorian times altered states of consciousness were perceived to be something of a temporary empowerment to the human mind, a condition whereby an unfettered exchange of magnetic fluid between the microcosm and the Universal Mind was deemed entirely possible. By collecting magnetic fluid from the Universal Mind in the manner that man-made solar panels harness energy from the sun, the conscious mind could then turn imagination and thought-desires into matter, or as Mary Anne puts it, “move with demiurgic power and grace”⁹³. Hence the line between mortal temporality and divine immortality blurred when one plunged into mesmeric trance states, allowing humans to enact god-like feats and to make gold of detritus and dust.

⁹² Mary Anne Atwood, *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery (Classic Reprint)*, (Central, Hong Kong: Forgotten Books, 2012), pp. 203.

⁹³ *Ibid*, pp. 38.



As a major interpreter of the Western esoteric tradition—most notably alchemy, astrology, and the Gnostic sects of antiquity—Carl Gustav Jung’s (1875-1961) opinions were informed by the cultural milieu of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Contrary to the tapering, reductionist view of eclectic contemporary scholars who have contributed the ongoing mythologization of Jungian psychology by taking the Swiss psychotherapist’s words at face value, the latter was *not* the inaugurator of a psychological take on alchemical symbolism. An initial connection between the two

had already been made some twenty years prior by Herbert Silberer (1882-1923) of Zurich, a reputed Freemason and psychoanalyst whose cerebral juxtaposition of dream leitmotifs derived from patients and alchemical symbols culminated in a pivotal insight; 'elementary types', that is, psychic prototypes that might better be described as inherited irrepresentable forms or concepts of numinous and transpersonal nature separate from the sphere of the mental ego, had actually 'insinuated themselves into the body of the alchemical hieroglyphs' as the spiritual alchemists 'struggled to gain a mastery of the physico-chemical facts by means of thoughts'.⁹⁴

Put in layman's terms Silberer was implying that unconscious content of a transpersonal nature was projected onto the same chemicals and experimental methods that were being utilized by the alchemists for the production of the red stone, elixirs, and other homeopathic remedies. The dual proposition that alchemical symbols primarily reflected unconscious projections born from the gradual orientation of the ego-Self axis towards self-actualization or 'individuation' and to a much lesser extent chemical methodologies is the central thesis in his *Problem der Mystik und ihrer Symbolik* (Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism, 1914). In addition to its masterful, dialectic compartmentalization of alchemical symbology with myths, legends, and folktales as psychic remnants of collective human infancy that freely offer themselves up to psychoanalytic scrutiny, Silberer's observations form an esoteric framework from

⁹⁴ Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix: Spiritual Alchemy and Rosicrucianism in the Work of Count Michael Maier (1569-1622)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 24.

which a much more technical version decked in scientific terminology could be forged some twenty years afterwards. That these proto-psychological attempts at an explanation of alchemical symbols should be fobbed off by Jung as ‘too primitive and still too much wrapped up in personalistic assumptions’⁹⁵ and then modulated altogether once he chanced upon the ‘discovery’ himself shouldn’t really surprise us given the sinful tendency of intellectuals to cover up their formative tracks in an attempt to garner credibility, awe, and admiration through deceitful claims of original thought. The premeditated oversight makes perfect sense when viewed from this kaleidoscope.

Prying into the recesses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we see that Silberer’s own work is relative with the spiritual breed of alchemy garnered during the Victorian fascination with the occult. During this time, the Enlightenment denunciation of obscurity caused chemico-operative alchemy and its material quest for the Philosopher’s Stone to fall into universal disrepute, however the Romantic disenchantment with the determinist and reductionist perspectives introduced by Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) and his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) spawned a spiritual countermovement involving a Renaissance-style fusion of alchemy with astrology, theurgy, and natural magic. As a result there was an explosion of innumerable interpretative schools of esoteric spirituality, the most popular being the occultist variety which regarded the chemical terminology and symbology of alchemical treatises as superficial veneers disguising teleological outposts of inner

⁹⁵ Ibid, pp. 25.

psychospiritual processes intrinsic to the soul of each human. There was a plethora of esoteric writers and secret circles that took up this interpretation; Albert Pike, American Freemason Ethan Allan Hitchcock (1798-1870), Mary Anne Atwood (1817-1910), Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1842), the Pietists of Germany and the United States, the *Gold- und Rosencrantz*, the 'L'Association Alchimique de France,' and a Parisian Masonic order called 'The Convent of the Philalethes'.⁹⁶

It appears the adaptation of alchemical symbols like the numinous dragon, the black sun, the salamander, the hermaphrodite, and the copulating king and queen to the inner transfiguration of a human psyche seeking illumination, conscience, and *unio mystica* with the godhead through the distillation of carnal machinations and pleasures was especially favoured by the Freemasonic circles.⁹⁷ The just mentioned Hitchcock, whose father was responsible for the amalgamation of masonic heraldry into green-rich seal of Vermont, echoes a chiefly spiritual interpretation based on a consummate moral life in his *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists* (1857): 'Man was the subject of Alchemy; and that the object of the Art was the perfection, or at least the improvement, of Man.'⁹⁸ More importantly perhaps, his elucidation in the preface that

⁹⁶ Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by William, R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (London, UK: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 387.

⁹⁷ Arthur Edward Waite, *Azoth, or the Star in the East, embracing the first matter of the Magnum Opus, the evolution of the Aphrodite-Urania, the supernatural generation of the son of the sun, and the alchemical transfiguration of humanity* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 1994), pp. 44.

⁹⁸ Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by William, R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (London, UK: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 392.

‘alchemical works stand related to moral and intellectual geography, somewhat as the skeletons of ichthyosauri and plesiosauri are related to geology’ is something of a rudimentary humus from which Jung’s notion of a collective unconscious—the phylogenetic strata of the psyche encompassing universal, archetypal, and primordial forms that stand outside the spatiotemporal realm and affect the entire human race—sprung forth.

Silberer, who we’ve dealt with already, was also a Freemason and it just so happens that before writing his exposition he became intimately acquainted with Hitchcock’s work. Further, the analytical ground laid in *Probleme der Mystik und ihrer Symbolik* was influenced by a Protestant soteriology perceiving in alchemical symbolism a dialectical psychospiritual pursuit towards salvific illumination. This proclamation rests faithfully upon the shoulders of a ‘parabola’ now correctly attributed to *Guldener Tractat vom Philosophischen Steine*, an exposition of natural philosophy with medieval content composed by chemico-operative alchemist Johannes Grasshoff (c. 1560-1623). As the chief catalyst behind Silberer’s innovative work the ‘parabola’ alludes to the Christian determination of self-knowledge, self-mastery, and self-improvement of a seeker of truth who is both an initiate and an alchemist, and in doing so invokes the ‘physical mysticism’ of Waite. Before his fatalistic renunciation of Victorian occultism in favour of 1920s positivism, the latter espoused formative opinions holding that the Hermetic Art was truly a dual pursuit of metallic transmutation and spiritual transcendence. He expounds this esoteric doctrine considerably in *Azoth* (1893),

reasoning that ‘alchemical literature deals primarily at least with the conscious intelligence of man, and with the unevolved possibilities of the body and mind of humanity.’⁹⁹

Hence chemical operations able to alter the inner configuration of matter possessed psychic equivalents that were to be paralleled on the ethereal plane and were to be recapitulated for the sake of acquiescing further increments of consciousness. This sounds remarkably like the Jungian approach, which didn’t invalidate the physical processes altogether but consigned them subordinate to the principle aim, which was transformation of the psyche on both personal and collective levels. The latter and a host of other phenomenological similarities between Waite’s and Jung’s views on alchemical transmutation are brought to light by Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman in a paper entitled ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy’. In their eyes, the Jungian mimicry of a quintessentially occult model wasn’t at all coincidental; in fact, Waite’s earliest treatises had been disseminated amidst an eclectic Jungian circle in Zurich way before Jung advanced a psychological importation of alchemical symbology. At the very least, the rude exposition unveils the depth of Jung’s knowledge of and preoccupation with Victorian occultism; at most it suggests a direct borrowing that was, to all intents and purposes, conveniently overlooked.

⁹⁹ Arthur Edward Waite, *Azoth, or the Star in the East, embracing the first matter of the Magnum Opus, the evolution of the Aphrodite-Urania, the supernatural generation of the son of the sun, and the alchemical transfiguration of humanity* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 1994), pp. 54, 58, and 60.

Roughly twenty years after the circulation of Waite's texts, the Sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1873-1930) sent Jung a cryptic Chinese Taoist treatise entitled, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*.¹⁰⁰ In a first perusal of the text Jung was struck by the ample use of mandala symbolism -the wheel of life or magic circle-which cropped up repeatedly in the psychedelic dreams and visions of many of his own ailing patients, including those of his eccentric maternal cousin Helene Preiswerk (1881-1911). It had even manifested in his own 'confrontation with the unconscious' in the years between 1912 and 1917, a creative period of infernal turmoil that led to some monumental revelations about the nature of the human psyche. During this time innumerable conversations with subpersonalities including an inner daemon by the name of Philemon convinced Jung that the psyche is intrinsically teleological; two conflicting psychic forces within, the conscious and the unconscious-were in eternal opposition. When there were in communion with one another the inner kingdom was prosperous, healthy, fulfilled, and integrated; on the other hand a prolonged divorce spawned repression and inflation, a 'dark night of the soul' that shattered the conscious life and erected psychological; barricades like neuroses, psychoses, and physical diseases. Hence the psychotherapist's chief goal was to heal the split and reinitiate the psychic flow of energy between the two dissimilar stratum of consciousness, a deed which would invariably put any individual suffering from dissociation back on the golden path to self-discovery, self-transformation,

¹⁰⁰ *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*, translated by Richard Wilhelm with a forward by Carl Jung (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1961), pp. xiii-xv.

and a fair more meaningful and balanced existence. If the presence of cipher codes like the mandala symbol in waking fantasies; in dreams; in artistic ventures like drawing, painting, and craftsmanship; and in other subtler and more unconscious aspects of an individual's life was numinous and able to transcend cultural and religious barriers then it made perfect sense that underlying mechanisms of metamorphosis that delineating their evolution and final culmination design were also universal. Jung's conviction was no doubt conditioned by the demographic. Most of the clients who sought his professional help were plagued by deplorable feelings of worthlessness and emptiness: 'About a third of my cases are not suffering from any clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and aimlessness of their lives.'¹⁰¹

In his discussion of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, Wilhelm claims that the latter has been in circulation amongst esoteric circles in China since the seventeenth century. Written by an unknown author, the central thesis of the text appears in a section named *Hui Ming Ching* or *Book of Consciousness and Life* where an overarching instruction is given: 'If thou wouldst complete the diamond body with no outflowing, diligently heat the roots of consciousness and life. Kindle light in the blessed country close at hand, and there hidden, let thy true self always dwell.'¹⁰² Any interpretation that elects to stay faithful to the traditional milieu from whence this treatise originated cannot

¹⁰¹ David Sedgwick, *Introduction to Jungian Psychotherapy: The Therapeutic Relationship* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), pp. 23.

¹⁰² *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*, translated by Richard Wilhelm with a forward by Carl Jung (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1961), pp. 69.

escape the inexorable conclusion that what is being alluded to here is spiritual integration through meditative instruction. But the developed West with its superiority complexes and systematic aspirations rarely adheres to this rational and coherent canon as a hermeneutic tool of interpretation. It attempts to make accessible and intelligible foreign philosophical concepts for which no indigenous equivalent actually exists by implanting them into Western hierarchies of scientific knowledge, a misunderstanding based on ethnic egocentrism that promotes an erroneous sense of cross-cultural unanimity.

Transposing this reality to the *Golden Flower* we see that the Chinese signs *hun* and *p'o*, in essence multiplex metaphysical symbols for a higher-soul remaining temporarily active after death and a body-soul disintegrating at death, are deciphered by Wilhelm as *animus* and *anima*,¹⁰³ respectively. Wilhelm's translations did not preclude personal aspects of being and were informed by the pictograms conjured by the characters making up the signs for the psychic structures; the first was a masculine cloud demon, the second a corporeal white ghost. Jung's understanding of these concepts was heavily contingent on the more 'objective' descriptions given by Wilhelm, however to make them accord with his own 'psychology of the unconscious' he had to strip them of their metaphysical associations and personal aspects and confine them to the sphere of the personality. In this way we get an *animus* understood as a masculine logos-cutter

¹⁰³ Ibid, pp. 14-15.

innate to the soul of a woman and an *anima* assumed to refer to the feminine eros-glue predominant in a man.¹⁰⁴

Distorting the definitions in such a way Jung swiftly arrived at the conclusion that ‘the roots of consciousness and life’ and ‘the blessed country close at hand’ must be the unconscious; the indestructible ‘diamond body’ the hypothetical meeting point between conscious and unconscious from which the archetypal Self emerges; and the circulation of light alluded to intermittently by the anonymous author the simultaneous activation of all components of the personality through active imagination and guided fantasy. In his comprehensive annotations Jung argues that the generation of the ‘diamond body’ is none other than ‘superior personality’¹⁰⁵ born from an inner reorientation so that the psyche’s centre of gravity is not the mental ego with its associative network of idiosyncrasies, dissociations, and neuroses, but an extramundane, unattached, and objectified consciousness free of inner and outer entanglements. As pointed out by Jung himself, it was the *Golden Flower* through which a historical prefiguration for his phylogenetic categorization of the psyche—the unconscious and the psychological archetypes—as well as its individuating tendencies was first cogitated.¹⁰⁶ Assuming a historiographical stance it becomes blatantly clear that East Asian spirituality was the cosmological vehicle that shuttled Jung back straight back to the forgotten foothills of a hypothesis that he himself had hastily dismissed.

¹⁰⁴ Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York, USA: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 708-709.

¹⁰⁵ *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*, translated by Richard Wilhelm with a forward by Carl Jung (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1961), pp. 124.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, pp. xiv.

Following his dissection of the *Golden Flower* Jung shifted his attention to medieval alchemy, an exponent of Christian esotericism. He commissioned a Munich bookseller who specialized in inconspicuous and out-of-print works to locate as many alchemical treatises as possible. The confusion evoked by the echoing tirade of winged dragons, tail-swallowing serpents, and copulating couples in these works would have been so vexing and exasperating as to provide any competent intellect the added impetus of taking on and surmounting the monumental task of decryption. Aided by Silberer's and Freud's impression of mythical folkloristic literature as collective dreams of humanity, Jung unravelled this Gordian knot by fathoming the multiplicity of symbols (i.e. mercury, water, menstruum, Mother Ocean, lead, earth, salt, and so forth) connected with the *prima materia*—the base substance that alchemists allegedly worked from—as primeval connotations of individual differences in autonomous psychic content projected unconsciously onto outer reality.¹⁰⁷

The *prima materia* had been bestowed many names simply because the specificity of projective material was different for each individual. Just like the phylogenetic stratum of the psyche called the collective unconscious, its true form and essence was indeterminable and unknowable. In truth the striking likeness between the two could only mean one thing; that they were one and the same transpersonal entity. By the same token the alchemical hermaphrodite represented the sequential couplings of ego-conscious and unconscious, a mystery facilitated by fires

¹⁰⁷ Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy, Collected Works* vol. 12, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 317.

of suffering and experience that produced vital changes in the ego-Self axis.¹⁰⁸ Jung stipulates that the exalted state of self-actualization can be attained with or without the intercession of an analyst, however complete submission to an alchemistic cycle both threefold and sevenfold in nature cannot be avoided. These include: *calcinatio*, a reduction of ego complexes; *solutio*, the subjection of questionable ego attitudes to intense scrutiny; *coagulatio*, the promotion of objective ego building; *sublimatio*, the acquisition of a comprehensive standpoint effective in day-to-day problem-solving; *mortificatio*, becoming aware of shadow or loathed aspects of one's personality; *separatio*, awareness of the subjective and objective in reality; and *coniunctio*, the realization of the Self through an amalgamation of conflicting psychic forces mediated by the mental ego.¹⁰⁹ Jung then connected the *nigredo* or blackening with *calcinatio*, *solutio*, and *mortificatio*; *albedo* or whitening with the culminatory aspect of *calcinatio*; and *rubedo* or reddening with the greater *coniunctio*.¹¹⁰ The last of these, whose connection to a Philosopher's Stone able to turn base metals into nobler ones and prolong human life indefinitely is known, was a phenomenal externalization of man's deepest truth, the actualized Self where conscious and unconscious stand as affectionate, considerate partners in a healthy marriage. So too was the central figure of Christianity, Jesus Christ.

By forging such theoretical connections and then backing them up with experiential evidence allegedly unearthed through

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 202, 205, 232.

¹⁰⁹ Edward Edinger, *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy* (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court, 1994), pp. 21-22, 56-57, 83, 117-118, 149, 187-188, 218-220.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 147-148.

psychotherapeutic methodology, Jung could progress a psychologized yet ahistorical position and concurrently attract minimal criticism; alchemists were projecting the same unconscious contents into their laboratory utensils that contemporary psychotherapists make conscious by manner of active imagination and guided fantasy—nothing more, nothing less. The historical precedent was first presented in its entirety in *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944) and then dialectically expounded to explain correlations between alchemical motifs and psychological concepts in *Alchemical Studies* (1968), a heterogeneous collection of prior essays on alchemy, and the impressive *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (1956). Together the three tomes comprise the final cerebral undertakings of his *Collected Works* and absorbed him until his death in 1961.

As the initial publication on the subject in book format, *Psychology and Alchemy* conveys a fundamental kernel of his belief system: ‘that the soul possesses by nature a religious function.’¹¹¹ This explains a millennia-long individual and collective orientation towards the Christian Godhead. Now it just so happens that the interjection of the Catholic Church in the evolutionary trajectory of the communal psyche has been detrimental, having in fact forced a temporary rupture in the communicative channels between conscious and collective unconscious by way of inflexible cosmogony and morals. Furthermore, the patriarchate has been guilty of endorsing and

¹¹¹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysteries, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963; Fontana, 1977), pp. x.

emphasizing the physical, tangible, and quantifiable, all primary characteristics of masculine ego-building consciousness. Consequently all complementary aspects of being have been disregarded or under rug swept, severing humanity from the numinous and creative fountainhead of all life, the unconscious. In the face of such a phenomenon the proliferating nexus of archetypal shadows—in this case ‘anima’ qualities deemed aesthetically feminine—will pursue variant avenues of expression to correct the psychic distortion and restore both inner and outer harmony. Jung identified an exoteric Christianity and an esoteric undercurrent of alchemy as a historical example of such a disharmony and compared that sociological ontology with the psychological syzygy of ego-conscious and dream life. ‘It [alchemy] is to this surface as the dream is to consciousness, and just as the dream compensates the conflicts of the conscious mind, so alchemy endeavours to fill in the gaps left open by the Christian tension of opposites.’¹¹²

The epic implications of this ‘discovery’, or dare we say ‘rediscovery’, were stressed in his memoirs *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: “My encounter with alchemy was decisive for me, as it provided me with the historical basis which I had hitherto lacked... As far as I could see, the tradition that might have connected Gnosis with the present seemed to have been severed, and for a long time it proved impossible to find any bridge that led from Gnosticism—or Neo-Platonism—to the contemporary world. But when I began to understand alchemy, I realized that it

¹¹² Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy, Collected Works* vol. 12, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 23.

represented the historical link with Gnosticism, and that a continuity therefore existed between past and present. Grounded in the natural philosophy of the Middle Ages, alchemy formed the bridge on the one hand into the past, to Gnosticism, and on the other into the future, to the modern psychology of the unconscious.

When I pored over these old texts everything fell into place: the fantasy-images, the empirical material I had gathered in my practice, and the conclusions I had drawn from it. I now began to understand what these psychic contents meant when seen in historical perspective. My understanding of their typical character, which had already begun with my investigation of myths, was deepened. The primordial images and the nature of the archetype took a central place in my researches, and it became clear to me that without history there can be no psychology, and certainly no psychology of the unconscious.”¹¹³

In the second part of *Psychology and Alchemy* we encounter intellectual fruits hoping to unearth correlations in support of an inherently self-regulating psyche, a ten month labour that involved the examination of fifty-nine dreams and visionary experiences belonging to the unconscious life of Nobel prize-winning physicist Wolfgang Paoli with whom Jung had collaborated to pioneer the synchronicity principle. It was collaboration with favourable outcomes for both; Paoli, who was experiencing bouts of depression and consequent withdrawal

¹¹³ Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysteries, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963; Fontana, 1977), pp. 226-227, 231-232.

from an unhindered engagement with life, was permitted the chance at treatment from a leading psychotherapist whilst Jung could heal the psychological disequilibrium of a learned mind and at the same time look for experimental validation of his 'psychology of the unconscious'. Foremost of symbolic uniformities manifesting across the entire sequence of dream leitmotifs was the *anima*; she initially appears as a veiled woman seated on a stair [visual impression 6] before uncovering her face so that it shines with a scintillating light [visual impression 7] and then proceeds to dominate the autonomous psychic terrain with an assortment of inexplicable guises. Like the chameleon, the *anima's* colours change to reflect the ever-fluctuating relationship of Paoli's ego-conscious and unconscious: in her third appearance she is a psychopomp lighting the way for him [visual impression 10]; in the fourth she assumes the form of his own mother and sister [dream 15]; and in the fifth she inverts into a female head emitting light [visual impression 19].

The pattern continues into the second series of emblems whereby the mandala symbol is emphasized. She is a gruesome foe and assailant [dream 6, series 2] yet she also transforms into an overly zealous woman contending for her lover's attention [dream 7, series 2]; she expresses herself as the subject of a portrait painted by the dreamer [dream 23, series 2] yet she is also the woman with pains in her uterus appealing to him through an articulately written letter [dream 32, series 2]; she is the spirit guide showing him the mooring post around which all perambulations occur [dream 40, series 2], the wicked witch facilitating a ceremonial dance with Lilliputians [dream 44, series

2], and the solemn priestess engaged in a ritual to commemorate the summer solstice [dream 56, series 2]. These fragments are accompanied by a visual impression of an unknown woman balancing on a globe and worshipping the sun, a leitmotif almost identical to the fourth plate of woodcut images belonging to Solomon Trismosin's famed *Splendor Solis* (1532-1535).¹¹⁴

Jung has recourse to his own theory of psychological types in his psychoanalysis of Paoli's depression. He identifies sensation and thinking as superior functions uninhibited in their expression, a reality epitomized by his choice of profession. In Paoli's case this integral preference for functions sympathetic to masculine ego-building consciousness has proliferated unimpeded for some time, resulting in a sacralisation of the masculine and a disidentification with the *anima*, the archetype associated with feminine aesthetic qualities of feeling and intuition. Psychologically, then, the profusion of recurring images and symbols inextricably linked with a chthonic feminine embodied by tail-swallowing serpents, fountains, seas, and the anonymous women must be the subtle undertakings of a dissatisfied unconscious hoping to frustrate the ego as to create a contrasexual reorientation of the ego-Self axis and hence have the polarization corrected. As an adherent of Johann Jakob Bachofen's dualistic conception of collective consciousness, Jung would have no doubt perceived in Paoli's psychological syzygy a personalized echo of two cosmic energies—the archetypal

¹¹⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, *Collected Works* vol. 12, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 86.

feminine and the archetypal masculine—in eternal conflict with one another.

The clearest expose of Jung's position on alchemical symbolism is no doubt given in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, a work which stays faithful to Silberer's rudimentary vision in identifying the *coniunctio oppositorum* ('conjunction of opposites') between sun and moon or the egocentric conscious principle and the unconscious as the chief aspect of the alchemical opus. Speaking with reference to Gerard Dorn's attempts to harness a *substantia coelestis* or 'spirit of wine', Jung posits that 'no amount of incineration, sublimation, and centrifuging of the vinous residue can ever produce an "air-coloured" quintessence.'¹¹⁵ What he's meaning to say is that the chemico-operative aspect is merely expedient parallel for the more significant psychic processes of individuation, a ritualistic embellishment of no objective significance in itself. This intermediary, ahistorical position was also extended to encompass cosmological premises from which the medieval alchemists believed they were operating; men like Morienus, Gerard Dorn (c. 1530-1584), and Michael Maier (1568-1622) knew that the *nigredo*, for instance, had something to do with psychic danger yet they were not fully aware that it was a confrontation with the shadow aspects of their own personalities.¹¹⁶ Jung informs that psychological projection into alembics, retorts, and other laboratory equipment insulated them from egoic inflation, and so they were able to work purposely and

¹¹⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, *Collected Works* vol. 14, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 526.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 521.

rationally; all the same the cultural milieu encumbered hyperopic vision of a psychological recipe for individuation that could be arrived at via active imagination.

And what is *active imagination*? Basically a psychotherapeutic tool of hypnagogic and meditative quality pioneered by Jung in the 1910s aiming to (re)integrate dissociative and fragmented aspects of the personality into a unified stream of consciousness. Described in some detail in *Mysterium Coniunctionis* it involves conscious appropriation of ‘a spontaneous fantasy, dream, an irrational mood, an affect or something of the kind.’¹¹⁷ Intense concentration on fantasy content that is quintessentially passive and receptive rouses an inversion that leads to action, a proactive participation with outer reality that allows the masculine ego principle to disidentify from the detrimental affect completely.

Initially Jung’s historiography of alchemy as a sequence of pseudochemical operations exemplifying an unconscious projection of individuation was very convivial, something which shouldn’t come as any great surprise given its notorious reputation as an intellectual *cul-de-sac* for contemporary historians of culture. Nevertheless in the aftermath of Jungian sensationism, radical and implacable polemicists like ex-Jungian Richard Noll (1959-) have stressed certain subjective tendencies in Jung’s experimental methodology as well as socio-political stances fuelled by professional aspirations that have in effect promulgated feelings of substantial doubt surrounding his

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 526.

legitimacy as an objective interpreter of the Western esoteric tradition.

The first unduly disturbing concern is his own inability in recognizing the paradox inherent in his own historiographical analysis; how might certain views explicated in the *Paracelsica*¹¹⁸, for example the deliberate and conscious appropriation of cipher codes for the sake of disguising an underlying mystical endeavour deemed an anathema by the Christian patriarchy, actually be reconciled with an unconscious projection of archetypal irruptions into laboratory apparatuses? In this particular instance an either-or-logic is mandatory. Moreover, some of the correlates intending to bring analytical psychology directly into line with ‘psychologized’ alchemy are sketchy at best; in *Psychology and Alchemy* Jung equates his four psychological functions—thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition—with the four elements, the four stages of the alchemical opus, and the four arms of the mystical cross without any satisfactory explanation as to why these correspondences should have been conjured in the first place. Here, Jung also has recourse to the neo-Pythagorean ‘axiom of Maria Prophetissa’¹¹⁹, an idiom traceable all the way back to the fifty-third chapter of a European alchemical tractate called *Turba Philosophorum* (c. 900CE) in exposing the central importance of four in the creative process: the ‘one’ is the uroboric autarchy of paradisaal perfection; the ‘two’ is differentiation into the phylogenetic strata of the total

¹¹⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *Alchemical Studies, Collected Works* vol. 13, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 171.

¹¹⁹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy, Collected Works* vol. 12, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 23, 26.

psyche; the 'three' is the *coniunctio* that produces the transcendental function; and the 'fourth' is the psychological totality arbitrated by the archetypal Self. Of course, yoking together concepts for their numerical relations is an epistemological blunder, a mistake that even his disciple and commentator Aniela Jaffe inevitably acknowledged: 'There was no particular book that he valued above all others. He would single out one or another according to its applicability to the theme he was interested in... at the moment.'¹²⁰

Another problem for the fort of analytical psychology has been the total lack of neuroscientific evidence that might support the existence of a transpersonal entity such as a collective unconscious. The observations from which theorization of the latter was eventually surmised came from Swiss patients that were more often than not apathetic, well-integrated, and endowed with an above-average acumen. With such a lopsided view of the consensus, the only rational course available to Jung was to perceive the greater corpus of mental conditions standing outside the 'norm' as symptomatic of a fundamental disconnection with the unconscious. This culminated in a quest to unearth a hitherto undiscovered phenomenon beyond the superficial processes of social cohesion, one which dipped all the way down to the rudimentary level of being and creatively affected the psychic blockades responsible for depression and dissociative states.

Incidentally, the most pivotal piece of the puzzle was offered up by one of Jung's schizophrenic patients whose

¹²⁰ Aniela Jaffe, *Jung's Last Years and Other Essays* (New Orleans, LA: Spring Publications, 1984), pp. 54.

hallucinatory visions spawned carnal images of a sun endowed with a flexible phallus, one that would have no doubt resembled an elephant trunk. According to the patient, the four winds were generated at the behest of phallic motion. Strange as it was, the images offered up for observation were comparable to descriptions of a Mithraic liturgy found in an unpublicized Greek papyrus where a phallic tube suspended from the bottom of the solar nimbus embodied the aerial forces.¹²¹ In claiming that the patient lacked foreknowledge of any such or comparable images Jung could then explain the oddity away as a frequent case of telepathic projection, hence offering empirical evidence for an unconscious seat of primordial symbols of transpersonal character that manifest in visual hallucinations and mythologems universally. Attempts to discredit 'the psychology of the unconscious' such as those initiated by ex-Jungian Richard Noll have depended upon throwing dark veils of suspicion over the experiential legitimacy of this 'Solar Phallus Man.' Noll in particular has argued that both English and German translations of the Mithraic text were in circulation before the patient's hallucination came to pass,¹²² an insinuation meant to undermine the empirical thread yoking the theories which buttress a Jungian interpretation for alchemy along with the integrity and character of the Swiss theorist himself.

In recent years, the Jungian school has also had to contend with a growing band of scholars seeking to demonstrate

¹²¹ Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York, USA: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 705.

¹²² Richard Noll, *The Aryan Christ: The Secret Life of Carl Jung* (New York: Random House, 1997), pp. 22-52, 98-119.

alchemy's importance in the transition from Renaissance vitalism to post-Enlightenment mechanistic philosophy. For instance Isaac Newton's lifelong interest in chemico-operative alchemy and the extent to which it acted as a formative stimulant to his conjectures on classical mechanics is illuminated by Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs (1930-1994) in her book *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy* (1991). An analogous argument is paved with respect to the man who is more often than not considered the founder father of modern chemistry in Lawrence Principe's book *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and his Alchemical Quest* (2000). On the other hand the French historian of science Barbara Obrist (1950-) has sought to purge late medieval and Renaissance alchemical literature of psychospiritual interpretations inspired by nineteenth-century Victorian occultism by asserting that the religiously-flavoured metaphors exploited by the authors are merely rhetorical devices and should not be used for academic extrapolations in favour of a vitalist cosmogony. We find an itemized argument against the 'presentist' approach in her extensive reading of *Aurora Consurgens*, an emblematic fifteenth-century text that Jung frequently used as a psychoanalytic hermeneutic; its lucidity, Obrist claims, is far greater when viewed without the kaleidoscope of analytical psychology than with.¹²³

Obrist also argues that Jung's erroneous and timeless 'historical vision' gave rise to sweeping generalizations about the ethos of all self-professed alchemists working in the medieval period. The fundamental misunderstanding allowed Jung to

¹²³ Lawrence M. Principe and William R. Newman, 'Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy', in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by William, R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (London, UK: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 406.

envision these individuals as progressive inheritors of an ancient soteriological quest for selfhood that embodied the qualities of religiosity and vitalism, one which operated on a collective scale as an outright defiance of church dogma. From the descriptions of the *lapis-Christ* parallel offered up in chapter five of *Psychology and Alchemy*, it becomes blatantly clear that Jung perceived the dissemination of Christological leitmotifs amongst medieval alchemists as an exoteric masquerade for an individuation process forced to descend into the subterranean darkness of the unconscious. Indubitably this same process had enjoyed unhindered expression under the Gnostic doctrine of the Anthropos (i.e. the *Visions of Zosimos*) at a time when the religious climate was much more liberal. Obrist's outright dismissal of this view is evident in the words: "In the texts attributed to Arnold, the metaphor of Christ appears amongst others which are used as examples, helping to demonstrate chemical processes that are difficult to understand. They are metaphors like the others, and nothing but metaphors, a fact which Arnold and the authors who follow in his tradition explain extremely well, and which also applies to the illustrations of such treatises. Nothing allows us to speculate on the religiosity of an author when he uses a consciously rhetorical process."¹²⁴

The resolve of historians of science like Obrist and Principe to demonstrate organic coherence between alchemical methodology and the evolutionary development of modern science has reinforced limitations wrought from deliberately

¹²⁴ Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix: Spiritual Alchemy and Rosicrucianism in the Work of Count Michael Maier (1569-1622)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 10.

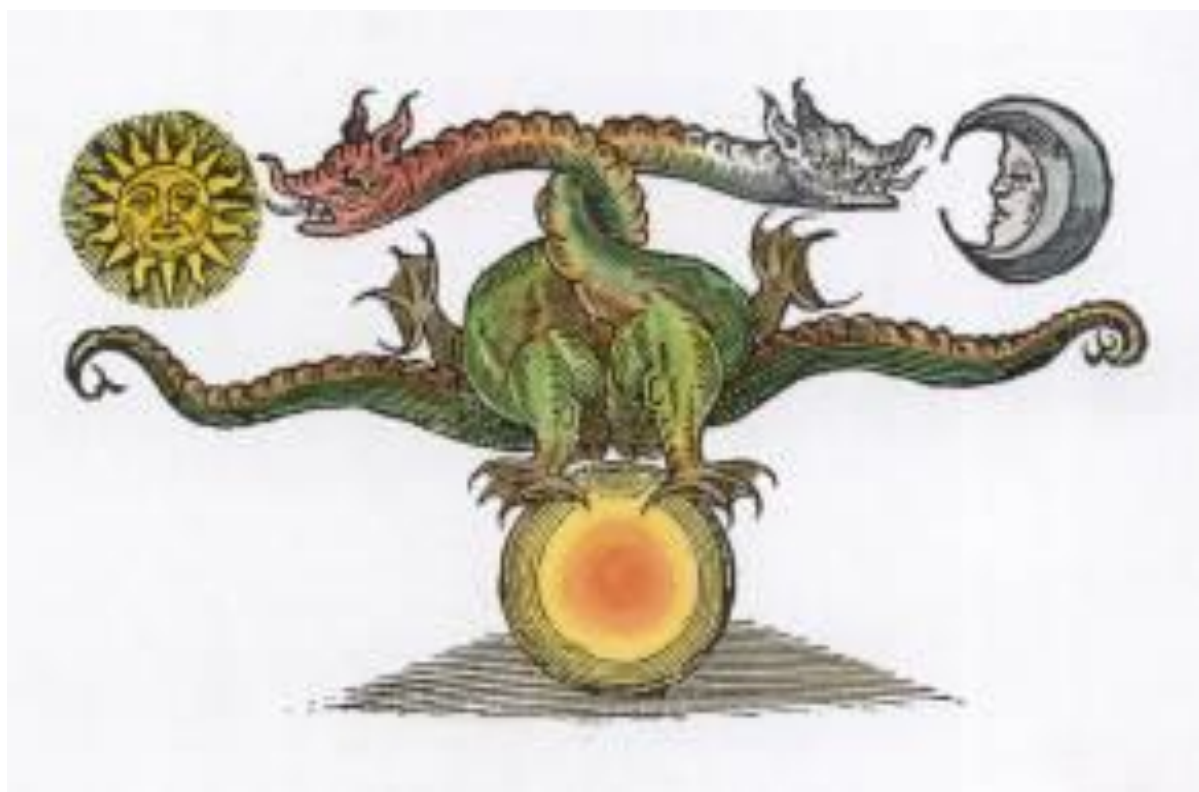
oversighting the socio-political and cultural milieu in which any historiography must be couched in favour of a psychological frame of reference that would have been unfathomable in the medieval and early modern periods. In ‘Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy,’ Lawrence Principe and William Newman adhere to the same line of argument in identifying twentieth-century figures like Jung, the psychoanalyst; Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the scholar of comparative religion Mircea Eliade; Helene Mertzger (1886-1944), a popular historian of chemistry; and the writers Carolyn Merchant (1936-) and Evelyn Fox Keller (1936-) as advocates of ‘presentist’ interpretations that either devalue the natural philosophical or ‘scientific’ aspects of the Great Work or dismiss it outright as a ‘hair-raising chemical fantasy.’ Speaking in reference to the unlikelihood of the collective unconscious as an objective entity, the researchers argue that the same alchemical symbols used by Jung to progress his non-chemical rendition are contrived *Decknamen* (codenames) for chemicals and minerals bearing no association with nascent unconscious content. If the symbols were products of unconscious projection then the ‘possibility of working backwards from them to decipher such images into actual, valid laboratory practice’ would be impossible.¹²⁵

Never at any stage do the authors entertain the notion of a dual interpretation; why do the symbols have to be relegated to either a chemical or a psychological ontology? Isn’t it in the

¹²⁵ Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix: Spiritual Alchemy and Rosicrucianism in the Work of Count Michael Maier (1569-1622)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 14.

nature of a symbol to embrace multiple meanings? After all, Western alchemy has always been a philosophical storehouse for a plethora of religious and mystical ideas in the manner that the cosmopolitan Alexandria was the transmutational receptacle for knowledge arriving from the four corners of the world in late antiquity. The Emerald Tablet, otherwise known as the *Tabula Smaragdina* in Latin, is a condensed and apocryphal summation of Alexandrian alchemy that was reintroduced to the Latin West sometime during the thirteenth century. In it, Hermes Trismegistus ascertains that the alchemical work delineates the processes of *all* creation. That would include every empirically validated or speculative theorization about the workings of the cosmos that has existed, exists, or shall come into existence in the future. Perhaps the recent germination of 'panpsychic' models of interpretation are an unconscious bid to unclog a *univers imaginaires* and balance the determinism and materialism that has orientated and restricted contemporary science since the publication of Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687). Or would this be too Jungian a thought to adhere to?

THE ELIXIR OF LIFE: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE ART OF
TRANSMUTATION



Much of the quixotic appeal of alchemy derives from its fantastical ambitions to perfect nature, to make 'gold' of detritus and stardust. For humanity as a whole, the fascination with such a tradition no doubt stems from an inherent curiosity as to whether or not limitations imposed by Mother Nature herself can ever be transcended. This question of paramount importance has plagued aspiring, amateur and 'master' alchemists alike for centuries on end, and the rhetorical enigma attached to the tail end of it explains, at least partially, the persistence of a chemico-operative stream that first appeared in China during the fourth century BCE as a quest for the Elixir of Life, an elusive herbal medicine intended to either prolong life or grant life eternal.

Echoing the concerns of the Chinese alchemists, as well as the ambitions of the Egypto-Hellenic, Arabic and medieval variants who came afterword, many contemporary esotericists and other intellectual rebels have ventured along the same paths and cultivated the same tottering earth. Those whose gusto and resolve keeps them from abandoning the quest early inevitably reach a forked road presided over by a Theban sphinx which asks: “Can base metals like lead, mercury and whatever else be transmuted into silver and gold? Does the Philosopher’s Stone, that elusive red powder with magical powers of projection, actually exist?”

Before we attempt to answer such questions prematurely and tempt our own fate in the process, two things should first be established: the authenticity of alchemical theory as a possible framework for the cosmos, and the properties pertaining to the Philosopher’s Stone such as those described in alchemical treatises on the Lesser and Greater Work clearly delineated. Logically, for the quest of material alchemy to be viable the end product must exist and the theory presupposed by the practice which creates it vindicated. If a case for alchemical theory cannot be established and a nexus of qualities belonging to the Philosopher’s Stone cannot be identified, then the pillars holding aloft the mysteries of the Grand Arcanum and the possibility of metallic transmutation invariably crumble in the manner that Atlantis was razed to the ground by earthquakes and then sunk to the bottom of the ocean deep in the dark recesses of Plato’s own mind, some two thousand four-hundred years ago.

The appearance and operation of the Philosopher's Stone is virtually absent from the revelatory visions, parables, conundrums and recipes of the early Alexandrian literature on alchemy. In fact, the earliest known allusion to it comes from seventh to ninth century texts written in Arabic and attributed to such legendary figures as Jabir ibn Hayyan (721-815CE) and Balinas, the Pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana. Through their engagement with Egypto-Hellenistic alchemy in Alexandria and other intellectual centres, these pioneers of the Arab alchemical tradition produced notable works such as *the Second Book of the Elements of Foundation* and *the Book of the Secret of Creation and the Art of Nature* which preserve the earliest known fragments of the *Tabula Smaragdina* or Emerald Tablet, a cosmological text that achieved widespread circulation in the fourteenth century and became known as the Bible of all medieval alchemists. In this compressed summa or compendium of alchemical knowledge, we learn that the Stone's father is the solar orb (also fire or philosophical sulphur) and its mother the lunar orb (also water or philosophical argent vive). The wind, on the other hand, is implicated as the womb which carried it and the volatile and moist humus that is earth is cast in the presiding role of wet nurse. For the most part, this description is rather abstract and ambiguous and it isn't really until the advent of the 'transmutational' history, a genre of literature which arose as a knee-jerk reaction to the growing fame of alchemy in the early modern period (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries), that we have a more concrete description of the Philosopher's Stone.

Although there appears to be some discrepancies amongst the primary alchemical writers with respect to the Stone's form and colour, all appear to echo a unanimous verdict when it comes to its quintessential features. The alchemists describe the 'red stone' as being a refined and delicate powder, usually quite heavy, that emitted a potent odour and scintillated when held up towards a light source like shards of broken glass. Indigenous to the Stone was a scarlet red colour, although others like gold, auburn-red, orange-red, emerald green and cobalt blue have also been suggested. For instance, Flemish chemist and physician Jon Baptiste van Helmont (1579-1644CE) was of the opinion that it possessed a saffron colour and sparkled whilst the alchemist Beregard claims almost emphatically that it encompassed a vibrant hue like that of a wild poppy and gave off the moist odour of sea-salt. Differences of opinion are also ample when it comes to its powers of projection, perhaps due to the waxing and waning forces of Mother Nature which are governed by the astrological movement. Anything from a hundred to a million times the projection of its own weight in pure silver or gold has been proposed, explicitly from authorities like Arnaldus de Villa Nova (1235-1311CE), Isaac of Holland (c.1600CE) and Roger Bacon (1214-1294CE).

Once alchemical literature had firmly established the nature of the 'red stone', comprehensive eyewitness accounts laying bare the transmutational feats of medieval laypersons began doing the rounds. Foremost and most renowned amongst these was the 'Flamel legend', a quasi-historical narrative that transcribed the life of a prosperous medieval Parisian by the name of Nicholas

Flamel who acquired an enigmatic manuscript entitled, *The Book of Abraham the Jew*. Subsequent intercourse with one particular man, a physician named Master Canches, equipped him with requisite knowledge to descry the chemical formulae bubbling beneath the book's hieroglyphic figures and allegorical illustrations. After three years of failed experiments and abortions, we learn that he finally succeeded in synthesising the 'red stone'. This golden moment occurred around midday on Monday 17th January 1382CE, when half a pound of red mercury spontaneously morphed into silver. The inbound tide of serendipity didn't stop there; on April 25th of the same year, at about 5 p.m., Flamel used the red powder to transmute another half a pound of mercury into pure gold. All this was apparently witnessed by the closest and most faithful of his confidantes, his wife Perrenelle. A further three successful transmutations took place between 1382 and 1413CE, and the unprecedented accumulation of wealth it brought Flamel spurred noble, philanthropic acts on his part that included the founding of fourteen hospitals, seven churches and three chapels in Paris and Boulogne.

Another successful transmutation occurred roughly two centuries later, when the Scottish alchemist Alexander Seton stunned a Dutch seafarer at a modest dwelling in Enkhuysen just outside Amsterdam by transmuting minute quantities of lead into gold right in front of him. In this case the divine metamorphosis unravelled around 4 p.m. on March 13th 1602CE. Forty-six years after that, on January 15th, alchemist Rihthausen of Vienna allegedly impressed Emperor Ferdinand III at his Imperial Court

in Prague by sprinkling granules of a mysterious red powder onto three pounds of mercury. The projection transfigured the latter into gold, an exhibition which so mesmerized the Emperor that he proceeded to knight Richthausen and had a medal struck to commemorate the event. On Saturday 25th of May 1782^{CE}, James Price, a member of the Fellows of the Royal Society conducted a public demonstration of alchemical transmutation at his personal laboratory in Guildford where he cast an alchemical powder called 'red earth' or the 'powder of projection' in a crucible of heated mercury and then took a backward step to watch the transitory expressions on the faces of some very learned onlookers as it morphed into gold. Public incredulity and criticism incited by the literati of the times soon forced Price into surrendering his transmuted product to an assay-master and an Oxford goldsmith for closer scrutiny and observation. One can only imagine the satisfaction and smugness on the part of Price when both examiners confirmed it to be authentic. The latter of these generated much hullabaloo by adding that it was superior to English gold. Reports of the acquisition or manufacture of similar transmutational powders, real or imagined, are subtly interwoven into the biographies of monks like Wenzel Seiler and John Dastin (1288-1334^{CE}), and seventeenth century scientists of the calibre of Robert Boyle (1627-1691^{CE}) and Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727^{CE}). Boyle and Newton were contemporaries and rather hypocritical and duplicitous when it came to their professional profiles; they rigorously and unashamedly denounced alchemy as fraudulent, writing contemptuously of the

art to please the academic world whilst simultaneously ensconced in alchemical endeavours of their own.

If these eyewitness reports are to be believed, then there very well may be an alchemical powder of projection in existence known only by adepts under a proverbial oath of secrecy. Of course, the empiricists and those reluctant to veer from established scientific conventions of our times would scoff at such a notion and point to the many loopholes inherent to the anecdotal evidence. Indeed, the authenticity of many of these transmutational accounts' will forever remain suspect given that they were circulated and transcribed before the advent of the printing press in 1440CE; consequently, they may be nothing more than radical mythologizations of real historical figures or even completely fictional inventions aimed at validating the chemico-operative tradition and 'selling' it to the exoteric simpletons. Why, for instance, is there a complete absence of birthdates for the 'master' alchemists? It is because the essence of their being is so mercurial that nobody, not even their own mothers, are able to remember the date and time of their birth or is it because they never existed? Most of us would probably say the second. On the other hand how could a chemico-operative enterprise that was based on nonsensical theories and absurdities have survived for as long as it did without an ounce of credibility? How could it have drawn in and fooled hordes of people belonging to all areas of critical inquiry and across vast expanses of time, including some of the most prominent intellectuals and rigorous scientists in Sir Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle?

A contemporary parallel to this enigma can be seen in Atlantis. If Atlantis is nothing more than a figment of Plato's imagination, and those who qualify as Atlantean romanticists bide their time searching for submerged walls, temples and other architectural wonders of the lost city in the depths of the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, there's going to be a profusion of very disgruntled and disillusioned individuals entering psych wards of public and private hospitals as well as nursing homes in a few decades from now. Similarly, one would think that if the chemico-operative stream of alchemy with its desire to synthesise an agent of projection called 'red earth' is nothing more than a symbolic transcription of psychological processes of individuation or self-actualisation, as Carl Gustav Jung would have us believe, then the operative quest with its purely materialistic outcomes is defunct and entertaining it nothing short of madness. Right? Perhaps the only way to disentangle this Gordian knot, so to speak, would be to disentomb evidence implicating alchemy as a syncretised and holistic knowledge system that may have been lost when human consciousness was appropriated by the dominant left hemisphere of the brain, the side that comes to know reality through quantitative analysis along with the reductionist and monocular perspectives of the five physical senses. If a case for alchemical theory can be established and supported through empirical evidence of some sort, then there is no reason why so-called 'red earth' shouldn't exist or why transmutational feats shouldn't be feasible.

According to alchemy's metaphysical system, each planetary force is supposed enact some kind of influence over the base

matter in the retort during the course of the operation. The formative forces of Saturn, Jupiter and the moon exert their effects during the first stage known as the Lesser Work, a cycle of processes which have as their aim the synthesis of the 'white stone'; alternatively, those of Venus, Mars and the sun come to the forefront during the second stage known as the Greater Work, another cluster of processes which further act upon the 'white stone' to garner the 'red stone'. Pivotal to the entire Magnum Opus and its culmination is the timing chosen by the alchemist to commence his or her work. Traditionally, the favoured period is spring or between the months of March and May, a time when the generative powers of Mother Nature are proliferating. It should also be worth noting that in a great number of successful cases, metallic transmutation involving a metamorphosis of red mercury or quicksilver into gold was juxtaposed by a conjunction between their celestial counterparts in the starry heavens, in this case Mercury and the sun. Hermetic author Nick Kollostrom examined this topic in his book *The Metal-Planet Relationship: A Study of Celestial Influence* (1993) and found that five out of seven astrological charts demarcating the exact moment a 'master' alchemist engaged projection or made gold were marked by an auspicious condition in the heavens where the planet Mercury and the solar orb stood within five degrees of one another. This study becomes much more substantial when one discerns that only four of the seven charts examined involved red mercury as the base metal. The other two were lead and silver, respectively. All this seems to suggest that the formative forces of Planet Earth, the World Soul or *Anima Mundi*, and the astrological

movement are key players when it comes to the synthesis of “red earth” and the divine metamorphosis of first matter or base metals into gold. Speaking in a context apprehensible to the alchemists and in harmony with the Hermetic tenet, “As above, so below”, we could say that the active planetary powers subtly and ‘divinely’ influence the matter in the crucible. But for all this to be viable the ancient connection between the planets and their respective metals must stand up to the mechanistic scrutiny of scientific method and analysis. Is there really a connection between the metal lead and Saturn, quicksilver and Mercury, silver and the moon or gold and the sun, or is it all just ancient superstition and scrambled guesswork?

The implication of an energetic syncretisation between the planets, the metals and human consciousness falls way outside the scope of conventionally orientated thought at this point in time. As preposterous as it may seem at first, the idea begins to suspend disbelief if we proceed along the logical avenue that all planetary bodies (including the earth) are like magnets and that each exerts a gravitational pull on the others. If one continued along this same train of thought—entirely scientific and credible I ought to add—he or she would see that the waxing and waning of this gravitational force is hinged entirely upon the planet’s relative position to the other heavenly spheres. Indeed, humans and all living creatures are unconsciously wired to them, though it appears that only the more intellectually adroit and curiously inclined ever come to terms with this fact during the course of their lives. When the shamans of many primordial tribes and the priests and priestesses of past matriarchal religions discerned

these living, interacting energies that pervaded the cosmos, it mattered not that their naked eye could see no further than Jupiter, or that the sun and moon were erroneously thought to be planets; the celestial spheres were merely exoteric markers for the qualitative powers that governed our multidimensional and majestic universe.

Interestingly, this perceptible association between the planetary spheres and their rulership over the metals becomes even more of a reality when we take into account a series of experiments that were conducted by Frau Lily Kolisko, a follower and confidante of anthroposophist Dr. Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925CE). Kolisko was convinced that the planet-metal relationship rudimentary to the holistic cosmology of most primordial cultures wasn't imagined and illusory at all; it was, on the contrary, real, observable and quantifiable. She devised a chromatographical method whereby filter papers were used to transcribe or record chemical changes that occurred in metal salt solutions when their celestial constituents entered into conjunctions and oppositions with one another. Under strictly controlled conditions, Kolisko was able to show that the images or pictures produced by the silver salt solutions encompassed a striking resemblance to the crater-ravaged surface of the moon, and that certain characteristics manifested at the appearance of each lunar phase, particularly the full and new moons.

Some of Kolisko's most dramatic experiments involved exploring the sun and the metal gold. To discern a hermetic connection between the two, she set up a series of tightly

controlled experiments whose primary aim was to observe changes that could occur on filter papers dipped in metallic salt solutions of gold chloride before, during the course of, and after a solar eclipse. When gold chloride remained unobstructed in conditions of pitch darkness, Kolisko and her assistants noted that it manifested scarlet reds, bright yellows, royal purples and other auric colours onto filter paper films. To provide a condensed summa of her results, Kolisko found that during the course of a solar eclipse which occurred on June 29th 1927^{CE}, the salt solutions reacting in the laboratory didn't produce customary pictures of the radiant and vibrant aurora. Instead, they showed up as an agglomeration of filthy reddish and purple-browns, as if an invisible hand had somehow reached out, smudged them over with a paintbrush and subsequently dotted them over with black specks. At this time, the gold chloride also lost its aptitude to rise along the length of the filter papers, mirroring the condition of a solar orb temporarily emasculated by the overspreading sphere of the moon. After the eclipse the qualities and behaviours exhibited by reactions of gold chloride in a dark room returned to normal. The implications of Kolisko's results were comprehensive and stupefying; against all odds, it appeared that the gold was unconsciously wired to express the prevailing condition of its celestial equivalent. Just as the solar energies were blunted by the eclipse, so too was the eternal metal prevented from expressing its cheerfulness and splendour through the manifestation of brilliant colours like scarlet red, golden yellow and magenta. When the lunar disc finally liberated the formative

powers of the sun again, so did the powers of gold wax upon the face of the earth.

From the 1920s until the 1960s, Kolisko expanded the breadth of her monumental research to encompass the behaviour of other metallic salts during solar eclipses. In an ensuing cycle of experiments, she was able to show that filter paper films dipped in a reagent of gold chloride and silver nitrate acquired a stonewashed violent hue that degenerated into Stygian darkness the exact moment the lunar disc passed over the sun. This indicated, among other things, that the silver was imitating its planetary constituent in the heavens by eclipsing the rich colours of gold chloride. Moreover, the films laid bare subtle changes to the inner texture of the participating metals that were obviously the result of a previously unknown chemical reaction or interaction of some kind. If such a phenomenon applied to all metals and planetary bodies, then mercury bichloride and gold chloride should behave in a similar fashion upon a conjunction of Mercury and the sun, the two planetary forces intimately entwined in the abovementioned examples of metallic transmutation. True?

Agnes Fyfe, a researcher from a cancer clinic at Arlesheim in Switzerland launched an exhaustive investigation into the corporeal effects of a sun-Mercury conjunction using the diluted sap of plants traditionally ascribed to the rulership of their respective planets, in this case mistletoe and iris. Her results revealed a change in the reagent during the superior and inferior conjunctions, with the former demonstrating a definite reaction

by rising along the herbal filter papers. Aside from the inference that the mistletoe plant comes under the aegis of the solar signature, her experiments did little to shed little upon the dynamics of the Sun-Mercury conjunction. Fyfe supplanted the metallic salts with plant saps on the premise that living matter would react more robustly to celestial phenomena than any inert material might. Her method may have been partially influenced by the fact that mercury bichloride is colourless and thus excruciatingly difficult to quantify in controlled settings. In the end, the decision to shift the focus away from the mineral kingdom may have been premature, for in doing so she introduced unforeseen variables and controls into her experimental method that left her vulnerable to a barrage of attacks such as the ones that were to come from elite members of the scientific community shortly afterwards. At any rate Fyfe's blunders and misfortunes should not deter the intellectually rebellious and progressive from exploring the reactions of a mercury bichloride-gold chloride reagent over Sun-Mercury conjunctions, as subtle changes spurred by the astrological movement may very well provide the necessary clues to unravelling the paradox of chemical transmutation.

In 1978^{CE}, Fyfe used a filter paper method not unlike the one that was used by Kolisko to descry whether the annual planetary movements of Venus would have any discernible effect upon one percent copper acetate solutions that had been placed inside extracts of plant sap. Just like the planet enacted its most powerful impression upon human consciousness when it was allowed to shine in the twilight glow of early morning as the

Eosphoros (Bringer of Dawn) or in the late evening as *Hesperos* (Star of the Evening), the metallic reactions on the filter papers were strongest when Venus assumed positions in the sky in which it remained unobstructed by the sun. Kolisko's experiments using gold chloride and copper salt solutions to discern changes in filter papers during a solar-Venusian conjunction were equally astonishing, revealing a dramatic precipitation of light green along the plastic films when Venus was at its highest point in the sky.

A curious observation that came to light during the experimentation phase of the solar-Venusian experiments was that the reaction rate varied with the changing of the seasons. This was both odd and extraordinary. How could a chemical reaction vary according to the time of the year? Strange, no? Orthodox science remains curiously silent on such issues, given that its doctrines decree that chemical reactions should not vary with seasonal rotation. Kolisko claimed that the strength of the reactions dissipated and disappeared between December and January, only to reappear again stronger than ever between the months of March and May. Save for being the equinoctial marker for spring, the said months comprise the premium time in which the laborious processes of the alchemical Great Work should commence. Astrologically it is the period in which the sun rises in the constellation of Taurus, a time in which the Venusian energy becomes most expressive and powerful. As we can see, the occult connections are plentiful and far too meaningful to be purely coincidental.

Many of Kolisko's experiments, particularly those that traced the Mars (iron)-Saturn (lead) conjunction, were replicated in 1949CE by Theodore Schwenck and again in 1964CE by Dr. Karl Voss of Hamburg. Both scholars successfully reproduced the same results and dutifully arrived at the same conclusions as Kolisko, publishing their works in various astrology journals in an attempt to spur further studies in astrochemistry and eventually integrate these scientifically demonstrable theories into our communal knowledge. Sadly, the implications of such were perceived to be heretical and controversial by the scientific community, and before long the negative sentiment had spilt over to the greater community—to the literati, university presses and media—all of whom ignored them completely. The reception of silence ensured that, in time, all memory and trace of experimental data in support of qualitative content and the holistic cosmology of our ancestors would be forgotten completely.

A similar fate has befallen the life works of the late Thomas Charles Lethbridge (1901-1971CE), a man who might be described as a scholar of alternative history, archaeology and parapsychology. Anyone with a fleeting acquaintance with Lethbridge's theories would know that he was a conscientiously minded and intensely practical individual who believed that avenues to knowledge should remain just as open to the channel of imagination and intuition as they did to the clocks and rulers of quantitative analysis. In tracing the many intersections, twists and turns that map out his life, it becomes evident that Lethbridge pertained to a progressive school of thought which

condemned the conventional scientific method of the times for becoming too mechanical in its ways, a mode of inquiry that resorted all too frequently to compartmentalisation and division without a thought for quality, essence and holism, a science which lacked soul, far removed from the human plight and ambition. His family were phlegmatic, level-headed and well-integrated citizens that had studied and graduated from Oxford University. Lethbridge parted with this tradition, initiating something that might be described as a symbolic schism, and went to Cambridge instead. Whilst he was there he devoted himself to the study of archaeology with much fervour and enthusiasm, a full-fledged interest for which he was honoured and acknowledged when he became Keeper of Anglo-Saxon Antiquities at the Archaeology Museum in Cambridge. During that time he met a rather odd but extraordinary woman named Margaret Murray who nurtured his innate eccentricity and radical curiosity. Prompted by their manifold encounters and by an unprecedented archaeological discovery of a statue of Matrona, the Celtic Great Mother Goddess, near an Iron Age fort called Wandlebury Camp, Lethbridge ventured along paths less travelled and released a book titled, *Gogmagog: The Buried Gods*, in which he established a case for the existence of a nature-based wicca religion that had thrived on the British Isles before the coming of the Christian dispensation. In the eyes of the “academic trade unionists” and the Cambridge academics, the publication went against classical and conservative rationalism and was an outright heresy. Displeasing the literati didn’t seem to bother Lethbridge one bit; he proceeded to sever his ties with Cambridge and moved

to Hole House in Devon where his investigations brought him face to face with the almost forgotten inheritance and sensitiveness of the right-brain hemisphere. The rest, as they say, is ancient history.

Whilst living in Devon, his empirical approach to knowledge coupled with an unwavering thirst to assume the role of detective propelled him towards virgin terrain where he made many original discoveries. By far the most intriguing and comprehensive of all was one made with a pendulum. On day, whilst attempting to determine the length of string most appropriate for a pendulum to be used for dowsing purposes, he ran into a curious oddity. It appeared that the pendulum would gyrate at a different length for each individual object or substance. The usual method Lethbridge employed to obtain a 'rate' (in inches) was to stand directly above the object and unwind the string until the gyration begun. Moreover a great many heterogeneous items reacted to the same 'rate', with the only way of telling the difference between two or more in a single group being to count the number of individual gyrations. Over the years, he launched a full-fledged investigation into this phenomenon, testing as many different objects and substances as he could get his hands on. Immaterial things like emotions and ideas also had 'rates', which spurred Lethbridge to the realisation that everything, tangible and intangible, must be composed of vibrations. His view definitely corresponds with M-theory, a fundamental framework for the universe put forth by modern theoretical physics in its desperate attempt to reconcile quantum mechanics and general relativity. The model in question was

proposed by Edward Witten of the Institute for Advanced Study and aims to define quarks, electrons and the fundamental forces of the cosmos in the context of one-dimensional oscillating strings that permeate eleven separate dimensions.

Before long Lethbridge had amassed a wide and healthy range of pendulum 'rates' which he plotted onto a 360-degree rose compass. He meticulously divided it into forty sections, given that all reactions obtained ranged between one and forty, and proceeded to mark up the name of each substance or object in the appropriate slot on the inner rim of the disc. On the whole, qualities that could subliminally be described as inert, unbecoming, mechanical and generally less 'conscious' were enumerated higher on the compass whilst those of a sentient, active and spirited nature that are coming-to-be were associated with lower digits. The obvious insinuation that is being made here is that those on the higher end of the scale are probably subject to a greater number of laws and characterised by lower vibrations, whilst the opposite holds true for those on the lower end. In addition, a great many fundamental qualities tended to be found on or around the rose compass's four main pillars, comprised of the forty-inch, thirty-inch, twenty-inch and ten-inch 'rates'. The compass indicated that the shade of black, the cardinal direction of north, the element of air, as well as thoughts pertaining to the just mentioned responded to the forty-inch rate, whilst white, south, heat and thoughts about each of those reacted to the twenty-inch rate. Alternatively the colour green, the cardinal direct of west, the element of water and thoughts involving those responded to the thirty-inch rate whilst red, east,

fire and thoughts pertaining to those all reacted to the ten-inch rate. As one should expect, light and dark are to be found on the polar ends of the compass; the first responds to a ten-inch rate and the second to a forty-inch rate. Death is to be found on the forty-inch rate and life on the twenty-inch rate. Contrary to what many sexists and bigoted peoples would have us believe, male and female are not opposites; the first has a rate of twenty-four inches and the second twenty-nine inches. It probably shouldn't come as much of a surprise to learn that the rates for female and gold are identical either. When we shift gears and turn our attention to the metals, mercury is to be found on twelve-point-five inches, lead and silver on twenty-two, tin on twenty-eight, gold on twenty-nine, copper on thirty-point-five and iron on thirty-two. Two substances or objects which share the same rate can be differentiated from one another by counting the number of gyrations; in the case of lead and silver, for instance, these happen to be sixteen and twenty-two, respectively. What should be evident thus far is that the rate by inches and the number of gyrations form a signature unique to an object, substance or thought.

According to alchemical esotericism, everything that exists—whether that be a plant, mineral, rock, metal, tree, planet or star—has an occult signature, an individual mark that originates from the formative spirit of God and connects the piece of created matter with the tapestry of Mother Nature, the *Anima Mundi* or World Soul and with the cosmos at large. The correct interpretation of the signature enables a practitioner of the occult arts, whether that be a Neo-Platonic magus, a theurgist or an

alchemist, to bend nature to his will in quite the same way that striking the patella tendon will incite a knee-jerk reaction. To give an example, the root of the kava-kava plant induces intoxicating effects like euphoria and narcosis once ingested. Kava kava's strong association with the condition of passivity and with the realm of dreams betrays a qualitative connection to the moon, the sphere of reflection. Its occult virtue, in other words its intrinsic nature, is wholly lunar. Hence if one wished to draw upon themselves the influences of the lunar signature and of the Great Mother Goddess, they would grind sun-dried kava kava roots into a fine powder, mix it into mead and consume it. The doctrine of signatures formed a vital component of Pythagorean mysticism, Platonic metaphysics and the holistic theories of Renaissance physician and alchemist Paracelsus of Hohenheim (1493-1591CE). Anyone trying to make sense out of Lethbridge's compass of vibrational 'rates' or attempting to determine a feasible connection with other cosmological systems will inevitably arrive at the same crossroad: are the four central pillars around which a vast majority of rates cluster the four ethereal elements of air, water, earth and fire the alchemists of all ages always speak of? Or are they the stages of *nigredo*, *cauda pavonis*, *albedo* and *rubedo* that characterise a fourfold subdivision of the entire alchemical opus? These are questions that beg to be answered. Conversely, are Lethbridge's pendulum rates and the esoteric concept of signatures one and the same thing? In all probability, yes.

One consequent discovery that shall here concern us was made at the Iron Age hill fort of Pilsdon Pen in Dorset with the

assistance of his wife Mina. Whilst perusing the site, it dawned upon Lethbridge that he should examine some of the pebbles about the fort. What he found really mystified him. As expected the pebbles reacted to the rate for silica, but they also responded to the rates for male sex and thought, the former at twenty-four and the latter at twenty-seven inches. The whole situation was bizarre. Why was there more than one signature on the pebbles? To a man with such detective acumen and adroitness as Thomas Lethbridge, the answer was obvious. The rates had somehow been induced into or impressed upon the stones, perhaps by events which had transpired hundreds if not thousands of years ago. Further investigations confirmed as such. Pebbles picked with gloves and tongs from a nearby beach only reacted to the fourteen-inch rate for silica. When they were grappled they also reacted to the rate for thought. On another note when the pebbles were thrown with brute force against a wall they reacted to an additional rate, that for male sex or gender. Defying all reason and logic, the pebbles could differentiate between which of the two genders had manhandled them; those thrown by Lethbridge reacted to the male rate and those by Mina to the female rate.

Anyone who didn't know that an experiential approach or procedure had been used to uncover a sublime fundamental plan such as the one demonstrated by Lethbridge's rose compass of rates would obviously think the idea was no more than a fanciful delusion or absurdity. Yet here it is! Where the scope of human perception and the quantitative analysis of traditional science either fail or remain silent the pendulum succeeds and tells the truth, pardon the pun. And in this case the truth is that there is a

subtle interchange of formative energy that occurs between all inhabitants of the cosmos, irrespective of whether they belong to the mineral, animal or plant kingdom. Lethbridge's results also demonstrate that an object's individual signature or unique cosmic blueprint can be modified to some extent through external force. The greater the force, the more profound and lasting the changes that occur. Rocks that had been thrown in battle centuries ago were still giving off rates for the male gender and for thought, a fact which entertains the idea that friction and potentiality caused on the physical plane by violence and bloodshed or on the psychic one by outbursts of anger and the outpouring of emotion might somehow contribute to a modification of an object's inner texture. Lethbridge's exposition per se is that external forces exhibit the ability to impress a foreign signature or rate onto objects, substances and thoughts, especially when they come from living entities like human beings. If this is true, then there's no reason why an abnormally powerful force shouldn't be able to purge and replace the indigenous rate with a different one, especially if it transpires under the auspices of the astrological movement. In Lethbridge's terms, then, red mercury, the base metal with an occult signature or rate of twelve-point-five inches would have to be impressed with the twenty-nine inch rate for gold and then purged of its original blueprint for a successful transmutation to occur. This phenomenon, literally and metaphorically speaking, would be gold.

Lethbridge's hidden cosmological system would have probably found a spirited ally and counterpart in the Paracelsian-

based teachings of Albert Richard Riedel (1911-1984CE) had the two ever met. Riedel, the self-styled 'Frater Albertus', served as a key figure in the transmission of alchemical esotericism and practical alchemy to many parts of the United States from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Albertus placed a profound emphasis on the art of *spagyria*, the laboratory practice of extracting the vital essence of herbs through processes of maceration, circulation and extraction to produce synthetic tinctures and elixirs many times more powerful than anything the unaided hand of Mother Nature or the pharmaceutical companies can produce. His vision of alchemy was probably an outcome of applying Paracelsian doctrine, especially where it concerned the triad of spirit, soul and body or philosophical sulphur, mercury and salt, to chemical processes and outcomes that can be demonstrated in laboratory settings and replicated a million times over. This practical method proved to be an enormous success, for it allowed a neophyte to come to terms with and correctly interpret the fundamental principles of alchemical theory and its objectives without becoming overwhelmed by obscure and cryptic references such as those to be found in Renaissance treatises dealing with alchemical recipes and formulae. Between 1960 and 1984CE, Albertus inaugurated the Paracelsus Research Society in Salt Lake City, in Utah, and took hundreds of aspiring alchemists under his wing. Most were members of contemporary theosophical movements like the Golden Dawn and the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC), but there were also independent researchers from fields as disparately related as parapsychology and chemistry.

During the time that the facility was operational, Albertus was assiduous in his aspiration to bring what he believed to be alchemy's principal tenets to an American audience: he initiated and maintained a quarterly publication based on the Hermetic traditions called 'Parachemy', conferred upon various alchemical texts a second chance at fame by translating them from their indigenous German, Spanish, Italian and French into English, and wrote ten books, his most renown being *The Seven Rays of the QBL* (1981CE) and *The Alchemist's Handbook* (1960CE).

In the United States, Frater Albertus's reputation was augmented when he claimed to have prepared the 'oil', 'essence' or philosophical sulphur of lead, copper and gold. For his devout students and those convinced of the reality of mineral and metallic transmutation, the statement vindicated Albertus's undisputed 'adeptness'. Conversely, for his detractors it merely substantiated the belief that he was an illegitimate charlatan. Whichever the case, Albertus was of a depth and complexity which bewildered and intimidated those who remained outside his immediate circle and the iron-clad doors of the Paracelsus Research Society. Likewise when it came to the feasibility of plant, mineral and metallic work in alchemy, he was convincing beyond a reasonable doubt. For instance, when occultist and writer Israel Regardie (1907-1985CE) visited Albertus at his research centre, his purely psycho-spiritual conception of alchemy went out the window. Whatever Regardie saw or experienced inside Albertus's laboratory complex clearly exerted a profound effect on him, enough at least to reignite his faith in alchemical craft practice and to spur a public retraction of this opinion in a subsequent

edition of his book, *The Philosopher's Stone* (1938CE). We can only guess that Regardie's polar shift of opinion was motivated by technical procedures involving the extraction of vital life force or 'signatures' from dried herbs such as those outlined in Albertus's practical manual for laboratory work, *The Alchemist's Handbook*. This concise and articulately written book, to which we will shortly turn our attention, is pivotal to Albertus's personal vision along with the current study as a whole for it gives a clear and concise definition of what alchemy actually is. Alchemy, Albertus dutifully informs us, must be understood in the context of a cosmological process aimed at 'raising vibrations'. The motif is mentioned in the introduction and reiterated time and time again, as if Albertus was espousing the metaphysical technique of positive affirmation to wire it into his readers' subconscious minds. Alchemy aims, hopes, wishes, begs, wants and aspires to raise 'the level of vibrations'. Anyone who hasn't heard of Albertus would think the idea had been plucked straight out of Lethbridge's rose compass of 'rates'.

In *The Alchemist's Handbook*, Frater Albertus makes a very clear distinction between the Lesser Work, or lesser circulation as he calls it, and the Greater Work or greater circulation. The first of these, which Albertus describes in painstaking detail, has to make do with the preparation of the plant or vegetable 'stone' and with the separation of the eternal vital principle or occult 'signature' of a herb from its destructible body; the second alludes to metallic transmutation, a much more coveted and elusive operation which cannot and must not reveal itself as a blatant transcription of the written word. "Those who wait for a

complete description in similar language, of the Great Arcanum,” he says, “will wait in vain. It cannot be given. It is not permissible.” Here, it might be worth mentioning that those who see in alchemy a breeding ground for outdated superstitions or regard transmutation as a by-product of the unrelenting story of the human imagination would probably stop reading at this point, but for anyone familiar with Albertus’s glowing success with spagyric techniques and with chemico-operative methods, the statement would only fuel his or her curiosity and serve as impetus to continue. And a little deeper into the text the reader may begin to feel a mixture of elation and relief for not having parted with this cute little manual prematurely. According to Albertus, the reasons as to why most novices become disillusioned with the pragmatic and operative approach to alchemical truth and eventually desert it is because they either perform certain experiments prematurely, or because they are without the requisite theoretical knowledge necessary to work with substances pertaining to each of the three kingdoms.

Alchemical doctrine acknowledges three kingdoms, the plant, animal and mineral, as well as three principles associated with each one—philosophical mercury, sulphur and salt. Mercury is positively-charged, sulphur is negatively-charged and salt, the binding force, is neutral. When alchemists speak of philosophical mercury, they refer not to the elemental variant of the same name, but to the intangible life-bestowing formative force that animates all created matter. Philosophical or alchemical mercury is also the fifth ethereal element, the ether or quintessence of the mystical philosophers and sages. Disregarding what modern

mechanistic science has to say about the nature of living matter, alchemy decrees that philosophical mercury, also the blueprint or signature, can be separated from living or 'dead' matter through a cycle of distillations using alcohol as a primary saturating agent or menstruum for the extraction. The alchemical mercury is of a different vibratory rate in each kingdom; lowest in the plant, higher in the animal and highest in the mineral and/or metallic realm. In its most refined state, mercury looks like a runny jelloid substance of yellowish tinge. The slight colouration is caused by delicate oil within the mercury. This is philosophical sulphur, a fiery principle which can be isolated from the mercury by subjecting the whole substance to a further cycle of distillation. The separation of mercury and sulphur isn't as crucial when working spagyric techniques to synthesise the vegetable 'stone' as it is when preparing mineral and metallic tinctures such as 'oils' or 'sulphurs' from the seven planetary metals. Additionally, the binding force which holds these two complimentary principles together is salt, and can be seen when the dead residue of any herb is reduced to black ash via calcination. Salt encompasses the defining characteristics and is unique to the organism, irrespective of whether it belongs to the plant, animal or mineral realm.

If everything that Albertus is telling us is to be taken at face value, then extracting the life force of plants and creating the herbal elixir should indeed be nothing but child's play. All that is needed is a ready supply of alcohol, the herb one intends to work with and a Soxlet apparatus or something of the like to complete the extraction. The aspirant is to grind the selected herb into a

fine powder and place it into the filter-paper cylinder or thimble of the apparatus. To complete the rudimentary phase he or she should half-fill the flask with alcohol and realign it with the distillation train. Once the heat source beneath the flask is ignited, the extraction will begin. After a short time smoke-like vapour emanating from the alcohol should diffuse through the filter paper cylinder containing the pulverized herb, enter a condenser tube above and gravitate there momentarily before running back down into the flask. A cycle of three or four distillations should bring about an alteration to the colourless transparency of the water-like extract in the flask; it should now be a light yellow. This is the differentiating essence of the plant or its philosophical mercury, and the ensuing changes to the liquid's texture and colour can be attributed to the presence of a delicate yellowish oil, its philosophical sulphur. At the conclusion of the distillatory procedure the dead residue can be disengaged from the thimble of filter paper, placed in a petri dish and ignited. This will reduce it to black ash or 'salt'.

Once this has come to pass the aspirant should scoop up the charred remains of the herb and empty them back into the flask, preferably with the aid of a plastic funnel. These should be washed over with extract, as much of it as they will soak up. The flask should then be reattached to the Soxlet apparatus and the distillatory procedure repeated over and over and over again, until there are no further changes to the extract's texture or colouration. By now the only thing remaining should be an oily jelloid substance that can manifest through numerous forms; in actual fact, the substance should convert into a runny liquid

when the temperature rises and miraculously solidify when it cools back down again. What the aspirant is now gazing upon is the principal form of the herbal elixir, its first state. One can increase its density and thus strengthen its potency by subjecting it to calcination. Frater Albertus alleges that each time this is done, its efficacy doubles. Moreover the refined extract, which contains the indestructible and eternal couplet of philosophical mercury and sulphur as well as the 'salt' which binds them together, can be hermetically sealed in a glass flask and subjected to a low summering heat to create a plant or vegetable 'stone', the crown jewel of the Lesser Work or lesser circulation. It is, in conjunction with its dynamic therapeutic qualities, more powerful than any elixir and can extract the triune "soul" of any herb or plant via alchemical immersion.

Like many an alchemist before him, Frater Albertus stops well short of revealing the mystery of the Grand Arcanum. He does, though, kindle within the aspirant the flame of faith by declaring that anyone with the skill, patience and ingenuity to generate the vegetable 'stone' can surely attain the mineral 'stone'. Of pivotal importance to the latter is a psycho-spiritual condition Albertus describes as 'readiness'. In order to successfully complete the greater circulation, he says, the aspirant must be ready. His statement brings to mind the Christian act of receiving Holy Communion, and the physical and spiritual cleansing that must transpire before a supplicant can the symbolically receive the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. In any case this is as far as Frater Albertus is willing to go, and from here we are pretty much left to our own devices. If there is any

credence to Albertus's notion that the vibration rates of minerals and metals is of a higher frequency than those of plants or animals, and if the creative and formative forces of the cosmos all originate from the unconscious *prima materia*, then the answer to the riddle may rest firmly on the shoulders of each individual alchemist, or in their heads rather. Processes related to the lesser circulation require no active participation on the part of the alchemist's mind simply because the vibratory 'rates' of the plant kingdom are lower than that of animals. The same does not hold true for 'dead' minerals and metals, whose 'rates' are much higher than that of humans. The answer, then, may lie firmly entrenched in successfully inducing a ruminative state of creative tension during a certain point in the greater circulation, enough to 'raise the vibrations'. Perhaps the twenty-nine inch rate for gold can somehow be imprinted onto base matter reacting in the retort or alembic. If thoughts can be imprinted onto rocks, as Thomas Lethbridge was able to demonstrate with his pendulum, then why not metals too? If a pendulum can recapitulate the 'rate' or occult signature of a particular substance or object in response to a fleeting thought about it, then who's to say that the thought of gold or its transmutation can't permanently reconfigure the extract of a metal, especially if the enterprise were driven by a profusion of unconscious willpower. Seeing as the astrological movement and the formative forces of Mother Nature are also crucial to the success of the operation, this would have to occur over a Sun-Mercury or Sun-Saturn conjunction, depending on which of the two—red mercury or lead—was being used as first matter. It's a fascinating proposition, albeit one orthodox science

would ridicule and vehemently combat for centuries to come. Then again, these inferences could be little more than the hyperactive musings of an author's inwardly-turned and boundless imagination.

But what if...

THE RIDDLE OF ALCHEMY: A SECRET DESIRE TRANSFORMED



For those briefly acquainted with the emerging field of Western esotericism, the word ‘alchemy’ sounds as bizarre and exotic as a Minoan crane dance and conjures images of medieval laboratories in which an alchemist clad in black robes and other paraphernalia broods over recipes and formulae in an attempt to make powerful herbal elixirs, transmute base metals to gold, and synthesize the miracle-working, ruby-red Stone. Most people nowadays perceive

the Hermetic Art as either a monolithic tradition that traversed cultures whilst remaining fundamentally unchanged, a purely spiritual or psychological process, or as a primitive and crude form of chemistry that lost ground with the coming of the Scientific Revolution.

As any conscientious student of esotericism would know, none of these explanations are satisfactory when subjected to closer scrutiny. Ever since its humble beginnings in Hellenistic Egypt, 'alchemy' has facilitated the Art-Nature debate and posed cosmological questions seeking to address the relationship between *God* and the created world or *spirit* and *matter* along with the true nature of reality. Moreover, it has always been an interdisciplinary field that entered into scrupulous intercourse with natural philosophy, religion, astrology, mythology, magic, chemistry, science, and spirituality, and preoccupied some of the greatest minds to have set foot on this planet. The Renaissance physician Paracelsus of Hohenheim (c. 1493-1541) and the natural philosopher Alexander von Suchten (c. 1520-1575) used a spagyric method typical of the practical or physical variety to create medicines. 'Alchemy' played a pivotal role in the Scientific Revolution as well. The great catalysts of the physico-mathematical sciences—Isaac Newton (1642-1727), John Locke (1632-1704), and Robert Boyle (1627-1691) —all dedicated ample time to individual alchemical pursuits that included metallic transmutation and quests to find the Philosopher's Stone. Further still the Victorian fascination with the occult during the nineteenth century produced a breed of 'alchemy' that was quintessentially inner or spiritual, with the most famous and

widely known being Mary Anne Atwood's psychic variant focused upon achieving mystical transcendence through Mesmeric trances and Jung's psychological interpretation. Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) believed that the symbols and images in medieval and Renaissance alchemical manuscripts were unconscious irruptions projected onto laboratory apparatuses by the alchemist's own psyche and had nothing to do with endeavours of a practical type. Since that time, the sevenfold and threefold chemical stages that typify the alchemical process have become fundamental components of contemporary depth psychology and transpersonal counselling.

Despite its adherence to a speculative theory of ancient natural philosophy, it should now be obvious that 'alchemy' was never a monolithic subject with a sole objective and a monocular vision. In the last two thousand years or so, the discipline has sprouted forth from the trunk of a sequoia tree that was Alexandria to create the towering branches that were its variant schools and the foliage that were its ambitious practitioners. Their practices depended on a great many things: the evolutionary phase of humanity's collective development; the social and cultural presentiments of their particular time; and their personal beliefs and tastes. Some pursued the Hermetic Art solely for material gain, wishing to duplicate precious metals like silver and gold through the synthesis of the elusive 'red stone'. Those who were more spiritually inclined with philanthropic sentiments hoped to fabricate powerful elixirs and potions to cure physical ailments that traditional branches of medicine did not have an answer for. Some sought in 'alchemy' a feasible

chemico-operative method whereby artificial life could be created (i.e. the homunculus) whilst others hoped that alchemy's theological and animistic grounding would allow for mystical *apotheosis* or union with God. For some of our more modern practitioners and interpreters, the process itself is merely a symbolic transcription of the inner psychological phenomenon of self-actualization or individuation. Hence it would be much more appropriate to speak of the many 'alchemies' that have surfaced and sunk back into collective unconsciousness rather than a single breed that has transformed to accommodate the socio-political concerns of any one era, culture, institution, or racial group.

Whatever the preferred practical application may be, one must never lose sight of the notion that these 'alchemies' are all underpinned by Hermetic ideas about the nature of the cosmos. At some time or another, any enthusiast of the occult and esoteric sciences would have probably heard the tenets, "As above, so below" and "As inner, so outer". Practicing magicians, astrologers, and alchemists usually understand these succinctly delivered messages in the context of symbolic correspondences between the inner and outer or spiritual and material dimensions. Esotericism is unlike modern mechanistic science in that it acknowledges that our planet itself is a living organism, and that everything in the macrocosm or greater cosmos is alive and interconnected through sympathies and antipathies that pervade all matter. In such a reality qualities that are of the same cosmic clay but belong to different spheres of existence (i.e. mineral, plant, animal, and human) eternally seek one another. To give an

example the sunflower plant, the metal gold, the sun, and the mighty Olympian deity Zeus are all connected by *qualities* like radiance, eternity, cheerfulness, brightness, and expression. Similarly, the flowering yarrow plant, the metal copper, the planet Venus, the minerals turquoise and semi-precious stone lapis lazuli, and the Olympian goddess Venus are all united by the aesthetic qualities of beauty, serenity, and quietude. These qualities group the aforementioned objects, substances, and ideas into a hierarchical system of knowledge devised by divine providence. Esoteric philosophy acknowledges animistic connections between things, material or immaterial, that are inwardly and intuitively felt to be true but which are otherwise ignored by contemporary science because there is simply no known way of quantifying them.

Any truly knowledgeable person would tell you that archetypal models of projection through which we perceive the phenomenal world around us are, in the end, a subjective question of individual preference and belief. Here, the boundary separating religious belief and scientific discovery blur. Religion is a personified projection of archetypal powers whilst the avenue of modern science offers much more natural and less dogmatic representations of archetypal projections. If one were to examine and pick apart the seemingly sound tower of the latter, they would see how precariously positioned on the mount of what constitutes and what can be defined as general knowledge of the cosmos it actually is. For instance, the widespread idea that space has three dimensions is a human construct that stands on quake-prone territory. We inherited it from Johannes Kepler (1571-

1630), another key player in the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century who reasoned that the triune aspect of God (the Christian Trinity) must also be a key dimensional feature of space. The idea of rational causes, causality, or cause and effect is much the same. It was coined by the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) to describe the true nature of all phenomena as extensions of the Christian Godhead. If the transcendental One is eternal and invariable, then shouldn't this also be a central feature of the external world at large? God is an immutable force and so there should be no external inaccuracies to contradict this belief. Thus it would make perfect sense to believe the notion that there are causes for everything in existence, even if they have remained hitherto unknown.

At this point a plethora of questions must definitely be gnawing at the reader's conscious: why has modern science been allowed to monopolize what comes to be regarded as undisputed truth and fact for so long when the objectivity of its own archetypal framework can so easily be called into question? What exactly gives the present-day scientific faculty the right to condemn alternative models of reality? Models of projecting reality proposed by science happen to be much more accurate than some of the primitive models employed by our ancient ancestors, but they in no way cover the full spectrum of phenomena known to exist and others that will no doubt come to exist as we continue to evolve. What we usually find with scientific discoveries is that every new one is usually accompanied by an entourage of related mysteries that enter consciousness where they await explanation or solution. From

this, it would be more than feasible to assume that many current models functioning under the aegis of the natural sciences (especially physics and astronomy) will one day become defunct and need to be replaced by ones which exhibit more comprehensive standpoints. This is why it should not prematurely deride, ignore or decry in public research and experimentation into phenomena deemed ‘unscientific’ or ‘pseudoscientific’.

One such scientist who dared to investigate esoteric paths less travelled was Frau Lily Kolisko, a faithful confidante of the anthroposophist Dr. Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925CE). Kolisko was convinced that there was a definitive relationship between the metals and the planets deemed by esoteric philosophy to be their undisputed rulers so she devised various experiments to test this hypothesis. Using a chromatographical method in a strictly controlled environment, she was able to show that visible changes occurred in preparations of metal salt solutions when their respective planetary rulers entered into conjunctions and oppositions with other celestial bodies. Photographs of the solutions taken before, during, and after each event revealed that chemical reactions had occurred in the metal salt solution at the exact moment of the celestial event. There was, according to Kolisko, a definitive relationship between the moon and silver, the sun and gold, Saturn and lead, and Mars and iron. In 1978, a researcher from a cancer clinic at Arlesheim in Switzerland named Agnes Fyfe used a similar methodology to explore the link between the planet Venus and the metal copper. Fyfe wished to see whether the celestial movements of Venus might have any

effect on one percent copper acetate solutions placed inside extracts of plant sap, and she too met with some success.

If the results generated by experiments conducted by these unacknowledged and under rug swept scientists is anything to go by, then there is a living and tangible connection between different aspects of the cosmos; there is a link between the *above* and the *below*, the *inner* and *outer*, the *macrocosm* known as the greater cosmos and the *microcosm* that is the human being. Why shouldn't there be, right? After all, the methods we have utilised to arrive here are the same ones used by that other subjective denomination of inquiry known as natural science and are something more than just blind belief. Using the words of that great Stagirite Aristotle, nature must be forced to the investigation (*ekthlibomene pros ten zetesisin*) if she is to assume modes of being far more comprehensive than the ones she has inhabited thus far. And to be forced to the investigation one must propose another viable hypothesis along the same denomination of inquiry whereby the objective understanding of reality might be furthered. In retrospect, could the Hermetic formulae about symbolic correspondences be something more than just a hidden knowledge system about the hierarchy of creation or a cosmic guide to the affinities between created matter like objects and substances and disembodied beings? Could it be telling us something more than the idiom that everything that exists *below* is in effect a debased reflection of all that exists *above*? Could it, in fact, be a subtle allusion to the idea that the *Great Below*-matter, its aspects, and the contingencies of chance that transpire as a result of corporeal intercourse-be manipulated or controlled

by inciting a powerful psychic force of some type from the *Great Above*, the dimension directly above the physical realm on the hierarchical ladder of creation? In layman's terms, do 'broodings', thoughts or intense mental efforts generated on the psychic plane somehow affect or manifest in the visible phenomenal world around us? Yes, no, maybe? The influential mystic and spiritual teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949) had much to say about this, one of the central concerns of the Hermetic Art, and it is to this fascinating mystic and his intricate philosophies that we will now turn.

In my mind George Gurdjieff is one of the most fascinating figures in the spiritual landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Born in 1866 in Alexandropol (Gumri) to a Greek father and an Armenian mother, Gurdjieff's first four decades of life were spent seeking and exploring. He travelled out to monasteries, wonder-working shrines, and other spiritual centres in the Middle East and Central Asia in search of occult knowledge and of an ancient brotherhood called the Sarmoung which he purports was inaugurated in ancient Babylon in 2500BCE. During that time he allegedly joined a likeminded group of explorers that set out on an expedition out to find a legendary city somewhere in the Gobi Desert, though for obscure reasons they had to turn back. His extensive travels bequeathed the secret knowledge that neither science nor dogmatic religion could impart, and by 1912 he had established a base in Moscow in Russia and had begun teaching everything he'd learnt in a deceptively simple style void of mystification. Two years later he met the Russian philosopher Peter D. Ouspensky (1878-1947), a

man who would chronicle much of his life and document a vast body of esoteric ideas articulated by himself about the nature of the human being, the cosmos, and methods of self-development. Much of Gurdjieff's comprehensive philosophical system and the exotic, enigmatic, fear-provoking, and magical practices he subjected his own pupils to for the sake of acquiring a conscious freedom otherwise unknown to ordinary waking consciousness is described in detail by Ouspensky in his 1949 publication *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*. In the following decades after meeting Ouspensky, Gurdjieff's system of thought gained ground and was introduced to a wider esoteric audience. By 1919 he had drawn a large enough band of faithful pupils as to establish his own esoteric institution, an aspiration which became fact when his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man was proudly unveiled in Tiflis (now Tbilisi), a city which rests on the banks of the Kura River.

Gurdjieff definitely espoused some rather intricate views about the nature of the cosmos, and a great many of these will probably remain unverifiable. Daring to state the crux of such a belief system in a little more than a few words is intellectual suicide and pure injustice to the sheer beauty, magnificence, and magnitude of his mystical philosophy, though I feel this is the requisite course of action for those readers unfamiliar with Gurdjieff's theories. At a quintessential level, Gurdjieff's 'work' revolved around the notion of *being*; the idea that one could rise above the chaotic contingencies of chance and circumscribe one's own fate by mastering self-control and concentrating one's willpower. In fact, when Gurdjieff was queried on whether he

believed in the ancient notion of fate, he aptly answered that only those individuals who had acquired *essence* had a fate per se. What he actually meant by this was that only those who made immense conscious efforts in striving to better themselves had the power to cleave through the cosmic noise and change the trajectory of their lives. Everyone else might be compared to pawn pieces on a chessboard being moved along by an invisible hand that is none other than the divine law of accident. Or with a pile of leaves being blown about by a gust of wind. Either way the basic logic behind this is that ordinary waking consciousness is a contracted form of awareness that could be described as 'forgetfulness' or 'sleep'. How many times do we start a new task, job, or errand full of enthusiasm only to have the prolonged cycle of repetition suck the life out of us and render the whole endeavor little more than a disenchanting series of obstacles that seem so overwhelming? Why does our consciousness seem to contract, narrow, and shrink so that its field of vision and activity is confined to the repetition of boring and mundane tasks, day after day after day without as much as a minor effort being made to escape or transcend them? Do people really prefer a claustrophobic psychic space or prison as their habitat over a boundless cosmic freedom? I believe we all know the answer to that.

Gurdjieff posited that a natural antidote to this inherited human tendency towards feebleness and laziness was to shock the body by forcing it to exceed its own physical, mental, and psychological limitations. The more often one inflicted this unnatural stress upon themselves, the greater their vital *essence* or

conscious willpower actually became. Think about the whole thing in the context of learning how to play a musical instrument. What happens to somebody who plays the piano or the guitar for extended periods or time, day in and day out? After a while it seems as though an invisible power has possessed the instrument in question and is now playing them. On a similar note somebody who programs their own conscious mind by repeating positive affirmations out aloud before bedtime will begin to act out these verbal commands unconsciously after about a week or two. Gurdjieff sought to the garner similar results with his own pupils. By pushing them over their individual physical or mental limits and forcing them to expend profound energy in enacting various tasks, he was drumming the behavior into the deepest layers of their being so that it could be replicated or recalled at will. He called the whole process 'self-remembering' and the exhausting practices (i.e. sacred dances like Sufi whirling and intensive labor) sanctioned to attain it were intimately bound up a hierarchical vision of the cosmos in which the anatomy of the psyche and the actual physical universe itself were comprised of corresponding levels or dimensions.

The nature of the human psyche or soul interested Gurdjieff immensely. He tended to view it as a multidimensional entity composed of various levels of *being* that identified themselves as the 'I' or personal ego and assumed the role of a temporary container through which individual consciousness or *essence* passed in its bid to gain freedom from the mechanistic laws of materiality. In many ways it recalls the solar barge of the sun god Re who had to complete a dangerous journey through the

Egyptian Netherworld by correctly naming the gates and deities standing sentry over each nocturnal hour and then having to traverse the mythological terrain ascribed to each one. Each hour almost always unleashed its own cunning traps and dangers on the solar barge, reinforcing the threat of death which could strike at any moment. Just like its mythical constituent in Egyptian myth, the individual light of consciousness is also at the mercy of being blighted out or obscured by intellectual and emotional conditioning as it traverses the *ladder of selves*. To successfully pass from one field of conscious vision or 'I' to another with a field far more comprehensive and multifarious the conscious standpoint has to withstand inner conflagrations lit by the strenuous mental effort of purposive activity. In developing these 'mental muscles' many of the individual 'I's' fused together like spherical beads of liquid mercury and create a formidable inner strength called true *essence*, propelling the individual's consciousness, or true personality up along the hierarchy of *being* where it begins its temporal lifecycle in the receptacle of a higher and more efficient "I".

To further complicate matters this propensity for inner growth and evolution is rather like trying to swim against a rip in the open sea because our consciousness is, for the most part, trapped in a narrow state and inwardly turned. About a third of our lives are spent buried in our sequestered worlds of sleep and most of the other two thirds in a passive state of contracted consciousness known as wakefulness. Don't think that the second has much to do with the world of objective reality, for most of what we experience and how we respond to it is intimately bound

up with the subjective fantasies, preconceived biases, and assumptions we have imposed onto it. Once in a while, our ‘semi-sleeping’ state gives birth to an intense albeit short burst of concentrated consciousness whereby we become acutely aware of everything transpiring around and within us. This is an active and passive state of existence, an inward and outward mode of *being*, a kind of widened double consciousness that senses and perceives its own activity whilst remaining aware of its own physical and mental position in temporal space. Can you read and comprehend a short excerpt from a newspaper whilst remaining intensely aware of your precise location in three dimensional time and space? It’s quite possible, but it requires strenuous mental effort on the part of the subject and it only ever happens in very short bursts. It is also possible to experience this state of consciousness quite naturally. Falling madly in love with someone, surrendering to titillation, and experiencing moments of true happiness all constitute ‘self-remembering’. Gurdjieff postulated that this intense awareness of inner and outer worlds was a millisecond glimpse of a fourth and highest state called ‘objective consciousness’. In acquiring this psychic condition one could observe and process objective reality continuously. This, says Gurdjieff, is the “work” that must be carried out during the course of one’s lifetime, though few, if any, ever rise to the challenge.

Conversely his ideas on the composition and nature of the outer world or cosmos were more in line with other esotericists, particularly those of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891). Peter. O. Ouspensky gives a systematic exposition of many of

these in *In Search of the Miraculous*, perhaps the single most important work on Gurdjieff not written by Gurdjieff himself. In attempting to connect his understanding of the human microcosm with universal harmony and cosmic order, Gurdjieff created a diagram known as “The Ray of Creation” which names and identifies seven dimensions separated from one another by vibrational frequency or rate. Density and complexity are relative to the position of the dimension on the cosmic hierarchy and the whole created cosmos is in synch with the Pythagorean law of the octave. At the apex stands the undefiled and transcendental One or Absolute, a sphere of sparse particles subject to a single law. The one beneath, the Galaxies or Worlds, is less sparse and subject to three. Directly below that the Galaxies is the realm of Stars or Suns which is even less sparse and subject to six. Proceeding in identical fashion after that is the Solar, Planetary, Earthly, and Lunar dimensions; the former is subject to twelve, the next to twenty-four, the one after that to forty-eight, and the last to ninety-six laws, respectively. If the human being is indeed a miniature replica of the cosmic totem pole as esoteric spirituality would have us believe, then it must somehow be connected to the ordered sequence as explicated by the descending branches of cosmic creation. And it definitely is, says Gurdjieff, who often spoke of the human being as having four distinct bodies. The first is of physical composition and corresponds to the Earthly realm, the second is astral in nature and belongs to the Planetary realm, the third is of a mental or spiritual substrate and adheres to the Sun realm, and the fourth partakes of a causal or divine nature and descends from the Star

or Stellar realm. Gurdjieff would often compare this fourfold blueprint to a horse-drawn vehicle where each of the four bodies was equated with one of its fundamental parts: the carriage was identified with the carnal instincts and thus with the corporeal body; the horse or steed, on the other hand, a creature of many feelings and emotions, personified the astral body; the driver was a figurative stand-in for the intellect or mind; and the master who owned the whole thing was the disembodied consciousness or the 'I'. In this way, what was above, the macrocosm, paralleled that which was below, the microcosm.

Another aspect of Gurdjieff's philosophy that links the inner and the outer together is the curious notion that the universe is pervaded by a series of twelve substances all called Hydrogen that are in constant use by the body's physical and psychic faculties. Obviously, the choice of name has nothing to do with the inaugurating member of the periodic table of elements, but is instead a pseudonym for matter of variant coarseness and density. Gurdjieff distinguishes his Hydrogens from one another by making them multiples of six, so that lowest is named Hydrogen $_{6144}$ and the highest Hydrogen $_6$. The finer ones are ethereal energies used by one of the body's seven centers—the higher intellectual, higher emotional, intellectual, emotional, physical, instinctive, and sexual—to fuel their respective activities. He purports that the higher intellectual sphere is powered by Hydrogen $_6$, the intellectual by Hydrogen $_{12}$, the intellectual by Hydrogen $_{24}$, the emotional by Hydrogen $_{48}$, and so forth. According to Gurdjieff the various centers can, on the odd occasion, utilize energies not indigenous to their own being. What

he's proposing is that the energy source Hydrogen₄₈ can in some instances be transformed into Hydrogen₂₄; Hydrogen₂₄ can become Hydrogen₁₂; and Hydrogen₁₂ can become Hydrogen₆. This rare phenomenon, Gurdjieff explains, occurs through a vital jolt or shock and doesn't necessarily need to originate internally or externally. Is this not the same as stipulating that changes initiated internally or externally directly affect its complement? Or that change in the *Great Above* directly influences possibilities latent in the *Great Below*? I think it does.

At this point I would be remiss if I didn't mention Gurdjieff's Law of Threes, described in detail by Ouspensky in *In Search of the Miraculous*. I remain undecided whether this particular idea is a product of original thinking or if Gurdjieff picked it up off another spiritual teacher during his many travels, although it makes little difference in the context of what I wish to convey. Whatever the case may be, by the time he started teaching at his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, Gurdjieff had assimilated the belief that the all phenomena are produced by the interaction of three 'noumenal' forces into his own knowledge system. The first force, according to tradition, is masculine, energetic, and positively-charged. Alternatively the second is an inversion of the first—feminine, receptive, and negatively-charged. Both of these are palpable and comprehensible. Their meeting, usually a violent interaction, produces a third type of neutrally-charged force not easily detected. In truth the only way of knowing that the latter exists is in the perceived 'medium'; its presence is revealed by the action of the first two. This archetypal model of reality is very ancient,

one that all alchemists of the ages have adhered to in their endeavors to produce the Philosopher's Stone and prolong life indefinitely. The Paracelsian derivative, the triune alchemical theory of Mercury (Spirit), Sulphur (Soul), and Salt (Body) which underpinned the ever-popular spagyrics and iatrochemistry of the Renaissance period, basically transposes this esoteric knowledge to the lowest sphere, the physical realm. Between the years 1960 and 1984, Frater Albertus Spagyricus (1911-1984) worked under these theoretical premises to identify and separate the positively-charged Mercury, the negatively-charged Salt, and the neutrally-charged Sulphur from various plants and minerals. In *The Alchemist's Handbook*, he affirms that simple chemical processes like maceration, distillation, and decoction can in fact extract philosophical Mercury, also known as *vital essence*, from any plant or mineral. Further still, the *vital essence* vibrates at a different frequency depending on whether it has derived from the animal, plant, or mineral realms. Is this *vital essence* one and the same with Gurdjieff's *inner essence*? It might be.

One can ponder the possibilities for days, months, years, and even a lifetime without ever reaching a definitive conclusion. It definitely hasn't helped our cause that our modern ostensible science has remained silent on many such matters and for reasons as trivial as not conforming to the dogmatic model of reality to which it ascribes. If only it could surmount its own dogmatic and fanatical beliefs, alternative and innovative models with which to investigate objective reality might come knocking on its door. There are definitely enough in the annals of esoteric and 'occult' literature to give science leads on how it might

further its understanding of objective reality. In any case from the esoteric exposition there appears to be an intimate connection between cosmic dimensions, themselves based on levels of vibrations, states of consciousness, and the *ladder of selves*. They interact, interpenetrate, and partake of one another in such ways that recalls the Hermetic adage that every single entity is part of one cosmic animal, able to function autonomously but also capable of collective action. Could these dimensions inside and without, perceived by the subjective human mind to be independent, actually be part of the same objective reality? If they are, then the *ladder of selves* is proof enough that parallel worlds or dimensions do exist.

And what proof exists for the *ladder of selves* theory, one might ask? Well the most obvious is multiple personality disorder, more formally known as dissociative identity disorder. In such a condition the personality suffers fragmentation at the hands of a harrowing trauma or abuse that has been repressed. Individuals with multiple personality can manifest any number of identities. Treatment under the mediation of a trained professional, usually a psychiatrist, aims to reintegrate the various personas into a single functioning psychic entity through various psychotherapeutic methods, usually visualization and hypnosis. Doris Fischer, Christine Beauchamp, and Helene, Carl Jung's cousin, comprise some of the better known cases of multiple personality. Perhaps the most famous case is that of Sybil Dorsett, a girl who developed sixteen personalities or alter egos to cope with the vexing sexual abuse inflicted upon her by her psychotic mother. Amongst her alter egos were two male

selves, a carpenter and a handyman named Mike and Sid Dorsett; Ruthie Dorsett, a two-year old baby; Marcia Lynn Dorsett, a very emotional artist; and a confident and erudite young French girl called Victoria Antoinette Scharleau. It took her psychotherapist Dr. Cornelia B. Wilber eleven years to reintegrate the entities back into the chief personality. Much more recently, an American woman known only by the pseudonym Karen Overhill (to maintain anonymity) sought the help of psychiatrist Dr. Richard Baer to deal with the abuse she suffered during her early years at the hands of her father and grandfather. During the course of the treatment Baer discovered that his patient had seventeen alter egos. Some of the more colorful and fascinating ones were eighteen-year old Sandy, a depressed binge eater; Jensen, an eleven-year old black artist; and Karen, a thirty-year old duplicate of Karen with suicidal tendencies. Baer's experiences in diagnosing and curing Karen are transcribed in a book entitled *Switching Time* which will go become commercially available in October of this year (2012). If a developed personality can spontaneously fragment into subpersonalities as these curious cases seem to show, then there must be some kind of hierarchy to being, a *ladder of selves*.

Scouring the abovementioned philosophical suppositions made by Gurdjieff, one sees that the widening of the conscious standpoint sought by spiritual or psychological alchemy and the chemico-operative equivalent that became very popular in the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance are merely inversions of the same cosmic process. From Zosimos of Panopolis (c. 300CE) onwards many alchemists begin to gravitate towards one or the

other. The just mentioned, for instance, was an adherent of the mystical and spiritual variety. Jung, who localized the whole discipline to depth psychology, was also an advocate for the spiritual breed. Though differing slightly in their aims, the Arabic Jabir ibn Hayyan (c. 721 - 815ce), Paracelsus of Hohenheim, and Albertus Magnus (c. 1193/1206-1280) belong to the second variety, the practical and chemical. Of all alchemistic thinkers, George I. Gurdjieff differs in that he is one of the first to lay bare the hypothesis that the transformation of lower to higher energies occurs across all 'substances' in the cosmos irrespective of their density, coarseness, and localisation. What is more he insinuates that unprecedented modifications to one energy type will directly influence a corresponding source. This sheds a whole new meaning to the Hermetic tenets, "As above, so below" and "As inner, so outer". In agreement with Gurdjieff's obscure outlook on the alchemical discipline is Mary Anne South, whose *Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* implied that metallic transmutation was indeed possible if the alchemist put something of himself into the chemical process by manner of a Mesmeric trance state.

In retrospect, Gurdjieff's alchemical spirituality, as complex and mystifying as it might sound, offers vital clues as to how the widening of human consciousness might finally be achieved. Human beings live out the majority of their lives in conscious 'sleep', a narrow field of vision in which the psyche experiences the cosmos through its own subjective kaleidoscope. But once every blue moon, we enter an inward and outward state of intensive self-awareness through which the dark cloud of

personal subjectivity spontaneously dissipates and we experience objective reality, a sharp moment of clarity whereby one intuitively feels that they have been possessed by a higher or more efficient 'I'. In other words, he or she has acquired a *vital essence* or mode of being that is higher up on the cosmic hierarchy of selves than the unremarkable one which bides its time repeating the same mundane tasks at home. If Gurdjieff's conception is to be believed, then all great discoveries that have come to constitute the growing pool of human knowledge and have augmented our understanding of the universe must be by-products of this elusive double consciousness. Theoretical alchemy acknowledges this state of consciousness and calls it the double mercury. Everybody can attain this state, though if recorded history is anything to go by, it appears that only a select few have experienced it for long enough periods as to articulate new archetypal models through which our collective knowledge might be furthered. In presenting his convoluted ideas about various substances loosely dubbed Hydrogens and how they might power our higher psychic and intellectual faculties, Gurdjieff invariably draws us into a philosophical debate about how synthetic production of this 'fuel', if it exists, might incite prolonged periods of double consciousness in humans and thus remarkable mental feats that would generate leaps in human evolution.

However in order to meet with some success in this department we must first acquire a very deep understanding of the receptacle through which these elusive transformations are known to occur—the human body. Our bodies are themselves

alchemical machines, forever breaking down foreign or external matter into forms recognizable to our cells that can henceforth be used to power the individual organs and systems. The small intestine of the digestive system, for instance, breaks down food into small molecules, nutrients, and water. These are then shuttled through the bloodstream to individual organs like the brain, heart, liver, and muscles for storage or additional chemical change. Sadly, our knowledge of this intricate piece of matter, at least until now, remains less than satisfactory. The aficionados of modern science—biologists, chemists, and physicians—understand how these transformations occur in the lower physical centers like the reproductive, endocrine, and circulatory systems but they know very little about how energies transmute in higher centers like the grey matter of the brain, incidentally the most complex piece of matter in the universe. Scientific research nowadays explores the connections between changes in brain chemistry spawned by psychedelic drugs and aspects of consciousness like emotion, perception, thinking, awareness of body, and awareness of self without any knowledge of how electrochemical changes in neural matter actually translates into psychic experience. How does the translation between the two dimensions and their messages, one physical and electrochemical and the other cognitive and psychic, actually occur? How do changes in serotonin levels facilitate a subjective experience of aggression? How does frontal lobe activation enable an inner conscious experience of disembodied entities? These are questions that neuroscience hasn't been able to answer, yet they are pivotal if we wish to make headway in understanding the interaction between

the outer physical and the inner mental dimensions as well as the nature of the energies that the higher centers might work with.

Clues to the first of these mysteries can be found in modern depth psychology. The most fascinating aspect of the human psyche is that our collective unconscious will often project models of reality, either through dreams, visions or active imagination, onto the conscious of an individual years (sometimes centuries) before it transpires in the phenomenal world. Metallic transmutation and the synthesis of material gold from lead started off as an alchemical desire many millennia ago and is now a reality, thanks to nuclear fission. The Franciscan philosopher Roger Bacon (c. 1214-1294), also known as Doctor Mirabilis, imagined automobiles, flying machines, submarines, and suspended bridges centuries before they became tangible components of our culture. Paracelsus's attempts to create the homunculus, an artificial form of life, have been consummated by a modern biotechnological technique known as genetic engineering. Contemporary with the just mentioned was Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), an ingenious Renaissance polymath whose horde of practical and impractical inventions included designs for flying machines that duplicate those of contemporary helicopters and airplanes. As explicated earlier, futuristic visionary experiences of this type are not part of the contracted waking consciousness that Gurdjieff called 'semi-sleep'; they belong to the elusive double consciousness or 'superconscious', a part of the mind that is also connected with telepathy, astral projection, precognition, psychokinesis, travelling clairvoyance, psychometry, and other psychical feats.

Anyone remotely interested in true 'science' knows that these phenomena exist and that they occur much more frequently than conventionally thought.

In actual fact our dream-selves, a level of mind that equates with the widened state of consciousness spoken of at length in this exposition, can convey knowledge of the future, as well as knowledge of times and places that aren't accessible to our normal contracted consciousness. The controlled hypnagogic trance employed by the eccentric visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and the psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung was a technique that shed ample light on the inner psychic processes as a state and level of *being* far more comprehensive, insightful, and meditative than anything waking consciousness could muster. Hypnagogic states are experienced naturally when one is drifting off to sleep; they're that little twilight zone between sleeping and wakefulness. Entrance into this intermediary state constitutes a transitory penetration of the non-conscious self and the acquisition of information about the universe that should not-according to modern scientific logic-be accessible. Swedenborg in particular learnt how to establish voluntary contact with the unconscious. On at least two occasions he assumed the role of intercessor for living relatives of recently departed souls and documented evidence shows that the information he conveyed was disconcertingly accurate. Moreover Swedenborg was able to communicate intimate details of a conflagration that broke out on the streets of Stockholm on July 19, 1759 from a party he was attending in Gothenburg, a city nearly five hundred kilometers away. His report was

substantiated some three days afterward by an emissary sent from Stockholm. The great Carl Jung also described similar hypnagogic experience that occurred on December 12, 1913 whilst seated in his office armchair. In what he describes as a waking dream, Jung experienced a terrifying drop into an abyss after the ground beneath him suddenly yawned open. When he regained his senses, he realized he'd fallen straight into a cave that was guarded by a mummified dwarf. Floating in the waters of a subterranean river was the war-torn corpse of a blonde youth, a black beetle that resembled an Egyptian scarab, and a dawning sun. Finally the water turned to blood. Jung interpreted his waking dream as a genuine precognition of the First World War (1914-1918).

Lead way into the powers of the unconscious was also made by a French aristocrat by the name of Armand-Marie-Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825) who discovered that telepathy was a side-effect of hypnotism. One of his public demonstrations involved a girl called Madeleine who would obey mental suggestions given by himself and by random members of the audience whilst she was in a hypnotic trance. Telepathic communication or mind-reading between individuals who have experienced double consciousness is not uncommon. Peter. D. Ouspensky describes one such instance between Gurdjieff and himself in Chapter Thirteen of his book *In Search of the Miraculous* where an internal dialogue unfolds between them in a house in Finland. "I heard his voice inside me, as if it were in my chest, near the heart." On a different trajectory of "knowing" the occultist and magician Count Alessandro di Cagliostro (1743-

1795) used a system of numerology to correctly predict the beheadings of Louis XVI of France and his wife Marie Antoinette. Alternatively the famed English astrologer William Lilly (1602-1681) and a visionary by the name of Humphrey Smith both predicted the Great Fire of London many years before it occurred. There are innumerable examples of psychical powers in the annals of history and all of them bear witness to the transcendent insights about objective reality and the information universe that heightened or double consciousness may garner. I, too, have experienced the faculty of foresight multiple times and consider it as real as the air we breathe or the water we drink. About three months ago now I began experiencing disturbing dreams in which the imagery was inexplicably connected with losing my hands and fingers. The distress and anxiety irrupting from my unconscious was obviously a sign of things to come because four weeks ago or so I suffered real injuries to the tendons in my wrist and could not maneuver them properly for days. To put it another way the *Great Above* had something interesting to tell me about the *Great Below*.

So what might we infer about the relationship between the outer and inner worlds and the nature of energies utilized by the higher intellectual and mental faculties of the human mind from clues bequeathed by depth psychology? Somehow the unconscious, or what might be described as levels of reality that our contracted waking consciousness is ignorant of, is connected to the phenomenal world in space and time and has intimate knowledge of its evolutionary course. On occasion, some of this 'secret' knowledge is made available to the developing conscious

or collective conscious through the heightened state of *being* Gurdjieff called widened double consciousness. We could say that the personal conscious or ego is like a grounded rabbit without the slightest clue as to what might lie beyond a clump of marshes whilst the unconscious is a bold eagle with a comprehensive view of the rabbit in the swamp as well as a 360-degree view of the surrounding countryside. Scope and trajectory of vision are the only things separating these two psychic entities from one another. Their relationship definitely parallels that of the *ladder of selves* in cases of multiple personality where the highest self in the chain of fragmented consciousness knows of the existence of all lower selves but the lower selves seem to be completely oblivious of the higher ones. Once therapeutic methods like hypnosis and visualization bring the alter egos or subpersonalities into a fundamental psychic harmony which I call a 'vibrational alignment' with the highest self, the identities fuse together like pieces of molten glass. Delimiting the two just mentioned entities from one another, then, is a transformative change in conscious standpoint wrought by one's unremitting subjective experiences in time and space. The wider personalities or more comprehensive standpoints always appear as more accurate measurers of objective reality than their narrower and seemingly more subjective counterparts.

These musings brings us to an intellectual crossroad with two possible avenues that beckon a contemporary reengagement of both the religious-scientific and fate-free will debates. The first is that humans beings, animals, trees, plants, rocks and minerals, in fact everything that exists on the face of the Earth itself, might

be under the mediation of some higher creative intelligence that has structured everything according to a cosmic hierarchy of *being* and whose actual immanence and intent becomes somewhat visible and less ambiguous when we experience objectified consciousness. To any individual sound of reason and judgment this would sound utterly preposterous and unfeasible and yet the fact remains that it is a supposition of deductive logic. The second, a much more likely prospect, is much less hostile to modern natural science with its Darwinian theories of evolution through natural selection. Could the variant contingencies latent in an energetic realm of matter acting upon matter have produced certain 'densities' such as those witnessed in cerebral function that might on occasion and under certain circumstances transcend the physical laws demarcating its particular dimension? Could these 'densities' have become so fine as to have actually breached some threshold that keeps everything pinned to the fundamental law of accidents? Perhaps at some stage in our evolutionary history the energetic interaction of 'densities' between the many cosmic rays made comprehensible to us through the esoteric correspondences produced a freakish breed able to enact powerful influences over the others. Once this came about the subjugation of all other 'densities' was only a matter of time.

Thomas Lethbridge's (1901-1971) innovative experiments certainly showed that when directed at external substances and objects, human thoughts, emotions, and physical forces released as a result of psychic activity made perpetual imprints upon the former detectable only by means of a pendulum. Similarly,

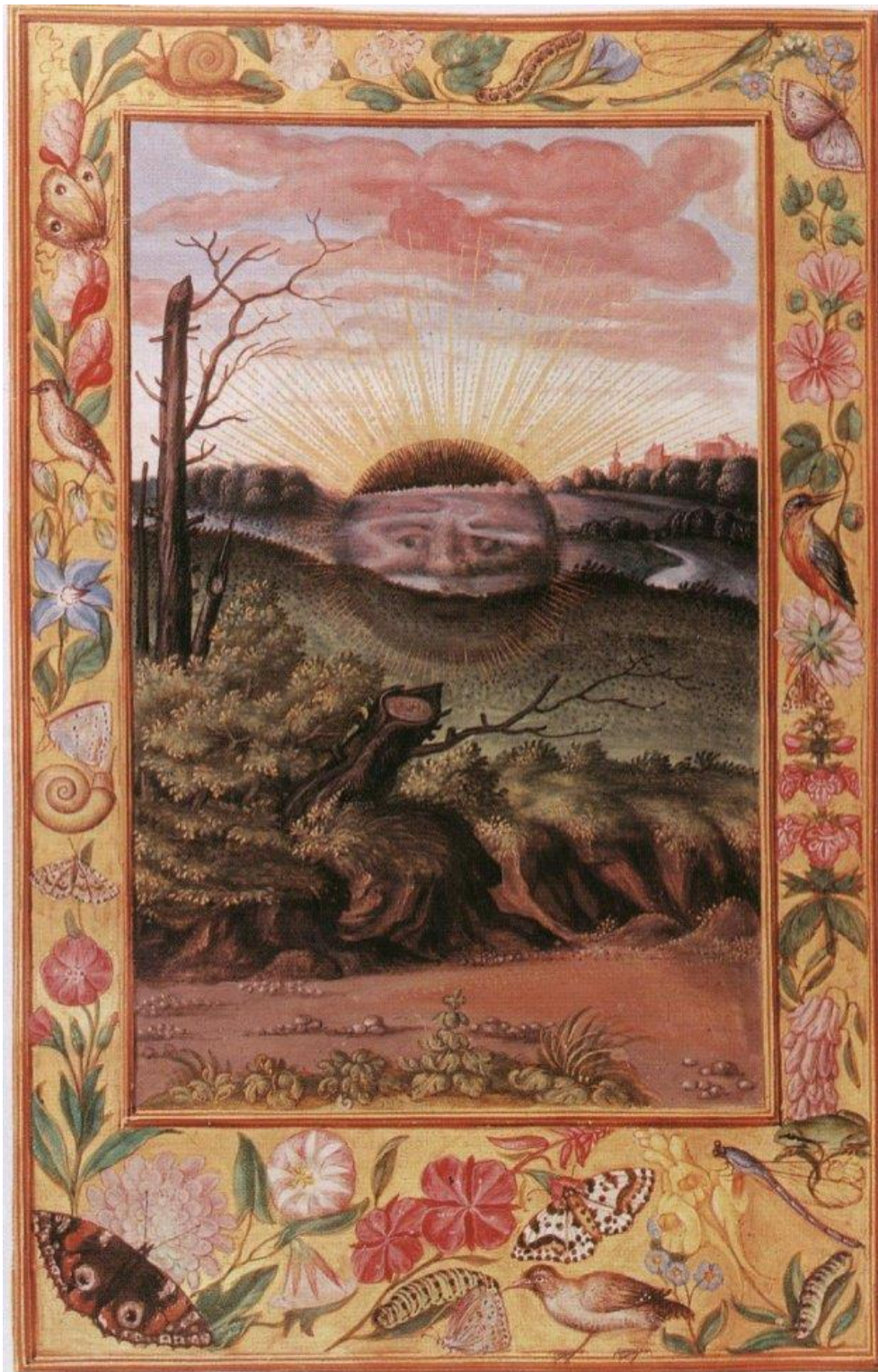
Gurdjieff was convinced that the energies of the higher intellectual and emotional centers of the human being could draw the lower energies and centers into stellar arrangements with a higher purpose in the exact way that an individual organ of the human body exhibits a level of control over how its localized cells will form, develop, and function. If there is any truth to these claims, then it stands to good reason that the image-forms and archetypes which appear in the unconscious and seep their way into the phenomenal world as full-fledged models of reality afterward are merely higher vibrations transposed to lower levels of vibration or dimensions where particles of matter are denser. As a complex alchemical machine, the human body is the only place in the cosmos where higher energies of this type and character are synthesized and their transliteration into psychic abilities—each of a distinct *vital essence*—known to occur. If we can continue to fuel these higher emotional and intellectual capacities that generate higher psychic vibrations and shape our objective reality by bringing the phenomenal world into alignment with the unconscious will, then there's no reason why we can't actually become those personified cosmic powers that we have brooded over since our coming to consciousness. Embodiment of these personified powers has always been a foremost target of the alchemical tradition, one objectified by the idea of a 'diamond body', the Elixir of Life, or the Elixir of Immortality. We humans created archetypal vessels of gods and goddesses because we wanted to inhabit them ourselves.

No doubt the image-forms that irrupt from and rent space in our collective unconscious have a strange yet uncanny way of materializing before our very eyes. Some have come sooner after they entered the pool of collective consciousness, whilst others have taken their time in acquiring an objective existence. At any rate they all become phenomena of the world that directly influence ways in which we live and have our being. Might the oldest and most desired of all one day join its descendants? Might we one day become gods and goddesses replete with magical powers?

Only time will tell....

THE BLACK SUN:

A DECISIVE SYMBOL OF TRANSFORMATION AND RENEWAL



One of the most interesting yet seldom acknowledged images that crop up in alchemical manuscripts is that of the *black sun*. For

those unfamiliar with alchemical symbology in general, the pairing of two words qualitatively irreconcilable may seem very bizarre. How can a source of omnipresent physical light that sustains organic life all over our planet be linked to the colour black or to the concept of darkness in general? The answer to this question lies in the near-perfect conditions that must subsist on the planet for life to take root. These, as we all recognize, are dependent on the relative position of the Earth to the primary source of heat, our sun. Coming too close scorches and reduces everything on the Earth's surface to cinders; alternatively, veering too far spurs a detrimental drop in temperature that coats it in thick layers of inimical ice. The environments of our two closest neighbours—Mars and Venus—both substantiate this theory. We also know that anomalous activity on the surface of the sun generates bursts of radiation (i.e. solar flares) that kill off those organisms unable to adapt to a spontaneous shift in environmental conditions. This dangerous and lethal potentiality latent in the solar sphere is called the *black sun*, a cosmological phenomenon dealt with at length by Stanton Marlon in his wonderful book, *The Black Sun: The Alchemy and Art of Darkness*.

Closely allied to the black sun are the *nigredo* and the *caput corvi*, phases of the alchemical opus inexplicable connected to darkness, excruciating pain, and suffering. *Nigredo*, as we should recall from the articles on transpersonal psychotherapy, is about an encounter with those facets of being that exist within the concentric sphere of the Self in an unacknowledged, unconscious state. Jung branded these aspects of the total personality one's *shadow*. Confronting one's own *shadow* is usually a fearsome

experience. Just like an excess of heat extirpates life and causes an alchemical vessel holding the matter to be worked on to burst, so too does a complete identification of the ego with conscious contents spur the materialization of archetypal and transpersonal forces which penetrate the frontiers of personal consciousness and overturn the soul's existing harmony and order. When this happens, one might feel like a mortal hero or heroine being seared alive by the fiery breath of a colossal dragon; an Egyptian Osiris being dismembered by the hands of the evil Seth; an intoxicated Dionysus being torn to shreds by a group of Maenads entranced and deaf to the reason of consensual waking consciousness; or a Christ bearing the collective burdens of humanity by suffering a chain of flagellations and subsequent death by crucifixion. What the language of these mythical constituents is telling us is that there can be no corruption without dissolution, no light without the darkness, no victory without defeat, and no form or establishment of form without the pre-existence of a formless *prima materia*.

Understood from a psychological vantage point *nigredo* is imminent when the ego-self can no longer contain the violent influx of transpersonal forces and when a growing number of phenomena and facts can no longer be explained away or reconciled with one's existing archetypal model of reality. This happens again and again over the course of one's lifetime; there is no limit to the amount of *nigredo* persons might suffer in their plight to individuate and become everything that the *nisus* embodied by their personal psychic dowry decreed they should become. In the alchemical *nigredo*, our personality loses its

fundamental unity and we are reduced to the sum of our parts. Some of these parts will enter into temporary conflicts and oppositions with one another, initiating a tug of war in the psyche that stretches the membrane of the ego in disparate directions. The ebbs and flows of transpersonal power can be so overwhelming and disorientating at this time as to incite genuine feelings that one is descending into madness or losing his or her grip on reality. Thankfully, all psychospiritual processes are heeded by hope, an omnipresent source of wisdom that any plunge into darkness is temporary and will soon be succeeded by healing and the reestablishment of fundamental harmony within the soul. Transcendence from the paranoia, anxiety, and madness associated with *nigredo* consciousness is probable when faith in the healing power of the Self has not been forsaken. This makes mental suffering all the more bearable, or so we're led to believe!

The image of the *black sun* can also be connected with the concepts of death and defeat in the Narcissus myth. Orientated to the field of psychological inquiry, the beautiful youth Narcissus himself personifies an inflated ego about to yield an acidic surplus of transpersonal energy which will gradually penetrate its archetypal blueprints and dissolve them completely. As expounded in the renowned classical tale, these corrosive agents do not come from entities, circumstances, or interactive fields that stand without; nobody, not even the beautiful water nymphs, can activate a powerful enough thought-desire, emotion, or *eros*-fire within the young man as to dissolve his internal mechanisms and structures. Narcissus remains unmoved by anything from the phenomenal world that is not of his own inherent nature. In the

end, the agent of dissolution comes from a spiritual space within, from intercourse with his own self. Peering onto the surface of a calm, limpid lake one day he catches sight of his own reflection and becomes enamoured of it. Desire for a physical form can be so overpowering as to spur behaviours and actions not indigenous to a particular personality. In Narcissus's case the impulse to get up close and personal with his own likeness could not be resisted and cost him his life; keeling over for a closer look at himself, he plunges into the water and drowns. Hence, from a psychological viewpoint, we might say that *eros*-fire or love has sparked a *nigredo* that dissolves Narcissus consciousness so that a greater, more comprehensive consciousness might emerge from its putrefying remains. The narcissistic youth had to die so that a much nobler, intricate, and three-dimensional personality, perhaps a sly magician or a valiant hero, can emerge and inherit the transmuting terrain.

From what we know about different states of consciousness, the propensity of the unconscious to express itself using leitmotifs from the natural world cannot be overlooked. What we find in most cases is that images are codified into a symbolic language unique to the consciousness footprint of each individual before being projected onto the nocturnal slate of mentation. A stream of images flowing forth from the unconscious through active imagination, hypnagogia, or dreams speaks only about the present condition of the psyche. Any other tool of analysis we might gravitate towards in our plight to derive meaning or understanding is purely speculative. For instance, stealing personal property from a close relative could connote anything

from the manifestation of new insights into existing problems to an undisclosed desire for vengeance against the respective personage for a perceived wrongdoing. The interpretation derived depends entirely on the sum of conscious and unconscious thoughts with which the personal ego is preoccupied at that point in time. This is why the best interpretation of any dream is best given by the dreamer himself. Who knows you better than you know yourself, right?

Having said that, there are certain images or phantasmagorias that possess identical or at least analogous meanings for the individuals of any one culture. Undoubtedly, the most dreaded of these is the *black sun*. Vivid, disturbing, and sometimes lucid dreams are a primary symptom of the arrival of the *black sun* in the little solar system of one's present, self-conscious personality. The harbingers of this distressing state are many in form and number, and can emerge from the unconscious depths either as literal renditions of a physical black sun shining in the blue sky or as subtle metaphors involving faeces, foul odours, the death of organic life, and lamentations for a living or deceased relative. Images of rotting flesh, graves, overflowing toilets, and the presence of worms and other organisms involved in the decomposition of organic matter are also indications that the *black sun* has risen. Marlon has specified in his book that the appearance of the *black sun* in dreams sometimes precedes a major life transition or the manifestation of a terminal illness. In this way, it acts like the great star Sirius whose heliacal rising from the eastern horizon heralds the coming of a new dawn. (As a

transition to the sphere of eternity, physical death is also an aurora of sorts.)

One of the most striking depictions of the alchemical *black sun* is to be found on the second plate of the third sequence of illuminating paintings known as the *Splendor Solis* (c. 1532-1535). Here, the *black sun* is portrayed as a black orb from which an infinite crown of golden-orange rays emanate. It ascends over an irradiated town nested amidst a bountiful countryside that is itself divided into three dunes. Climbing higher and higher along the invisible rungs leading to the pinnacle of heaven, the sun's rays pierce the rose-tinted wisps of cloud overhead but also the dense folds of earth in which vegetative and mineral life gestate. Indeed, the fire of life coming from the centre of the solar system is the same one that churns in the centre of the earth. This dual fire indicates that inner and outer and above and below are one reality. Perusing the vicinity of the aurora, one can see that the terrain is semi-translucent; the shape of the sun's orb is clearly illuminated behind the meandering path which connects the horizon to the adjacent mounds of the countryside. A close examination also reveals the incongruous nature of the image; the fecundity and fruitfulness of the green hills and meadows closest to the horizon are juxtaposed by a foreground dominated by a desiccated watercourse. What confuses the issue further is that a bed of young shrubs and plants have miraculously sprouted from amid the dust. Finally, a cluster of dead tree stumps situated on the mound furthest from the horizon and around the bank of the watercourse serve as reminders that the ancient land from which

they once sprouted is periodically atrophied by natural cataclysms and upheavals.

So what exactly is being depicted here? Taking all the aforementioned observations into consideration, the answer that best fits is one that regards the entire plate as something of an emblematic reminder that each growth in individual and collective consciousness is a crisis in self-esteem. It's telling us that higher consciousness—a concept that concurrently embodies vital life force, dynamic systems of operation, and mentation—is the glorious child of a cosmological contradiction where death and regeneration are indivisible aspects of creation. This isn't just an unshakable law of psychological distillation; it's one that defines all processes of creation. Looking at life as a purely physical process, we might say that the periods of depression signifying a necessity for planetary evolution have come through anomalous climactic changes to the Earth's atmosphere. The major catalysts for these extreme, hostile periods whereby existing orders of plant and animal life suffer decimation and fossilization and new potentialities for expression are realized come from above in the form of meteorites and solar flares and from the Great Below in the guise of volcanic eruptions, continental drifting, earthquakes, and periodic orbital wobbles. As an agent of transmutation, change is coming from the celestial and subterranean planes, from regions above and below.

The same is true for the individuating Self; when the coagulated personal myth and archetypal vision of the prevailing ego can no longer contain a proliferating mass of factual

information and data about the phenomenal world, transpersonal powers existing without but operating from within the totality of the psyche are spontaneously activated. Extreme or excess conditions in the ego (i.e. severe inflation of thought-desires) are the reason for its sublimation. At this point the old 'form' of the personality is dismantled; the outmoded psychic projections are subsequently destroyed; the shadow aspects are reconciled with elementary projections the Self deems worthy of being saved; and the remaining thought-forms are reintegrated into a newer and more inclusive 'form' or wider personality. Of course, the acquisition of this newly illumined state wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for the combined action of the outer interactive field and the emotional phantasmagorias irrupting from the unconscious on the conscious ego. Our new psychic constitution is thus a combined gift from the nourishment of inner and outer planes of reality, from the Great Above and the Great Below.

By the same token the fiery essence within our own psychic core is the same one powering the cosmic animal known as Mother Nature, the Earth, the solar system, and the entire universe. Everything that exists has come about through the action and interaction of this prime, intangible substance whose true form has never been comprehended or seen, and whose theorization has been honoured under a host of names like ether, fire, odic force, mercury, mesmeric fluid, qi, and prana. Sadly, variant levels of ignorance, egocentricity, and narcissism prevent most of us from ever awakening to the fact that everything in the cosmos is interconnected and imbued with some degree of sentience. Straddling this esoteric conceptualization entirely, the

plate conveys a consciousness or state of being that is delicately poised between the forces of creation and destruction in addition to the active and passive principles of generation; to gain traction in moving forward, *life* must go backwards first. From the contradictory nature of the natural imagery we gain a sense that for any sentient entity, the auric illumination of the present co-exists alongside the whole gamut of painful putrefactions endured in the past. The phenomenon, the decor tells us, is universal, embracing the physical, biological, and psychospiritual dimensions of existence. Just as the contemporaneous bionetworks of the Earth thrive atop subterranean depths enfolding the fossilized remains of prehistoric life forms, so too does the psychic patina of a fully-formed adult personality embody the fossilized memories of prenatal, childhood, and teenagehood incarnations buried deep within the darkened caverns of one's personal unconscious. Thus, the plate is an ode to the animistic and primeval belief that Great Above and Great Below and planes of reality perceived as inner and outer by the human mind are all reflections of cosmic laws originating from the inexplicable One. Between the horizon and the second mould of lush vegetation the semi-translucent earth reveals a *black sun* with a very human physiognomy, suggesting that there is a numinous creative intelligence that has ordered the phenomenal world and its constituent elements.

Perhaps, then, there is a reason to the cosmos. What do you think?



1.

I awake, complacent in my bed. Turning my head sideways, I see that the patterned blinds and curtains had been drawn to allow slivers of morning light to enter my room. It appears that the aurora has arrived. I decide to lie there for a few minutes and soak up the auric atmosphere, the sight of the sun as it ascends to the

topmost echelon of the heavens from the eastern horizon. At some point I become attuned to the fact that the glass panelled doors of my balcony face westward, not eastward. Why would the sun be rising from the west? Very strange indeed. Instinctively, I glance around the room to see if the arrangement of my personal items—computers, tables, stools, synthesizer and drawers—are out of place or if foreign ones have spontaneously appeared out of nowhere but I can't seem to put a finger on anything that would betray subsistence in an altered state of consciousness. Everything looks exactly the same!

I remember that the previous night I'd gone to sleep naked. If the deductive logic of wakefulness was anything to go by then my current attire should illuminate if my psyche is still loitering about in some dark corner of the dream world or not. I fumble around the covers, running my hands across my bare chest and abdomen. My hand then slides a bit lower, to my manhood. It appears that everything is an Adamic, unobstructed state. Yes, I am awake!

Closing my eyes, I begin to daydream about the pleasures and delights of sleeping naked. Who do people enjoy sleeping naked I ask myself? It must have something to do with the primal condition of being born into the world from the wombs of our mothers. We emerge into this world without the garments which herald our conditioning. The aurora, mortal birth, and nakedness are all qualitatively connected and go hand in hand so it makes sense that the best state to be aroused in from sleep is one in which we are curled into a foetal position without any apparel on.

Snapping out of that imaginal space, I throw the covers off me in a nonchalant way and jump out of bed. Time to rise, shine, and warm the room with some positive vibrations! I check my figure out in front of the full length closet mirror, admiring the hours of strenuous work in the gym that its size and contours clearly denote, and then I slide it over across to the other side to reveal a wide range of shirts, pants, and shoes on the shelves within. I take note of my cheerful and frivolous morning disposition, picking out a sea blue Hawaiian shirt gifted to me by my friend's mother, a pair of white khaki shorts with a combat design, white socks, and dark blue sneakers. For a few seconds, I peruse the images on the shirt, admiring the palm trees, the bright coloured tropical flowers, and an attractive slender couple sharing a loving moment beneath a straw umbrella stereotypical to the art, topography, and promotional ventures of tropical island destinations. The shirt is a sentimental piece of clothing, reminding me of my magical ventures in Maui and the Big Island in Hawaii. I stare at it for a few seconds, grinning like a child who has just won a holiday package to Walt Disney World in Florida.

Something makes me glance towards the radio clock on my dresser. Its nine am already. How did it get from six to nine so quickly? Three hours have already elapsed and if I don't make haste I'm going to be late for work again. I get dressed quickly, snatch up my keys from the marble bench in the adjoining kitchen, and then scoot out of the front door towards the garage to collect my car. But no sooner have I left the house do I realize that something isn't quite right. There's no sign of life anywhere. The screeching of car tires grinding against bitumen, the audible

squabbles of the rowdy neighbours, and the habitual ruffling of palm fronds in the front and backyards are all non-existent. Everything is void of the vitality and motion intrinsic to the principle of life. Everything is preternaturally silent. I can't seem shake the feeling that what I'm seeing is a phantasm, an illusion. Am I still asleep? No, I'm quite certain that I've awoken from my slumber.

I continue my examination of the phenomenal world by peering upwards. The sun seems to have departed from its diurnal linear pathway, coursing along a serrated trajectory quite foreign to its usual inclination. There's something quite unusual about its appearance as well. It looks more like a black hole with spokes spinning across the sky rather than the typical golden star of illuminating golden rays with which all of humanity is familiar. Suddenly I become seized by the feeling that this is some rare cosmic phenomenon that human beings are not supposed to witness. The intense heat emanating from the menacing black hole evokes queasiness and giddiness on my behalf. I can feel the shirt clinging to my dampened skin. A brief glance downwards awakens me to the notion that something sinister and uncanny is transpiring right before my very eyes; the beautiful coloured prints of tropical vegetation on my shirt have deteriorated into a vivid portrayal of a putrefying mess of plant matter and the enamoured couple are no longer there. How can something like this happen? Before I can formulate any explanations to account for this anomaly a sonic boom comes from directly overhead, a cacophonous blast that jolts me into dropping my keys and cupping my ears to prevent damage to my auditory faculty.

Radioactive dust, rocks, and ash begin raining down around me like black pellets. Knowing how precarious my position is, I cover my head and bolt back into the house. "The world is ending!" I scream, diving haphazardly into the small pocket formed by the bottom of my queen-sized bed and the parquetry. For a while I just sit there, listening to the interlacing rhythms formed by the pitter-patter of the black rain and the thudding of my heart as it slams against my ribcage. "Oh God, please let none of this be true," I whisper to myself. "None of this is true. The world isn't ending."

"Paul?" murmurs a womanly voice to my right.

I jerk my head in the direction of the sound but I can't seem to make out a physical presence. "Who's there?"

"Your mother."

"You're lying. I know the sound of my mother's voice. That's not it."

"I'm your spiritual mother." Her voice has a genteel, tender, and sincere quality to it.

"I can't see you."

"I'm invisible," she enlightens. "What are you doing down here child?"

"Something weird is going on outside," I blurt out. "The world is falling apart."

After a few seconds she replies, "How do you know that? You're supposed to be sleeping! You didn't go outside, did you?"

Her ominous tone causes a tight knot to materialize in the pit of my stomach. "Why not?"

"It's forbidden for anyone to go outside today Paul."

"Why?"

"Because changes are happening," she says. "When these changes are effected everybody is put to sleep. Everybody must be asleep. You were told to stay inside today."

"No I wasn't."

"You naughty boy," she scolds. "Why don't you ever listen?"

"Because I wasn't told about it!" I exclaim, obviously exasperated by her lack of empathy.

"You were told Paul," she insists. "You just can't remember."

"I don't remember it."

"You didn't let the sun see you I hope," she says.

"Why?"

"Because that's not really the sun," she reveals. "At least not the one you recognize as the solitary source of power in our solar system. That's actually something else that nobody knows about. Humans are forbidden to cast their eyes upon it."

"I saw it."

"Oh oh..."

"What?"

“You’re in big trouble now.”

Even before she’s finished her sentence, I know that something deplorable is about to befall me. I can feel it in the fluid within my cell membranes and the marrow of my bones. An attempt to close my eyes and teleport myself elsewhere proves unsuccessful. Within a few seconds something deep within my psyche changes. Something visceral has materialized and taken control of my body. In my mind’s eye, I can see exactly what the demonic entity looks like—it’s a reddish-purple being with deformed facial features, furrowed skin, and the limbs of a baboon. Its ugliness is such that it inspires a kind of enchantment. The image forming in my mind is so grotesque, nauseating, and psychologically perturbing that I do my best to block it from perception. Rolling out from under the bed I proceed to thrust a few fingers into my mouth; perhaps I can expel it through induced vomiting. The reaction is fast and violent; strands of bright yellow bile and amber red phlegm explode from my mouth and collect into a enormous pool on the floor that ends up covering half the room. No doubt the thick, brightly coloured mucus pouring forth from me is hard evidence that I have been touched by the darkness.

Oh God, how can I rid myself of an entity battling for control of my body? How? Soon, I realize that I’ve lost control of my own kinaesthesia and movement. Like a passenger of an out-of-control merry-go-round, I watch passively as my body starts to perform outrageous deeds. I dance around the room, screaming the worst kind of profanities imaginable and other incomprehensible prattle

in foreign languages until my voice becomes dry, rusty, and coarse. Then I yelp out in surprise as an invisible hand curls its fingers around the back of my neck and smashes my head against the wall, drawing blood. Soon, my clear, unblemished skin is covered over in bruises and abrasions. I'm completely terrified of what is unravelling; is this what it's like to be psychotic, or to have no control over your own functions? I seem to be spiralling out of control, spinning faster and faster like the propeller blades of a jet and I'm completely powerless to stop it. My limbs all seem have a mind of their own. The only thing that the entity hasn't managed to usurp is my mind. Thankfully, my mind and my thoughts are still mine. I haven't the slightest if the entity can somehow work its way into my brain and pinch me out of the throne of my own being completely. I guess only time will tell.

At some point I realize that I've internalized my speech. "I can't go on like this!" I shriek. "Help me! Somebody help me!"

"What's going on in here Paul?" asks a familiar voice from the doorway.

I stop dead in my tracks and look towards the doorway. My friend Sara is standing there, hands folded across her bosom. "How did you hear me?"

"Never mind," she says. "What's wrong?"

"I need help. There's something inside me."

She looks straight into my eyes pensively. "Oh, I can see what it is."

“Get it out of me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not allowed to bend the laws,” she says. “There’s absolutely nothing I can do about it Paul.”

I’m flabbergasted by her icy detachment. “Am I supposed to live like this forever?”

“Yes it’s necessary that you endure it,” she says. “That’s how you’ll produce gems and diamonds.”

“What gems and diamonds? You’re not making any sense.”

“Think about it for a second,” she says. “You know exactly what they are.”

“But I don’t want gems and diamonds,” I argue. “I just want things to be as they were before. I’m really losing my grip on reality. How can anybody live with a chronic condition like this? It’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know what’s real anymore. I can’t differentiate fantasy from what’s real.”

“Don’t fight it Paul,” she says. “It’s a mistake to fight it. It was meant to happen so embrace it. You’ll be glad you did!”

“I’m crazy.”

“A privileged condition,” she says, smiling. “Very privileged.”

(The specific dream sequence ends here.)

2.

God knows how I've gotten here, but it seems as though I'm in a subterranean kitchen of some sort. Two strange features of the room is that it has been covered over in jet black paint and that there is a complete absence of air vents installed to divert any vapoury by-products of cooking liable to facilitate oxidization. The rectangular shaped room features a range of sinks, benches, stoves, and such fancy cooking utensils as to give the impression that it's part of an exclusive and opulent restaurant in the middle of Beverly Hills.

Taking a glance around, I can see that there are various raw meats simmering in dark-coloured pots and pans. To my right the water in some kettles has reached boiling point and the latter have begun to whistle unceasingly. The amber-red flames emanating from beneath them cackle, flicker, and fluctuate in their plight for vertical ascension, threatening to engulf a series of Magnum Opuses that are coming-to-be. Moreover, a large chute overhead seems to connect one of the pots with machinery in the adjoining room. Judging from the intermittent rumbling, I'd say orbicular

objects or pieces of food are rolling down the chute and splashing into the pot. Wafting across the room, the pungent aroma pertaining to the misty vapours doesn't inspire any mouth-watering response on my part; on the contrary, they evoke a nauseating pang.

"Hey chef!" screeches a deep, scratchy voice from the next room. "Keep stirring the pot."

Instantaneously, I realize that there's an oversized wooden spoon in my hand. It's so big and heavy that I need two hands to manoeuvre it.

"Stir the mixture," says the masculine voice again, 'with the tool that has been given to you by the master."

"Okay."

I take a step forward, to the closest cauldron, and jab the spoon into the thick, congealing mass of lard simmering within. The temperature in the room is so great that I have to cease the action time after time to wipe away rivulets of sweat dribbling down my temples.

"Hurry up," the voice declares. "We don't have all day."

"What's in this mixture?"

"That's none of your concern."

For a while I engage in the monotonous, mind-numbing activity without as much as a thought for what might be happening on the opposite side of the kitchen door, but at some

point I become attuned to a series of murmurs that seem to be coming from that direction. The murmurs gradually transmute into a succession of muffled, bloodcurdling cries for help that are blighted out and then silenced by the menacing buzz of a chainsaw. My intuition tells me that something sinister and malevolent is going on outside, something that has nothing to do with cooking and hospitality. Pain and the fomentation of food are multiple universes apart, I tell myself. I desert my post and tiptoe all the way to a door adorned with glass panels and curtains, sliding the latter aside just enough for a quick peek of the beyond. What I see petrifies me.

Barely more than a few feet away, nude men and women are all seated on a rectilinear arrangement of wooden chairs with their backs to an executioner. Their arms and legs are bound by handcuffs and their heads covered over by black hooded facemasks. They don't seem to be aware that their lives are about to be cut short like broiler chickens. Or if they are they're putting up a stoic front. I catch a brief glimpse of the executioner as he revs up his assailing weapon and steps towards the chairs, getting ready to lop off another head. The tightness in the pit of my stomach grows into the size of a golf ball and I begin shuddering violently.

Clutching my throat, I stumble back to the cauldron and look inside. There, amidst the gelatinizing heap, are the putrefying heads of those that have been beheaded in the adjoining room. What's going on in here? How did I ever end up in a human slaughterhouse? I need to get out of here!

The door suddenly swings open and a tall man dressed in a classy business suit walks in.

“What’s going on?” I ask, trying to keep my voice from quavering.

“We saw you looking through the curtain,” he said. “We know what you’re thinking.”

“No, I...”

“I see the doubt and the uncertainty. You’re going to betray us.”

“No, I’m not!”

“Oh, yes you are!” he exclaims. “I know that sort of look when I see it.”

“I promise I won’t tell a soul.”

“You won’t get the chance,” he said. “Our master wants to have a word with you.”

Innately, I recognize that this “master” of theirs has supernatural or mystical powers and that meeting with him could mean potential dissolution and death. My legs feel weak; my head as light as a feather. Should I use the wooden spoon as a weapon and attack my potential assailant or should I just drop everything and run? But where do I run to? There’s no way out of here. Incapacitated by an influx of trepidation and revulsion, my body refuses to do either. I feel heavy like grey lead, as if the soles of my feet have fused with the earth.

“Who is the master?”

“Hello,” says another mesmerizing, guttural voice from beside the businessman. “I am the master.”

I avert my eyes, anticipating that his physiognomy might be able to enchant or possess the psyches of other people just by making eye contact.

“Look at me!” he snaps.

I look downwards. “No!”

“Look!”

“No. I know exactly what’s going to happen if I look.”

His voice is much closer than before. “Look at me,” he reiterates. “I know you want to. There isn’t a human on this earth that can resist me, you know?”

“I’m not looking!”

I can feel his breath against the nape of my neck now. I clutch my eyes tightly, wishing that he would just dematerialize and leave me be. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“If you don’t look I’ll saw your head off!” he exclaims.

The jaws of a chainsaw suddenly roar to life. Mortified by the prospect of being decapitated, I open my eyes just enough to see who the master is. The man gawking at me is somebody I recognize quite well—me. In fact it’s an older, scruffier looking version of me, a middle-aged me that might exist in a good decade or so. The other me has a wry smile on his face. Our eyes meet for

a brief second and then, without warning, the real me is thrust from the dream segment back into the everyday realm of consciousness.

3.

Who doesn't like summer I tell myself, stepping into a pair of black denim shorts, a sleeveless red T-shirt, and my favourite brown sandals. It's that time of the year when the sun is at its zenith and the soul is unfettered by the monotonous conditions imposed by Western lifestyle. When the centrepiece of our solar system is cheerful, the heart and soul also shine with the same degree of splendour and contentment! Glancing casually out my bedroom window, I see an earthly paradise unfold before my very eyes; children act out imagined roles and inwardly felt narratives against a marine backdrop that inspires serenity and recreation.

Just like the children, my excitement cannot be contained for a single second. I dash outside, across the street to a tiled promenade that traverses a crescent-shaped shoreline. The row of white condominiums and other high rise buildings which dominate the view recall the topography of cities like the Gold Coast in Australia and Miami in the United States. I let my eyes wonder out towards the horizon; there's not a cloud in sight! Pleased that the weather god has taken kindly to my presence, I begin meandering along the footpath in a carefree manner. I'm not pressed for time and I have no particular destination in mind so there's no point in rushing. Walks are always more enjoyable when you can stop regularly to peruse the scenery anyway!

Marching to the very tone that the weather has set, I pass by throngs of sun worshippers, children, skaters, bikers, joggers, and other pedestrians on my way to nowhere. There's a tepid breeze coming from the south; it ruffles my hair and caresses the hairs of my exposed skin. The sensation of the current as it makes contact with my body is bizarre, preternatural; it almost feels as though it's passing through me.

At some point an attentive, middle-aged man steps right in front of me, blocking my way.

"Good day sir!" he greets.

"Good day to you," I reply jauntily.

His smile turns into a frown.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"You look very um..."

"Very what?"

"War-torn."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Are you an ex-soldier by chance? You look like you've just returned from a war."

"No," I reply. "I've never been a soldier and I've definitely never taken part in any war."

"You're covered over in sores and wounds," he says with a look of desolation and pity in his eyes. "How awful."

Indeed, when I glance downwards, I realize that my torso is riddled with fleshy wounds which seem to penetrate through to the marrow of my bones, to the very core of my body. Some are elliptical in shape, others hexagonal, and others still perfectly spherical. All look rather fatal. If I wasn't human I'd be a piece of Swiss cheese thrown out for the sewer rats to ravage. Without warning, the hairs on my skin become fully erect. How can I have deteriorated so badly and not be dead? What's happening doesn't make any sense at all. I don't dare lift my shirt or drop my shorts to see what there might be affected by the same ailing condition.

"How unusual," says the stranger, mirroring my own thoughts. "You should really be dead by now, shouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"How are you still thinking, talking, and standing even?"

I shrug my shoulders like a small child that has just been asked how a powerful magician might saw a pretty woman in half and put her back together.

"Is this the central mystery of life?" I ask the stranger and some higher aspect of my own self. "This is the central mystery of life, yes?"

"This is the central mystery of life," my own voice echoes from multiple directions.

I awake with a muffled scream, my skin crawling.

CHILD'S PLAY: A FUNDAMENTAL KEY TO TRANSFORMATION



The third and final collection of images from the *Splendor Solis* series features four beautiful illustrations encapsulating the entire alchemical process: an image of the black sun (already discussed in a previous post); a scene depicting ten children engaged in free play; an outdoor scene featuring a group of women washing and putting out white blankets and bed sheets to dry; and an image of the golden sun warming a town and its surrounding countryside with its splendid, unencumbered rays of light.

In my eyes, the most puzzling and cryptic is the second which depicts children at play. A casual inspection of this picture will reveal an inner and outer state of fundamental harmony and exuberance. The first thing that becomes apparent here is the capaciousness of the room and the plentiful sunlight piercing through the windows. The prevailing feature within the room's confines is an enormous tile stove. These features reminds us of the alchemical vessel in which the matter to be worked on is sealed before being subjected to the slow-burning and persistent hermetic fires. Seated magnanimously in front is a pleasant-looking woman decked in a black-collared red dress and a white head scarf. Incidentally black, white, and red are the tutelary colours of the alchemical phases—*nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo*. Her maternal and benevolent nature is designated by her immediate preoccupations; she's cradling a small infant who sits complacent on her lap and simultaneously tends to a very needy and nude toddler who's tugging on her dress. A lustration bath or washbowl is on the floor beside them. To their right stands an open doorway; the wooden arch above it supports two stoppered

flasks containing a yellow solution, emblematic of an intermediary alchemical phase called *citrinitas* or *xanthosis*. Beyond the opening is another female figure holding a minuscule lustration bath or waterbowl. She is illumined against the subtle shades of three-dimensional darkness.

Alternatively to their left a solemn child clad in blue is in the process of assisting a smaller nude one to slide onto the wooden bench. In close proximity is another pair of children engaged in fantastical role-play; the younger of the two, a naked boy, rides a toy horse and holds a toy pinwheel whilst the other boy wears a blue outfit and vies for his attention by waving around another toy pinwheel. In the space directly between the two intermingling couples is a black bird, probably a crow or jackdaw, with its wings partially outstretched. This is a powerful symbol of the omnipresent *prima materia*. In the forefront of the image are five other children pretending to be charioteers and passengers; two older children, one robed in a blue garment and the other in a yellow one, are providing the physical support necessary for two naked others to lug about a nude toddler on an opulent red cushion that has imaginably converted into a chariot. The drivers seem self-absorbed; one is candidly petting the head of the other and admiring him. All primary colours—red, yellow, and blue—and the fourfold composition of matter conceived in Aristotelian terms—water, fire, air (indicated by the wings of the black bird), and earth—are present, indicating that transformation of being is imminent.

So to which stages of psychospiritual development is this plate alluding to? The best way to answer this question is to look at the entire plate from a contemporary psychological perspective. A depiction of children at play indicates that the *pleromatic* and the *uroboric* consciousness have been superseded. Both of these just mentioned stages precede the development of the ego-self; the *pleromatic* (before birth) is associated with the inertia of emptiness, apathy immobility, immutability, and eternal unconsciousness and the *uroboric* (inside the womb) with a partial differentiation from the ambient background of primordial powers. This sentiment corresponds well with the positions of the black bird, a symbol of the *prima materia*, and the mother figure, an emblem of primitive emotions, instinctual drives, and the will to survive. Their placement near the robust children is an apt reminder that previous phases of psychological development are always nested within and kept dormant in the memory bank of subsequent ones. At this point it might be worth mentioning that the authentic experience of innumerable persons has shown, time and time again, that one can regress back to these earlier stages when circumstances necessary for their proliferation (i.e. prolonged anxiety, phobia, and physical or sexual abuse) are rife. Hence their emblematic presence in a plate specifically orientated towards the aesthetic consciousness of a child is entirely warranted.

Now let's turn our attention towards the overarching theme, the children. Scouring a room full of alchemical leitmotifs we realize that there seems to be three distinct subgroups or categories within the interacting family of children: the naked

toddlers, the older children bejeweled in beautiful blue garments, and a sole child dressed in yellow. The first of these embody a state which transpersonal theorist Ken Wilber (1949-) called *body ego* consciousness. This is closely connected to the concretization of cerebral hardware needed to survive in the sifting and sometimes very deceptive sands of the environment. Like full-grown adults toddlers can detect movement, perceive colours, shapes, and forms, discern objects in three-dimensional space, and calculate depth. They are also extremely receptive and extroverted at this stage, absorbing actions and behaviours from other selves and parent figures in their immediate vicinity in the way that the swirling sands of a desiccated desert will swallow whole the first drops of summer rain. Their head space fills with a multiplicity of fantasy images that are marginally differentiable from those that encompass an objective existence. Ones that aren't invented are carbon copied from actions and expressions undertaken by significant others.

A toddler exposed to a clown face baring teeth will emulate that particular facial expression. Similarly, if the toddler witnesses a maternal or paternal figure striding about with a limp, he or she will probably replicate and perfect that to a tee. Irrespective of moral and ethical trajectory, everything perceived becomes part of their inner world. When vocalized enough times by parents or other children, abominable words or phrases can easily join the shortlist of their primitive vocabulary. In short, the foundational mind of a toddler is an empty slate unconditioned by the threads of religion and culture but their consciousness *wishes* to be filled with content that will enable the formation of

cohesive bonds and relationships and hence guaranteed subsistence in the world. This statement is mirrored by the six toddlers of the plate who are stark naked. Dressing oneself or the act of being dressed is synonymous with communal values; by adhering to this coded logic, their nudity becomes an expression of the virginal, receptive, and unconditional state—the state of *wishing* oneself into existence. Toddlers are like little dark moons, waiting for the light of the sun to give their inherent manifold natures colour, shape, and texture.

The next group of children, the ones decked in blue, are slightly older in age and represent inauguration into a stage of development that Wilber called the *membership-self*. Just as the word itself suggests, the ego-self has now extended its borders beyond the skins of its own carnal body and has allowed for definition as a members of a group, usually its immediate family. Carrying on from the preceding phase, the ego-self maintains a plasticity and sensitivity that allows swift assimilation of cognitive and behavioural impressions coming from other family members. Save for the obvious purpose of imprinting, this heightened sensitivity to external influence aids in the synthesis of self-image and esteem. A child can only verbalize or express what he or she has learned from others. This is why influences demonstrated at this point should encompass love, patience, and compassion—sentiments able to equip the child with the intellectual skills and emotional understanding necessary to engage others in a wholly meaningful, purposeful, and interactive way.

Scampering about with their elaborate silk garments, these children have advanced their language, logical, and mathematical skills to a degree that enables them to express themselves more competently, concretely, and specifically, and always in egocentric terms. Spatiotemporal existence coagulates and the child's newfound ability of measuring, compartmentalizing, organizing, and knowing what things, objects, and substances are by slapping labels or names onto them helps in the promotion and solidification of the personality. In this consequent stage, the child's ego has fully disconnected from the maternal uroboros; it now sees itself as a dynamic, functional entity that can operate within a greater reality yet is distinctly different from other children that share similar physical and mental characteristics. The frequent use of the personal pronoun 'I' or 'me' vindicates this theoretical supposition. Though-forms of the *membership-self* are also heeded by a double consciousness perceived as fundamentally incongruous in the adult mind; children at this evolutionary stage can partake in left-brain thinking by computing times and days and following all rules and regulations of board games like Monopoly and concomitantly entertain a more image-based and comprehensive language of imagination through role reversal, mythical play, and the active creation of and participation in alternate realities without sensing the alleged paradox. A most significant feature of this stage is the blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality, and the harmonic equipoise between the masculine solar (active) and feminine lunar (passive) energies.

The third and final subgroup consists of a single individual, an older-looking boy: he wears yellow, the colour of illumination, rides a toy horse, and offers a helping hand to a naked toddler on a red cushion. Interestingly, the image of the horse and its rider has been used by many psychological schools to designate the indefinite marriage of personal consciousness, the inner realm, to consensual reality, the outer realm. Consciousness has again undergone a major evolution here and defines itself wholly in accordance to the manifold layers of illimitable darkness, the unconscious; things are perceived as being black or white, male or female, right or wrong, good or bad, sweet or sour, physical or non-physical. This permanent schism of opposing forces signals the swift ascension of patriarchal solar consciousness. Everything that the child does in this stage is goal-orientated towards the salvation and augmentation of self-esteem. Social accolades might be sought with much panache and personal crises, riddles, and major problems are shunned, sometimes to the detriment of other children and adults. For the most part the child's personality has become deeper and more sophisticated now, espousing individual likes and dislikes, emotional bonds, a fierce sense of independence, and a healthy dose of self-control. The latter quality is sometimes symbolized by the horse and its rider; just as the rider is the master of his animal and can control it at will, so too is the intellect the exalted and sovereign entity of the mind that can pull the reins in on the chaotic ocean of emotions and triumph over them.

Ken Wilber's non-hierarchical map designates this particular cerebral precinct to *mental ego* consciousness. The *mental ego* is

a huge fan of building giant castles with impregnable walls and moats to protect a developing stream of cognitions, acuties, and behavioural patterns that gravitate about a central pillar of psychic images and ensuring that they don't deviate from the path being hewn. From a transpersonal viewpoint, this mental position facilitates the emergence of a fairly rigid and unquestionable worldview, a defensively tapered state that removes the child's now fossilized memories of the interconnectivity of all things and of creation as harmonic unity. At the behest of the *mental ego*, the developing child fulfils his or her social obligation by constructing a conscious edifice for perpetual habitation that is substandard because it remains forever blind to the objective reality of its own relativity, to distortions of its constricted perception.

To give a more tangible example a child that has entered this phase might say, "My name is Axel. My dad is a truck driver and my mother is a tailoress. My best friend's name is Jack. I like chocolate milk and white chocolate raspberry ice-cream. I don't believe in ghosts. I don't like playing sports. I think that there's a cookie monster on my roof that comes out at night and makes funny noises. When I grow up, I want to become a pilot." Evident here is the severe stringency as well as any short and long-term repercussions that might be generated by this traditional model of encountering reality. Unlike the preceding mode of consciousness where psychic terrain remained largely unfortified and open to all influences emanating from the competing forces of the Logos-cutter (the logical) and the Eros-glue (the mythical), the *mental ego* state puts up thick gargantuan walls that prevents

the subtle dew of mythical thinking from seeping through. The initiation of a unified perception whereby the two are no longer reconcilable means that the masculine solar energies have emerged victorious at this transitional stage of psychological growth.

In light of the just mentioned symbols and the stages of psychological evolution associated with them, the second plate of the third series of illustrations comprising the *Splendor Solis* alludes to three intermediary states of consciousness known as the *body ego*, the *membership-self*, and the *mental ego*. Collectively, these states are a fundamental key to the transformation of human consciousness. Incidentally all of them are inexplicably linked with the notion of free play. When children play, they are proactively and uninhibitedly communing with other children and adults in a manner that encourages learning. They also behold every second spent playing with little regard for social convention and for memories and feelings of the past or those that might eventuate in the future. The most important thing for them is the here, the *now*. There's a genuine wonder and awe felt towards all objects and beings in the cosmos irrespective of whether they're natural and animate or artificial and inanimate. In most cases these are only marginally defined, allowing for levels of fantastical engagement that are much more polygonal, energetic, and qualitative than the habitual or obligatory ones entertained by most mature adults. This contracted state of attention sets the stage for efficient absorption and consolidation of information. Because play is void of the fettering stress of goal-orientated behaviours, learning

often occurs at an accelerated and exponential rate. By entering this 'free play'-an interactive field of creativity, exuberance, optimism, and very high vibrations—a child begins to garner an intimate understanding of its own thought processes, predispositions, and opinions; the thought processes, proclivities, and views of its interacting peers; the variant dynamics of self-dialogue versus the deeper mysteries of human relationships; and its own natural talents.

The enactment of fantastical myths and other narratives where anything is possible through role-play helps a child connect with the basic substrate of their own being, the innate psychic traits or dowry preeminent at birth. Children are visual creatures. They create images in their mind's eye and put these images into action (sometimes to the detriment of others) without as much as pausing to doubt their feasibility. Nothing is ever impractical, farfetched, or too eccentric and illogical in their world. One minute they're princes and princesses stuck in medieval towers, the next they're transforming into dreadful witches and magicians in order to cast spells upon the rude lady next door, and a little while after that they've become white rabbits trying to jump out of Willy Wonka's top hat! This temporary freedom to act, to pretend, to be what one *wishes* to be and perform whatever actions and behaviours one wants on the spur of the moment not only empowers children by giving them the chance to apply theatrical suppositions to specific situations and learn from them, but it also hands them a level of control that is non-existent in the more rigid structure of their everyday lives. Being allowed to think and act for oneself fine tunes the

conscious will so that it becomes creative, flexible, intensely alert, and fiercely independent. Instead of becoming a cheap counterfeit of an existing individual, the child will more than likely flower into a well-balanced, measured being driven by innovation and self-creation.

So how might we perceive this plate in light of the above discourse? What amalgamating tenet could it be alluding to? Personally, I see it as a stark reminder that by returning to and recapturing aesthetic child consciousness, we can remember how to sustain a trajectory of audited fantasy images in the subconscious for prolonged periods. By keeping that clearly defined feeling-imagery within and feeding it with the blood of action, it eventually materializes as an objective truth or feature of outer reality—something able to be seen, grasped, and savoured in time. Sometimes we dream and then the dream comes true. Have you ever heard of the axiom, “Be careful what you *wish* for, because you may just get it?”

WOMEN'S WORK: INTEGRAL MECHANISMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS



The third picture of the third series of plates belonging to the *Splendor Solis* collection of alchemical images initiates a dramatic departure from both the images of *sol niger* (the black sun) and the tranquil haven of children at play. Gone are the mystifying sentiments prompted by a harrowing vision of desecration and the transcendental electricity that is generated when children create an interactive field in their playrooms and playgrounds. Instead, what we see is an assemblage of women going through the motions of ordinary and mundane domestic tasks; the washing, rinsing, and drying of white linen. It's a scene that strikes us as odd and unprecedented; what connection, if any, might there be between the washing of fabric and the cosmological processes illuminated by alchemy?

The answer to this conundrum lies in the nature of transformation itself. Coming about chiefly through emotional understanding, major transitions in the development of consciousness would never eventuate if it wasn't for active participation and repetition in diurnal tasks that societal norm deems mandatory. By continuously chipping away at issues, problems, and ailments from every possible angle, one gets closer and closer to their aetiology, expediting an in-depth understanding of fundamental natures that promotes heightened awareness of underlying connections and consequently psychospiritual growth. Motifs of women washing and cooking are actually quite rife in alchemical manuscripts. On the third emblem of Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens*, an inscription beneath an illustration of a woman tilting over a washing tub reads, "Go to the woman who washes the sheets and do as she

does.” There’s an obvious analogy between the chemical processes of *solutio* (when a solid turns into a liquid) and *sublimatio* (when a solid is converted into a gas) that are instigated by the application of heat to the contents of an alchemical retort and the ascension of water vapour along with subsequent downpour of rain that occurs in nature at the behest of our splendid sun. This is why master alchemists would instruct their protégées to, “Go and look at the women who are employed over the washing and fulling of linen: see what they do, and do what they are doing.” What was meant by this is that one should first become intimately acquainted with the operations of nature—in this case the rotation of the elements through the presence or absence of heat—before attempting to accelerate that process in the laboratory.

A brief glance at the picture indicates that there’s some kind of work-in-progress. The central image is a winding waterway that cleaves through a beautiful courtyard adorned by immaculate green lawns. From an artistic perspective, it’s nearly impossible to discern its origin or destination. It also appears that most of the vigorous activity is focused in the forefront of the image. On the extreme left-hand side a range of black pitchers and a cauldron are being scorched by an unrestrained fire. Interestingly, a group of three women working nearby are completely embroiled in their work and don’t seem to be at all alarmed by the secretion of noxious fumes. One washes linen in a shallow wooden basin whilst the other two expunge linen of excess water. They all wear a combination of different tricolour schemes; the first on the left is decked in white, black, and blue; the second in white, black,

and red; and the third in white and gold. Directly behind the latter two an incandescent black garment, perhaps made of silk, has been draped over a wooden barrel. Venturing towards them is another woman carrying a basket atop her head; the position of her arms is reminiscent of the matriarchal gesture of epiphany.

The middle ground is dominated by two women, one decked in blue and the other in red; the latter has ventured into the stream to wash linen whilst the former pegs recently washed ones onto the clothes line to dry. Beyond them are lawns that have been covered over with rectangular pieces of clean linen by three women with red dresses and vaguely defined physiognomies. These have been strategically positioned either horizontally or vertically along the ground to aid in the evaporation of water. A man standing on a patch of land near the bank of the waterway can be seen pouring water or some other liquid from a container onto a piece of linen. On the opposite side is another man perusing something in a courtyard that can't be seen because the trajectory of vision is obstructed by the walls of a house. The space beyond that is dominated by two medieval blue-domed structures; an unpaved footpath which winds its way like a slithering snake to the arched entrance of the walled town; and a precipitous, jagged peak that breaks through a thick layer of ominous-looking cumulonimbus clouds as it rises into the heavens. There's also a golden hue phosphorescing near the horizon, suggesting that rays of sunlight will eventually break through. Just like in the second plate with the family of interacting children, the five colours depicted by all the people present are colours associated with pivotal positions of the Great

Work: black with *nigredo*, the stage of putrefaction and corruption; blue (or blue-green) with *cauda pavonis* or multiplication; white with *albedo*, a stage indicative of the albification, purification, and unification of matter; yellow with *citrinitas* or *xanthosis*, an intermediary phase of illumination; and red with *rubedo*, a culminating level of the alchemical process linked with final integration and actualization. The elementary quaternary of fire, water, air, and earth necessary for the synthesis of the Philosopher's Stone are also present in the image.

So what might this plate be telling us about the nature of transformation? First and foremost the allusion to *solutio* and *sublimatio* is important, for it subtly hints that the two alchemical operations are essential components of the life process. Relating to the element of water, *solutio* denotes the disintegration of an entity into its integral components. In psychological terms, the act of submerging something in water is one and the same with the annihilation of an inflated ego-self through an encounter with a more comprehensive standpoint. Symbolized as a larger container, this more comprehensive stance might be projected from the conscious of a deeper and more evolved individual, an esoteric society or school, a political faction, a cultural group, or the powerful *egregore* of an organized religion faction. Any entity in possession of a worldview consensually felt to be more objectively 'true' than the relative one of an immature ego can bring about the *solutio*.

It's no doubt an experience that almost always forces an individual into a terrifying encounter with their own shadow, to

put it in Jungian terms. When an ego suffers liquefaction by immersion in the unconscious, an extremely volatile terrain of feeling-imagery, the personality is exorcised of problems, prejudiced attitudes, and other fixations that have kept it from moving forward and acquiring authentic existential consciousness. Once the libido has been freed from these obstructing bonds of the past, the corresponding personality can resuscitate from the darkness of oblivion with a sounder, much more expanded field of contemplative vision that allows for the retention of multiple viewpoints. Ken Wilber called the latter *vision-logic* and described it as a by-product of *centaur* consciousness, a stage of development focused almost exclusively on vigorous activity and responsibility. The few people who enter this phase retain an intimate sense of community and belonging but it becomes substandard to taking the reins of life into one's own hands. They walk with a spring in their step and their body language seems to intimate that they go about fashioning their world and their future proactively. These sentiments correspond perfectly with what seems to be transpiring in the plate. By working together in a group the industrious women are giving the impression that the activity is a communal endeavour, yet a closer examination reveals that each has appropriated an idiosyncratic manner most characteristic of individualistic affairs. The women are sharing domestic tasks and working towards the fruition of the same goal without having established a shared psychic space between them, an interactive field or communal *egregore*.

Sublimatio, on the other hand, can be seen in the assignment of the white linen to the lawns for ventilation. An upward motion or ascent and the condition of being on an elevation or high up in the sky are all associated with this chemical process and its associative symbolism. Under the mediation of the air element, *sublimatio* involves the transmutation of a solid substance straight into a gaseous vapour without passing through the intermediary liquate state. The phenomenon unfolds in a more natural state outdoors, where moisture like dew or bodies of freshwater are evaporated by the sun's heat during the diurnal hours. Psychologically, rising upwards is a blatant reminder that we can transcend the pathological symptomology of our own melancholies and complications. Our usual nature is to identify wholly and unconsciously with our own psychological projections; we're so immersed in our subjective states-moods, feelings, pseudo-emotions, neurotic behaviours, depressive complexes, and the like-that we often become embodied by them. Instead of confining them to a miniscule space within our thalamocortical systems we allow them to proliferate autonomously. Eventually, they grow to be much larger than we; they overpower us and take a stranglehold on our lives.

However, by gaining a deeper awareness of the unconscious and its language, we detach from the very temporary and transitory states that kept us imprisoned for so long and come to see them as symptoms of undisclosed wishes and desires, unfulfilled natural talents and tendencies, and persistent involvement in relationships with incompatible partners. When we learn to look at our own lives objectively and critique them as

if we were just another stranger, the solution to problems that initially felt like nagging injuries or gave the illusion of being unassailable peaks spontaneously appear. Herein lays the mystery of psychospiritual development. Acknowledging a mental state, for instance a raging anger or a deep melancholy, and then christening it with a name puts significant distance between the negative magnetism of the feeling-image and the positive magnetism of your own being. You rise above it and remain above it, like a mountain peak which forms and then subsists above sea level for the majority of its geological lifecycle. From that elevated position life with its roots and its destination is so transparent. The problem for most of us in general is that these sparse periods of extreme clarity, of *albedo* consciousness, are few and far between.

All these ideas are pertinently represented in the *Splendor Solis* image of women's washing; the notion of detachment, of attaining an objective bird's eye view of one's life path, is epitomized by a precipitous peak in the background and by a raging fire in the foreground. The qualitative connection between the concept and the symbol used to embody it is self-explanatory in the first example but slightly more obscure in the second. How is the raging fire in the picture and the sense of detachment propagated by the alchemical *sublimatio* linked? The element of fire, as we know, shares a qualitative esoteric connection with spontaneity, creative energy, the sun, the colour red, truth, unconstrained emotions (i.e. jealousy, anger, and rage), and by extension of that inflation of the personal ego. If we were to equate it with the latter two, the image then becomes a supernal

expression of silent and humble perseverance in the face of psychological adversity. By going about their domestic business without any expectation of receiving privileges or honours and concomitantly overlooking the obvious dangers that the fire represents, the women are detaching from the problematic entanglements of matter with its eternal orientation towards the subjective and the personal.

This is an authentic sign of transpersonal development in every sense of the word. To rise above the *mental ego* is to transcend the thought-desires constructed and projected onto the substrate of reality by one's libido. All desire to subjugate and bring under our ownership or control is an illusion, a self-centred error of perception spawned by the ego-self. It takes profound courage, responsibility, and persistent proactivity such as the kind we see in the *Splendor Solis* image of women washing to shatter that illusion. The process leading to such a 'big' breakthrough is sometimes painstakingly protracted and gradual, such as in long-term psychotherapy, and at other times rather unprecedented and instantaneous, such as in spiritual emergencies (i.e. peak experiences, out-of-body experiences, past-life memories, shamanic crises). Given that the psychic contents carried by prevailing ego-self differs from person to person, it's almost impossible to predict what particular configuration of circumstances are likely to spur major life transitions that are transformative on an spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and communal level. An explicit experience that spawns creative development and exaltation in one person could very well induce

destructive urges, dissolution, and regression to a more primitive level of being in another.

In retrospect, the implicit references to the alchemical *olutio* and *sublimatio* processes bring to mind the integral structure of consciousness. From the abovementioned discussion it seems as though dialectical progression from one stage of development to another is preceded by a crisis in self-image followed by a willingness to jettison the very principles underlying one's kaleidoscopic vision of reality. Of course, the obvious problem with any temporary dissolution of identity is that it automatically activates conscious defence mechanisms to counter the dissolution of self. The most catastrophic of these is the enchantment of regression, which thrusts one back into *mental ego* consciousness. During such a potentially destructive phase, the creative urge, the will to rebuild one's personal myth in light of new experiences and a deeper awareness of life, becomes one's saving grace. The logical and methodical manner in which the shift from a presiding state to a more comprehensive one occurs is quite remarkable.

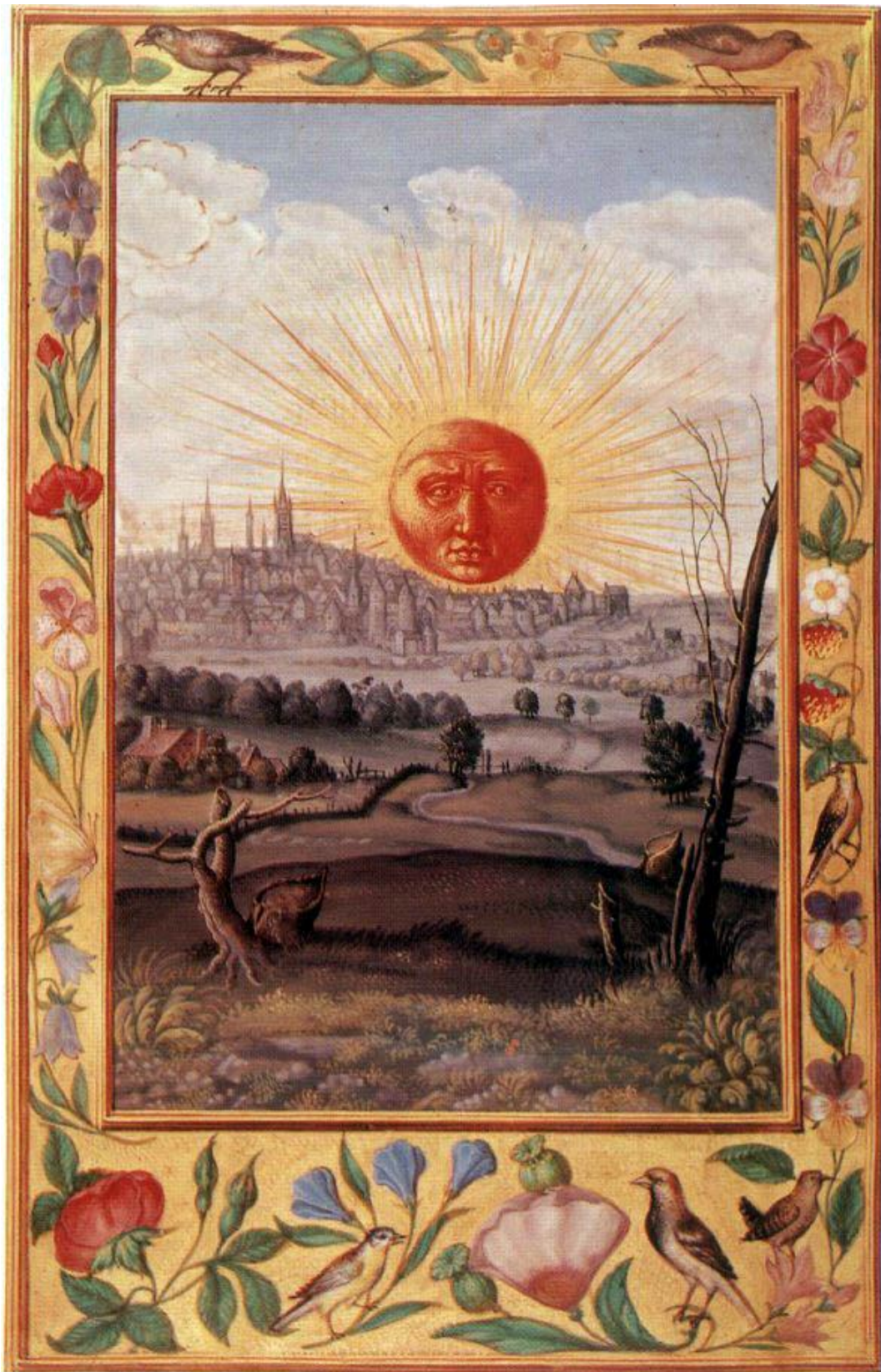
An individual usually begins with a self-image and complementary cosmology that adheres to a set of rudimentary laws. Over time, these are developed and refined according to information and theoretical facts that have been singled out for their compensatory or harmonizing qualities. Lamentably, it isn't long before the respective individual feels that the theoretical framework itself just isn't enough to appease the thirst for emotional understanding, and so he or she might actively seek

out specific inner and worldly experiences that justify the extended subjective vision. This promotes sensations and feelings of complacency and wellbeing—the belief that all is well. The specific layering of theory and evidence isn't rigidly confined to one particular arrangement of operations; feeling and intuition may very well precede the gathering of facts. Inevitably there comes a time when the accumulative process inverts, and the individual realizes that he or she has been blasted out of the known world (his or her own) into infinitude. Abruptly, everything has been turned upside-down; the value-bestowing and meaningful acquisitions and possessions within have been liquefied. Somehow, the unconscious will have to initiate the condensation of a new self-image and personal universe because the rules of the game have once again been changed.

This, more or less, is how human consciousness transitions from one stage to another.

THE SPIRITUAL SUN:

DISIDENTIFICATION FROM THE REALMS OF CONVENTION



The last plate of the alchemical *Splendor Solis* series is also the most unfathomable. This picture is a lot like the inaugurating one with the black sun in that we are once again some distance outside the walls of an anonymous city. We can no longer perceive bubbly children at play or a group of conscientious women going about their domestic chores. There's no motherly love, no reminder of mundane tasks that need to be completed on a daily basis. In fact, there isn't a single human being in sight! It appears as though we've left the sphere of the personal altogether and landed on terrain that is much more impartial and detached.

The city itself, together with the surrounding countryside and a river that courses towards its fortifications, is blanketed over by a menacing grey shadow. For reasons unknown to us the unfettered rays of the sun are incompetent, seemingly unable to illuminate the surface of the earth. In the foreground a cluster of ghastly tree stumps protruding from a subtle carpet of green shrubs remind us of nature's inexhaustible cycle of birth, death, and regeneration. Irrespective of the kingdom to which they belong, all earthly creation is bound by these laws and will ultimately suffer the same fate. Looking skyward, we see that the sun has just broken free from the boundaries of the horizon and will soon trace its familiar arc all the way to the uppermost stratum of the sky. How do we know that it's dawn and not dusk? The truth is that we can't really be sure, though the position of the plate as a culminating aspect of the alchemical opus suggests the former. The aurora always comes after a dark night of the soul, not beforehand. Moreover, the numinous presence of the

sun is prodigious; the spindles of light projecting from the corona pierce the furthest corners of the cosmos and illuminate even the most concealed pocket of darkness. It's markedly human features advocate the belief that there's a hidden intelligence or conscious entity behind the basic blueprints of creation. The direction of its gaze indicates the perusal of something that is beyond the perceptive reach and comprehension of all earthbound creatures, great and small.

My inclination is to view this final picture as an expression of elusive *subtle* consciousness, the psychospiritual position that theorist Ken Wilber pioneered to describe the process of gaining freedom from the *mental ego*. In the wider scheme of things, what is the latter but a partial by-product of the modern psyche's roots in society and engagement with collective norms and values? What is the latter other than a coloured mask to front consensus reality? What is the latter other than a red-tinted patina to come to terms with the hierarchical ordering and strict compartmentalistic nature of the male-dominated societies that have prevailed in the last two thousand years or so? The ruling masculine principle or ego is all about conquering and gaining the ascendancy over Mother Nature; it sees domination and the affirmation of personal will as a mark of exaltation and sovereignty. Relentless pursuit of it is the stuff of true heroes and gods, it asserts. In all Aryan cultures where the Martial energies are allowed to achieve their fullest expression (i.e. Mycenaean, Hittite, and American empires), the collective or state myths are explicitly orientated towards narratives that demonstrate the race's own intellectual and physical superiority. Irrespective of

whether they're real, partially real or imagined, description of wars and battles are peppered with grandiose detail describing superior skills in combat and intrepid character, with both corroborated as decisive factors in their ultimate victory. Of course the principle aim of the mythographers responsible for their transcription was to belittle and undermine the worth of other contemporaneous peoples whose cultures were undoubtedly perceived as real threats. Encoding such sentiments into folklore and allowing them to subsist in racial memory demonstrates to what extent domination was deified and ego-building promoted. Having inherited the principle values of that Aryan cosmology, we inhabitants of the developed West will often ask ourselves questions like: What's in this for me? How will this affect me? How will this improve my self-esteem and self-image? How will this help me climb to the top of the communal hierarchy? How will this preserve my name for posterity? As Ken Wilber asserts so pertinently in his work, 'conquering death by becoming the father of oneself' is what the *mental ego* wants to accomplish.

At the *subtle* level of consciousness, one's psyche undergoes a major transposition that results in an ejection of the ego from the driver's seat. The self-centred will of identification and assertion, the art of seeing red, transmute into the green of surrender. Through some eye-opening experience, an individual is forced to confront their own limitations and handicaps. He or she may contemplate the brevity of human life when juxtaposed with the infinitude of the universe. The known world begins to shatter and break apart. Gradually, the solid ground of consensual reality

gives way to a bottomless pit where the objectivity of unshakable laws are radically scrutinized, altered, and sometimes jettisoned altogether. One is no longer a totem pole at the centre of his or her own solar system, but rather his or her solar system is merely one of infinite variants modelled off an unfathomable prototype. Consequently, the respective psyche suffers albification or whitening where it becomes extremely receptive to higher transpersonal energies and is ready to be imprinted with higher knowledge. The latter frequently comes from peak experiences or *unio mystica* with the divine; from voluntary or involuntary possession; from messages channelled by discarnate entities, masters, angels, or spirit guides; from psychic openings like the acquisition of parapsychical powers; and from infiltration by impersonal archetypes that stand outside the spatiotemporal domain but become personal via engagement with higher cerebral function. Growth of awareness surrounding the fundamental interconnectedness of all things that comes hand-in-hand with such experiences illuminates our *likeness*; hence it's quite common for *subtle* consciousness to be marked by unfettered displays of compassion towards the sick and physically disabled in addition to a real willingness to work towards the alleviation of world hunger. The hippie subculture which proliferated from California in the mid-1960s and 1970s theorizations surrounding the supposed existence of indigo children are both tangible communal expressions of the *subtle*.

If we were to describe what occurs at this intuitive soul level from a more holistic vantage point we could say that the compressed conscious core holding the empirical personality

together has melted away, leaving behind a mercurial essence that seeps down through the subterranean strata of the Self to illuminate an ecology of consciousness much more comprehensive, introspective, and intuitive in its definition of the objective. Just as the earthly womb preserves an inestimable amount of knowledge about extinct organisms that were alive when the sedimentary rock responsible for their fossilization formed the uppermost strata, so too does the somnolent darkness of the Self contain concrete imagery and symbols that can transfigure an individual by activating vivid prepersonal memories and higher causes. The best possible way of accessing them is to surrender self-directing freedom and the moral independence that comes with it and enter into an interactive transpersonal field comprised of shared identification with *egregores* like unconditional love and compassion.

As a clandestine esoteric system of knowledge that works with symbols and picture-images to unlock multiple layers of meaning, to break the societal codes of extinct societies, and to expand the frontiers of human consciousness by condensing experiences which would otherwise be indescribable, the discipline of alchemy itself belongs to the sphere of the *subtle*. Given its tendency to process reality through *sublimatio* rhythms that seek common denominators instead of differences in numerator, we see that the *subtle* likes to straddle the line between form and formlessness, between holism and reductionism, and between acute self-awareness and collective unconsciousness. Without question many great thinkers operated on this elusive level to cognize their perennial philosophies.

Plato's idealistic view of eternal forms and ideas, Immanuel Kant's idea of unknowable *noumena* in relation to sense-based *phenomena*, and Carl Jung's theory of psychological archetypes were all developed out of a timeless system of esoteric correspondences that drew the differing aspects of creation into qualitative relationships with one another. This could never have been accomplished without the aid of symbols and pictograms which group multiple ideas together. Long before them, the Minoan priestesses of the Great Mother Goddess used the multicultural labyrinth symbol to simultaneously connote a whole continuum of ideas that included the snake, subterranean water, dancing, and the Underworld. The feminine tradition dissipated during the Iron Age but was picked up again by the medieval alchemists who used a qualitative grouping of pictograms as metaphors for a single concept. The *prima materia*, for example, could be represented by either a virgin woman, dew, the moon, mercury, earth, water, or the sea. Of course, standing on the opposite end of this cosmology is the discriminatory, explicit, and concrete outlook of language, a system of communication far more innovative and intricate than the former but seriously hampered by an inability to contain more than one idea at a time and capture the numinosity of transpersonal experience. For all intents and purposes, a picture is really worth a thousand words isn't it?

There are certain factors intrinsic to psychological makeups that determine how quickly an individual might attain *subtle* consciousness. These are fierce independence, a peculiar streak of natural eccentricity, and a formative environment that

promotes creative and free development of self-image and identity. Many psychologists just don't realize how detrimental and antagonistic the dogmatic enforcement of religious, philosophical, or political ideas is to psychospiritual evolution unfolding along the lines of one's natural tendencies and talents. When oppressively imposed, dogma can derail, hinder, or terminate integral stages leading to *subtle* consciousness. The best tangible examples of such come from third-world countries where people are proselytized to march to and uphold a collective national *ethos* that cares little for the principles of true freedom and individuality. In humble countries like the Philippines, for instance, the unyielding breed of Christianity known as Roman Catholicism has become so deeply intertwined with the contemporary Filipino psyche that competing religious and philosophical systems are decreed an anathema. A casual visit to a general bookstore in downtown Manila automatically justifies this deduction; hordes of shelves are made readily available for plain and special edition copies of Biblical Scriptures preaching salvation through the divine figure of Jesus Christ whilst areas of critical inquiry like psychology, the New Age, comparative religion, natural science, neuroscience, and physics are strikingly absent. Control is best maintained when seminal sources of information able to cerebrally empower an individual are audited before circulating on the national market, something that the Philippine government are obviously quite competent and clever at. How can one aspire to self-control and freedom to think for oneself when the potentials for such have not yet been

consciously disclosed? Empowerment cannot precede the possibility of empowerment.

But to be fair to the Philippine populace, all individuals that live in social communities are conditioned to some degree or another. We ourselves, the inheritors of the developed West, must adhere to the judiciary laws of our respective countries otherwise we face punishment and repudiation. We dress, style, and groom ourselves in accordance to contemporary vogue; utilize orthodox phrases when acknowledging acquaintances, neighbours, and strangers in the street; hold down paid jobs in order to make an income so that we may pay our bills, keep our stomachs full, and indulge in a vacation or two to Thailand, Fiji, or the Bahamas; paint the walls of our children's rooms in sex-specific colours (i.e. blue for boys, pink for girls); and partake in extracurricular activities outside standard business hours like watching movies, playing golf, going out to dinners with relatives and close friends, and celebrating religious and cultural traditions like Christmas and Easter. Those that amble along paths that fall outside the continuum of social conditions deemed "normal" are made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable, they're sneered at and ridiculed, and in worst case scenarios judged and disenfranchised. Many of these negatively skewed retorts by conservatives and those towing convention are unconscious reactions, illuminating the extent to which thoughts and actions perceived to come from our own selves have been communally synthesized. So it appears that we, too, are marionettes on strings. In truth our only discernible difference from the classical conditioning that ensues in

developing countries is that our culture bequeaths to us the illusion of control. That's the only difference.

Nothing is exempt from the enchantment of conditioning, not even our education system. While a lot of what we're taught at primary and secondary school is rooted in concrete facts obtained from the mathematical measurements and the physical laws of three dimensions, the cogitations that led to their establishment derive from... Yes, you guessed it—human beings. Ever since the appearance of the empirically-minded pre-Socratic philosophers, theorists have resorted to deductive reasoning to generate workable hypotheses about the nature of humans and the entire universe that are substantiated or rejected through quantitative analysis. Though eventually overridden, many archetypal models advocated by great scientists, philosophers, and cosmologists of eras bygone seem to reflect conscious perspectives relative to the scientific knowledge available at the time. The main problem with theories is that, all too often, they grow prickly horns and serrated scales and become conventional dogma. “This isn't the way things might be or most probably are even, this is the way they are!” they shriek. When intellectual laureates in physics, neuroscience, or any other field of inquiry attempt a radical imposition of their viewpoints on the general public, you can be pretty sure that there's an underlying doubt there, an unconscious qualm nibbling at them in the manner that the ocean nibbles on sedimentary rock.

For one, our personal engagement of impersonal sensory information means that nobody is exempt from the subjective

retina of the cerebral eye. Even more significant is the trajectory of unified consciousness. Frequently unacknowledged in the scientific world is that our sensory percepts do not detect the full range of *noumena* that exist and can inform us about objective reality. There are atypical components of consciousness—sights, sounds, tastes, smells, sensations, proprioception, kinaesthetic awareness—and consequently other submodalities of experience that are not accessible to human beings. Our fractional engagement with all that exists in the cosmos means that all knowledge mustered, even theoretical knowledge cognized by the most formidable intellect, will always be relative and unable to inform the totality of being with its objective relations. Some of the shrewder amongst us might theorize the existence of something so subtle that it remains undetected by our paradigmatic modalities (i.e. dimensions that transcend three-dimensional time and space, cosmic *ether*, or some other physical force) but ultimately the latter's unwillingness to yield to an empirical testing only operational in the world of three dimensions means that the theorist responsible will always be fighting an inexorable uphill battle. With no way of garnering evidence, that unsubstantiated fleck of thought will sink back into collective unconsciousness and become a historical fossil quicker than the jagged flash of a lightning bolt.

In any case, much of what we believe to be fundamentally true about the cosmos today can be attributed to the inferences of select theorists with comprehensive visionary breadth. The rest of us—including university professors, medical doctors, and scientists—are automatons of above average acumen that record

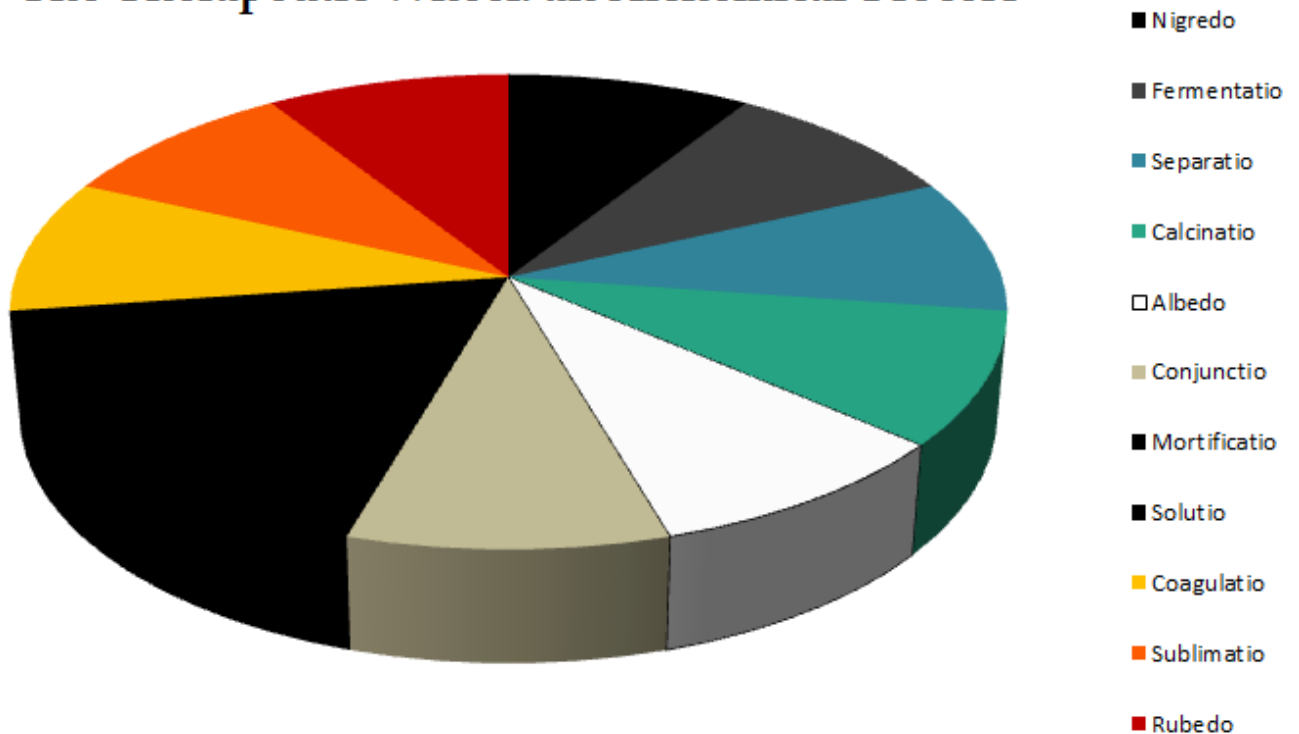
and replay their theories without every questioning the cosmological premises upon which they were founded. In this way we're like the lyrebirds and cockatoos of the forest that can mimic human speech or monkeys that learn difficult tricks by chance without the cerebral firepower to apprehend the higher modalities of spoken language or perform elaborate actions rendered automatic by the dynamic mentation of the human brain. In the vast majority of cases the materialization of verifiable information that doesn't seem to fit the archetypal framework of our theories is either ignored on purpose, scoffed at and dismissed as 'unscientific' or 'outrageous', or falsified under skewed premises and shoved in the 'defunct' drawer. A computer analyst trained to compute exclusively with numbers would become bamboozled at the appearance of a letter or pictorial symbol on their computer screen inasmuch as a neuroscientist would buckle in disbelief at the discovery of an extra-terrestrial organism able to operate on an intellectual level akin to that of human beings without a central nervous system. It's always easier to close your eyes and pretend contradictions are not there rather than have to deal with the eventual ramifications should they be acknowledged on any conscious level. The point that I'm trying to make here is that we suffer from short-sightedness.

Another good example comes from the different schools of psychological thought that have evolved over the last century. Engage a Jungian analyst with the terms *conscious* and *collective unconscious*, and they'll know exactly what you're talking about. But throw in the terms *superconscious* or *middle unconscious*

(terms that apply to the transpersonal cosmology of Roberto Assagioli's psychosynthesis and derive from the same stream of esoteric thought) for good measure, and you'll find that a vast number would quickly lose track of your hypothetical argument. Such is the extent of our short-sightedness, a stubborn and egoistical unwillingness to peer into our neighbouring intellectual compartments and descry how their paradigms might be similar or different to our own. The worst of the offenders are cosmopolitan institutions like universities and colleges which favour shameless out-and-out regurgitations of conventional dogma if one wishes to graduate with distinctions and honours. Hence, modernity unconsciously promotes the art of clever imitation instead of clever innovation. If you imitate like a lyrebird you're rewarded with handsome grades and a good job that offers respectable wages. Proceed in the opposite direction, along the yellow brick road of self-sufficiency and independent thought, and you've unconsciously applied for candidature into the association of mentally unbalanced theorists. Sometimes, the unfettered egoism of one epoch is paid for in blood by the ingenious mortals of subsequent ones whose discoveries happen to negate archetypal models of reality conceived by their intellectual predecessors.

Evidently, then, *subtle* consciousness is all about independent thinking and innovation. It's about thinking for oneself, reasoning for oneself, and doing for oneself. There's a whole lot of value in that!

The Therapeutic Wheel: an Alchemical Process



Carl Gustav Jung's persistence in deciphering the cryptic, convoluted, and exasperating imagery presented in many ancient, medieval and Renaissance alchemical manuscripts was instrumental in eliciting a renewed twentieth century interest in alchemy as a corroborating aspect of depth psychotherapy. In the last few centuries preceding this phenomenon alchemy had fallen into disrepute as a rudimentary protochemistry superseded by the manifold developments of Enlightenment science, a discipline of no practicable use except to the quacks of Victorian occultism who still ambled about in garage laboratories trying to transmute lead into gold and perfecting methods of pseudo-transmutation by which select credulous members of the general public might

be duped. Of course these sentiments began to dissipate when Jung pioneered a panpsychic model explicating that the entire alchemical opus was in fact a symbolic anatomical dissection of humankind's plight for wholeness, the self-actualizing process known as *individuation*. It was developed on the conviction that the collective consciousness of Western civilization has evolved under the mediation of a monotheistic religion whose dogmatic nature is rudely indifferent to the inner life and to the innate psychic dowry of natural tendencies that make each one of us a distinct and individual personality. With the roots of consciousness estranged from their origin in the unconscious for such a long time the only way the Western soul could express its desire for totality, for reintegration, and for a return to the paradisaical perfection that was lost at birth without being apprehended by the Catholic Church was through the veiled language of laboratory processes and chemical reactions.

Before I detail how the unconscious processes of psychological reintegration embody the Hermetic Art and the search for the Philosopher's Stone some background information on the individual phases of the alchemical opus is necessary. In the *Emerald Tablet*, perhaps the most important medieval article on alchemy that has thus come to light, the thrice-greatest patron of the esoteric sciences and arts Hermes Trismegistus lays forth thirteen propositions hinting at the notion that alchemical methodology is an individual and world-creating process whereby pure energy is transliterated into imagination and imagination into matter. The alchemist's job was to achieve *unio mystica* (mystical union) with the transcendental realm of the divine and

understand how these cosmic works of creation could be recapitulated in miniature through normal chemical processes. Looking at the symbolic content of alchemical manuscripts from a historiographical perspective, it becomes obvious that the primary writers rarely expressed unanimous opinions on specific aspects of the alchemical opus. There are variances in opinion on almost every aspect; from the time of the year that the Work should commence and the chronological sequence of stages to the number and type of ingredients and utensils that should be used along with the colour and texture of the final product.

Despite this discordant fact details of practical work were usually spoken of in the context of a three or four colored division that was underpinned by a sevenfold schema; the Saturnine, Jovial and Lunar forces lunarized the base matter by initiating chemical processes such as calcination, solution and putrefaction which brought about *nigredo* and *albedo* in the sealed vessel.¹²⁶ Successful completion of latter bestowed upon the alchemist the gift of the 'white stone'; the power of healing and of transmuting base matter like lead or mercury into silver. Further operations were then carried out by Venusian, Martian and Solar forces which solarized the just formed 'white stone' through chemical reduction, sublimation, coagulation and fermentation.¹²⁷ These subsequent reactions in the sealed vessel or glass brought about *citrinitas* and *rubedo*, culminating in the synthesis of a glittering red powder of significant weight known as the 'red stone'; this was the *ultima materia* or Philosopher's

¹²⁶ Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Shaftesbury, UK: Element Books, 1986), pp. 185-189.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 189-191.

Stone, with the power to transmute base metals to gold and impart immortality. The creation of the 'white stone' under the aegis of the first three planetary powers comprised what alchemists termed the Lesser Work and the creation of the 'red stone' under the aegis of the last three the Greater Work. Mercury, a planet-metal that would have comprised the preliminary stage, was never ascribed a definitive position in its own right because it was considered to be the formative force behind the entire alchemical opus.

The panpsychic model of alchemy packaged by Jung in the last three volumes of his collected works—*Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), *Alchemical Studies* (1967), and *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (1970)—and then delivered to the intellectual mainstream by such established historians like Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade is basically a patterned application of his own established theories of the collective unconscious, projection of archetypal contents, and individuation onto cosmological premises put forth by the occult system of alchemical knowledge. By identifying close parallels between enigmatic images of dragons, creatures of classical mythological lore, copulating couples, planetary deities, natural elements, and royal personages to be found in alchemical manuscripts and similar ones rife in the archetypal dreams, hallucinations and visions of his psychotic patients, Jung realized that the elaborate processes and substances being described by the alchemists weren't tailored towards a material enterprise seeking a rubicund chemical but were in fact emblematic stand-ins for archetypal content psychologically projected onto laboratory apparatuses from the confines of the collective

unconscious. Given that psychospiritual development through the self-actualizing process of individuation is typically ahistorical and happens quite unconsciously, there was no way that the alchemists could have known that their hitherto repressed inner lives were becoming exteriorized and attaining hallucinatory realism and authenticity. Basically what Jung is telling us is that the alchemists were engaging in ‘active imagination’, taking bits of fantasy, dream material, or particular feelings and moods and ruminating upon these until they took on a life of their own and evolved into action. Hence the lack of a consensus when it came to alchemical methodology and the exact nature of the prime substance (*prima materia*) needing to be worked on can be attributed to psychological inimitability. The *tabula rasa* of each mind is filled with different possessing transpersonal energies and mental states and “carries the projection of the autonomous psychic content” so it makes sense that no two base ‘chemical substances’ (mental states) will ever be identical.

Transposed to the psychological level alchemy becomes something of a generic framework through which Jungian *individuation* can be comprehended and quantified. A significant quality brought to our attention by the alchemical stages themselves (i.e. *necrosis-nigredo*, *cauda pavonis*, *leucosis-albedo*, *xanthosis-citrinitas*, and *iosis-rubedo*) is that self-actualization occurs within the cycle of time whilst at the same time drawing upon disembodied transpersonal energies (i.e. love, desire, envy, passion, greed, hate) that stand without and make transformation possible. One of the first propositions of Hermes’s Emerald Tablet reveals that the *prima materia* is created out of the

fourfold elements—fire, air, water, and earth. Psychologically, these can be understood as the mental faculties of thinking, intuition, feeling, and sensation that differentiate from the collective unconscious to form the personal ego. The lead, salt, mercury, earth, or some other base substance needing to be subjected to the cycles of distillation, concoction, or maceration detailed in alchemical manuscripts is the archetypal situation of the ego personality; the planet-metal stages and tricolour scheme of the opus are the transpersonal energies disconnected from ego consciousness and seeking reintegration; and the end product of gold or the ‘red stone’ is the individuated Self that has reconciled personal and transpersonal factors and thus garnered major increments of consciousness.

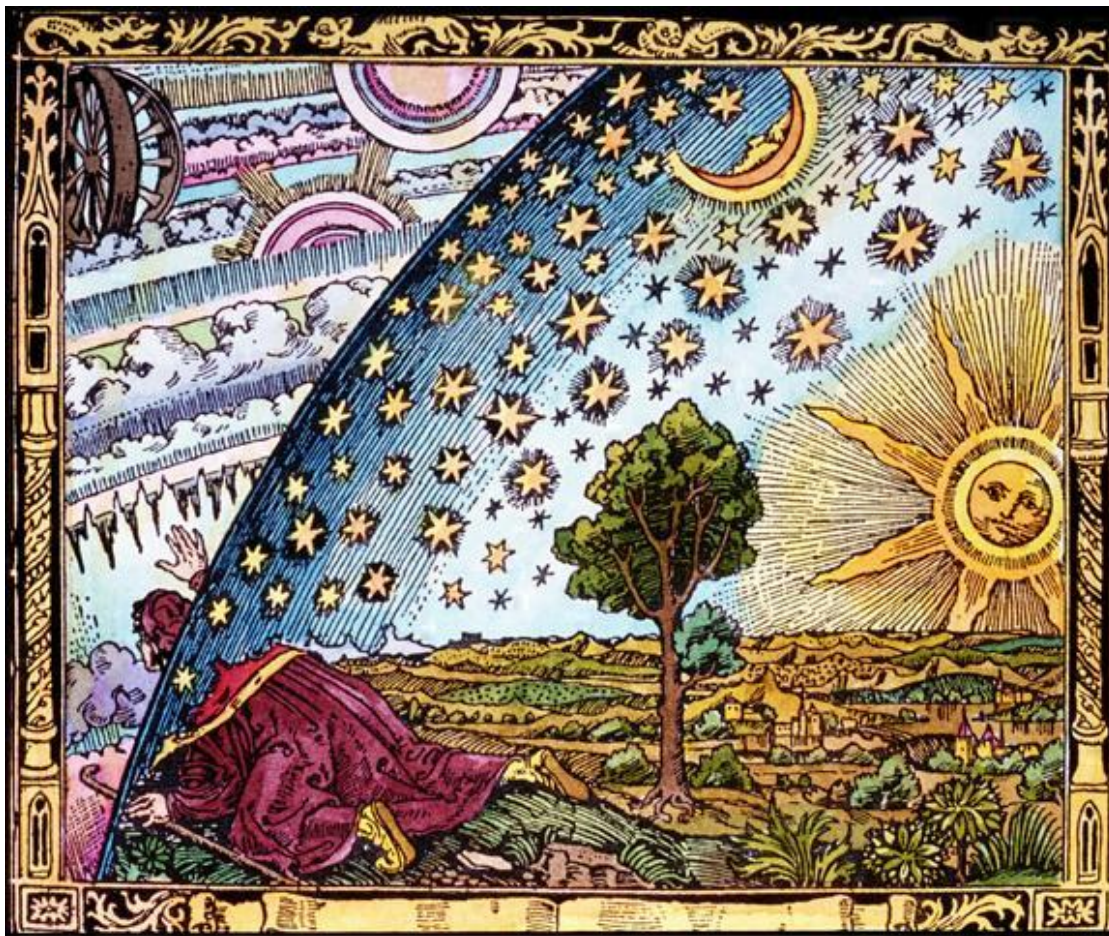
So in ascending to the mount of modern depth psychology as it exists today and looking down towards the jutting slopes of the Jungian school; the lesser and more subtle ones of Jocelyn Chaplin; and the fertile investigations of Micheline Boivan, Augustine Meier, and Jungian Edward Edinger into the processes of counselling and psychotherapy we see that the transformative endeavour of self-actualization as outlined by the alchemical opus is cyclical in nature. The expunging of neurotic and behavioural patterns detrimental to the evolution of character may take days, weeks, months, or even years to complete, depending on how deeply entrenched the habits’ roots are in the humus of the collective unconscious. Some persons undergoing therapy require gradual progression through successive cycles and a repetition of various phases to attain freedom from their detrimental mentation and behaviours whilst others only need

one. Depending on the temperamental composition of the individual in counselling and the nature of his or her psychological disturbance, a therapist may sidestep, subvert or invert a specific step or a whole assemblage of steps. There are no fixed rules or premeditated techniques and exercises when it comes to healing the ailing psyche. To find resolution and closure an individual may combine a particular configuration of therapeutic methods belonging to different psychological schools of personal development, counsellors, and discarnate spiritual entities. By and large the order of alchemical operations takes a back seat to the random path most able to stimulate psychospiritual transformation, psychic equilibrium, and a realignment of fundamental harmony with the outer world in the one being counselled.

According to the alchemical path, there are three core virtues that must not be forsaken for therapy to be successful. They are perseverance, valour, and a conscious willpower resolute in its ability to subsist through tumultuous and unpredictable mood swings. The deep nature of the individual psyche is rendered comprehensible and its deep 'waters' become navigable only when the mediating conscious is imbued by such a sulphurous attitude. You must become hotter than fire to evade dissolution wrought by the black embers of pain, trauma, and suffering and worse still, the lamentable fate of actually becoming these embers. If you successfully resist the friction, the struggle, and the premature dissolution brought on by transpersonal energies, an inner fusion of natural tendencies occurs and you develop a 'superior personality' able to disengage from and

transcend the unbearable gravity of neurotic habits and problems. One alchemical manuscript says, “O all ye seekers after this Art, ye can reach no useful result without a patient, laborious and solicitous soul, persevering courage, and continuous regimen.” What this means is that maintaining inner calm, patience, and resilience in the face of adversity allows one to navigate through psychological disturbances without running onto a reef of complexes and persistent sticking points.

As the psychotherapeutic process gradually shovels away more and more neurotic dirt from the concretized bundle of psychological impulses to reveal the superior personality hidden within, we begin to see that the tendency to individuation is spurred by unconscious willpower proliferating from the Self. In this scenario of self-actualization ego function plays only a minimal and supporting role (if that). Whether you flower spiritually and become all you were meant to be is pretty much contingent on the willingness of your personal ego to channel and accommodate transpersonal energies compatible with your centre of gravity. Successful collaborations that steer clear of psychic inflation yield more and more consciousness; they create ‘diamond bodies’, gold, and other everlasting gems highly resistant to pressurized forces perceived to manifest from intercourse with the phenomenal world. Therapy enters into this far-ranging picture as a facilitator, ensuring that these natural urges for self-actualization come to pass at an accelerated rate.



The Emerald Tablet, otherwise known as the *Tabula Smaragdina* in Latin, is a condensed and apocryphal summation of Alexandrian alchemy that was reintroduced to the Latin West sometime during the thirteenth century. Esotericists and occultists frequently refer to it as the 'Bible of all alchemists', as fundamental to the Hermetic Art as what Biblical Scripture is to Christianity, the Koran to Islam, the Torah to Judaism, and the Enneads to Neo-Platonism. In terms of esoteric influence in alchemo-Hermetic circles only the seventeen tracts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are grander.

The earliest record we have of this document is in eighth and ninth century Arabic philosophical treatises, for instance in

The Book of the Secret of Creation by Balinas, the Pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana. Translated from Arabic into Latin by Hugo von Santalla in the late twelfth century,¹²⁸ this text endeavours to anatomically dissect the cosmological principles which underpin the universe. It explores, among other things, the many names which define the intangible sphere of God and blatantly recapitulates the birth of the cosmos within the context of Aristotle's theories of matter. The etheric bodies or planets of the *primum mobile* just below the Empyrean spur ontological differentiation of the primeval matter into three separate realms; the mineral kingdom with its stones and gems; the vegetable kingdom with its plants and trees; and the animal kingdom with its dogs and dears.

Being a miniature replica of the macrocosm, the human being possesses a very exalted place in this hierarchy and is particularly susceptible to interlinking forces of mutual attraction known as cosmic sympathies. The latter describes a condition of mutual attraction, correspondence and fundamental interconnectedness where everything below is caused by and is a debased reflection of everything above. Concluding Balinas's *Book of the Secrets of Creation* is the enigmatic prose of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, which offers an abridged summa describing natural processes in the context of entelechy. Emphasis is placed on the dependence of all life on the two celestial luminaries and fire or heat is implicated as the primal mover and root power of chemical processes like sublimation, dissolution, and calcination. The cyclical movement of the alchemical opus, the *hen to pan* (all

¹²⁸ Ebeling, pp. 49.

is one) or underlying unity of all created matter, the interdependence and interpenetration of spirit and matter, and everlasting transformation are some other cosmological leitmotifs that crop up implicitly in the text.

Below is an English translation (*Holmyard, Alchemy, 98*) of the Emerald Tablet:

True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracle of one thing.

And as all things were by the contemplation of one, so all things arose from this one thing by a single act of adaption.

The father thereof is the Sun, the mother the Moon.

The Wind carried it in its womb, the Earth is the nurse thereof.

It is the father of all works of wonder throughout the whole world.

The power thereof is perfect.

If it be cast onto the Earth, it will separate the element of Earth from that of Fire, the subtle from the gross.

With great sagacitie it doth ascend gentle from Earth to Heaven.

Again it doth descend to Earth, and uniteth in itself the force from things superior and things inferior.

Thus wilt thou possess the glory of the brightness of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly far from thee.

The thing is the strong fortitude of all strength, for it overcometh very subtle thing and doth penetrate every solid substance.

Thus was the world created.

Hence there will be marvellous adaptations achieved, of which the manner is this.

For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistus, because I hold three parts of the wisdom of the whole world.

That which I had to say about the operation of Sol is complete.

Below is my psychological interpretation of the Emerald Tablet:

True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. The archetypal contents which are in the collective unconscious are mirrored by the conscious experiences of the ego personality, and the conscious experiences of the ego personality are a reflection of the transpersonal aspects of unconscious function, to accomplish the miracle of *individuation*.

And as all psychological synergies of archetypal powers called temperaments were cogitated in the space of no time deep

in the unconscious, so too all ego personalities arose from the collective unconscious by single acts of psychological projection.

The father thereof is *thought*, the mother *feeling*.

Intuition carried it in its seedy womb, bodily *sensation* is the nurse thereof.

The collective unconscious is the father of all 'diamond bodies', all self-actualized personalities.

Its individual-creating powers are perfect.

When it becomes embodied it loses its unity and the transpersonal potentialities within begin acting through the ego's four main functions—thinking, feeling, intuition, and sensation—to separate the loathsome *shadow* from the nobler aspects of personality; the carnal, instinctual desirousness from the emerging totality of the everlasting Self.

As a protean and numinous force, the archetypal bundle manifesting on the earthbound plane as the personal ego raises its level of vibration to interact with transpersonal principles and imagery (i.e. entities, gods, landscapes, etc.) inhabiting the heavenly realm of dreams, hypnagogic images, and other altered states of consciousness.

From there it lowers its vibrational frequency and enters the earthbound plane again. With knowledge of the upper realms in tow, the personal ego can now descry how the transpersonal energies yearning for manifestation can best be actualized by archetypal contents presently in its own arsenal.

In this way your conscious personality can navigate through the contingencies of chance and become all your innate natural tendencies decreed you were meant to be without suffering perpetual immolation at the hand of possessive love, egocentric inflation, instinctual desire, and concupiscence, all qualities which can develop into neuroses and madness if left unhindered.

Your ego-self is innately equipped with the essence of *remembering* the consciousness of unity and becoming all you were meant to be. This essence is comprised of two fundamental qualities—persistence and bravery—that sharpen unconscious willpower and transpose the psychic centre of the conscious personality to the mount of the true self from where every one of your problems, miseries, psychological disturbances, neurotic habits, and even more severe dysfunctions like psychosis can be resisted, overcome and unknotted.

Thus was the individual Self born.

By virtue of the fact that psychological projection of archetypal content differs from individual to individual, there will be marvellous and comprehensive variations in individuated *essence*.

For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistus, because I understand the interplay between the collective unconscious, the personal unconscious, and the conscious; the three parts of the wisdom of the whole world.

That which I had to say about the operation of human *consciousness* is complete.



In transpersonal psychology, each stage of the alchemical opus corresponds with a particular juncture in the psychotherapeutic journey. For the most part everything begins with the *prima materia*, the base substance of which all created matter is hewn. Alchemists across the ages have agreed that it is elementary and ubiquitous in nature. The *prima materia* is to be found everywhere and nowhere, interpenetrating and pervading all things great and small by virtue of its inherent multiplicity but at the same time resisting differentiation and compartmentalization. The variegated and disparate epithets ascribed to it—Adam, virgin, lion, seed, earth, sperm, menstree, lead, mercury, chaos, spirit, dew, water, fountain, and a great many others—testify to this mercurial essence. Transposed to the psychological level, we might think of it as the uppermost mental state of one's present

self-conscious personality that contains ‘projections of autonomous psychic content’.

The slab of consciousness equated with the alchemical *prima materia* is the mythological stratum of our lives that forms the crust of our temperament. Within the rocks and detritus here can be found a whole continuum of reasons to account for the circumstances of our lives and why we have made certain choices and elected life paths compatible or incompatible with our innate natural tendencies. This brittle patina in which we are temporarily encased is us with all our faults; our everyday miseries, problems, and idiosyncrasies; our neuroses; and our undisclosed desirousness to be something other than what we are today. Many people elect to remain ignorant of shadowy and licentious aspects of personality because it challenges their own conditioning; the intellectual values instilled in them by the academic establishment, the theological and philosophical sentiments conveyed by their existing religious and socio-political affiliations, and their own constricted sense of self-identity. It’s much easier to repress something and pretend it’s not there than to acknowledge its existence and have to deal with the far-ranging ramifications, right? Acknowledgment means consensual agreement to deal with the issue at hand, something that those lacking in willpower and courage cannot do.

In any case when our stream of self-awareness narrows into an impermeable iron funnel unable to be infiltrated by the rich, interwoven tapestry of mental life streaming forth from our own higher Self, our *dreambodies* begin inducing little quakes that

course up from the very core of our psyches and rattle the towering pylons that uphold the current life myths inhabiting the uppermost stratum of our consciousness. The quakes or 'irruptions of the unconscious' materialize telepathically through harrowing, bloodcurdling dreams and kinaesthetically through generalized pain and an extensive range of other physical symptoms. These are initial signs that something is not quite right in the kingdom within and that we should seek professional help. Further, they are also an exaggerated picture of rigid life myths about to be rendered malleable; an unconscious eruption of nightmares and atypical bodily sensations usually means that the pylons holding up the rigid monocular vision of ourselves and of the cosmos has started to wear thin and can no longer accommodate changes in the orientation of psychic projections. The further we lapse into unreflective states of existence and sink into the obscure swamps of inertia, the louder and stronger these quakes become. Anybody who repeatedly fails to heed and respond to these subterranean warnings ends up suffering far-ranging consequences in the long run. In the most severe cases apathy can lead to a destabilization of good health, temporary and permanent lapses into madness, and even the development of localised cancers.

Hence from the just mentioned we can safely surmise that individuals who have decided to seek professional help through psychotherapy understand very well that there's some chink in their psychological armoury. The periodic disturbances indicate that there's an existing problem, though they themselves remain oblivious to its exact nature and underlying cause. This leaves

the mediating counsellor with the pivotal task of generating the necessary conditions for dark, filthy archetypal contents bubbling deep in the unconscious and yearning for expression to be consciously expressed without overwhelming or frightening the client. Most therapies shy away from the dogma of hard-and-fast rules so it's usually left to each individual counsellor as to how the healing process might best be initiated.

Alchemical methodology decrees that the initial *nigredo* phase is preceded by a conjoining of the masculine and feminine elements, of Philosophical Sulphur and Philosophical Mercury or Sol and Luna in a hermetically sealed cooking vessel of some sort, usually a crucible, a retort, or an alembic. By analogy, the counsellor's first job is to initiate a marriage or 'coniunctionis' between the client's temperament, the corroborating aspects of being presently expressed through dreams and symptoms, and specific details of the current life myth. By instigating a conscious acknowledgement of all these seemingly irreconcilable and fragmented aspects of life the counsellor forces the client into a chaotic but necessary descent into a realm of frustration, confusion, and collapse. The alchemists were always apt in stating that corruption must precede regeneration so it makes sense that the soul must suffer dissolution before it reconstitutes into a much more durable form able to withstand the hermetic fires of pain and suffering. Some people fear that becoming exposed to the *apeiron*, the infinite chaos of disembodied subentities and psychic images will inevitably drive them over the edge into the cleft of madness. Such erroneous thinking is usually the products of inadequate education and misinformation spun

on the spindle of superstitious old wives' tales. As long as there is some degree of self-love or Eros present in the psyche of the one beholding the experience, the possibility of the *prima materia* destroying the self-conscious ego personality by reducing it into a sludge pile of co-existing and conscious subentities is zero. If this initiatory phase of *conjunctio* is successful, the fragmented, dissociated, and warring aspect of the ego responsible for the problem is concretely actualized by being conferred borders and form.

The Great Work is hermetically sealed as soon as the *materia prima* is poured into the vessel and its multiple elements married by fire, meaning that the counsellor and the client must be bound by an oath of confidentiality. There must be mutual trust and faith between the two parties comprising the professional relationship, otherwise the consulting glass shatters and the transmuting essence is lost. An alchemical vessel resembles a womb and the consulting room a womblike environment where a client's innermost secrets are revealed and his or her unconscious projections brought to light. If we took this implicit metaphor a step further the counsellor would then become the nurturing and protective mother figure and the client the child dependent on the mother for psychospiritual nourishment and growth. A tacit condition of working relationships in therapy is that once the counsellor has agreed to take on a new client, he or she will go to great lengths to ensure that a gratifying rapport is fabricated. Rapport is important for many reasons, the foremost being a confidence-building one. A good counsellor will engage with clients by articulating body

language and physiognomies compatible with their own. When performed tactfully these facilitate feelings of reassurance, expunge insecurities and doubts about the working relationship, and encourage the client to be more proactive in ascertaining the entrenched roots of problems and miseries. They also bequeath to the counsellor valuable knowledge of subconscious streaming that often contradicts the spoken word. People rarely, if ever, disclose the whole truth about their situation; the best way to comprehend it is through their physiognomy, body language, and tone of voice.

Alchemically speaking the putrefaction and blackening of the 'married' or conjoined elements of the *prima materia* is known as the *nigredo*. The alchemical manuscripts vividly portray this phase through a series of distressing images—flooding, dismemberment and decapitation, and tears—qualitatively connected through the leitmotif of pain and suffering. When I meditate upon this stage a particular scene comes to mind from *The Book of Night*, an Egyptian cosmographical text dealing with the mysteries of human birth, death, and regeneration to be found in the second traverse chamber of the Osireion in the Upper Egyptian city of Abydos. In a pictorial sequence relating to the passage of the dead through the fourth hour of the night, an army of fish-headed Sethian creatures are depicted wreaking havoc along an aquatic habitat that is most probably an ethereal version of the Nile River. The wave of terror and confusion incited by these beasts quickly disseminates to the riverside inhabitants, who lament and mourn the omnipresent disorder and confusion by smashing their fists against the ground and pulling thick

strands of their pleated hair out. What this haunting image conveys is that there can be no subsistence, no transformation, no rebirth, and certainly no resurrection unless a vehement struggle with dangerous forces ensues and the latter are overcome.

Nigredo in counselling and psychotherapy is the lively one-on-one engagement that spurs an analogous condition in the client's psyche. With the counsellor's careful and calculated probing, the client is gradually roused from his ignorant and unconscious state and brought to consensual terrain where he or she can deliberate upon the prevailing rigidity of the ego's narrow attitudes and values. Of course it's not just the analyst that has the power to propel the client into the *nigredo* stage. Anyone with a more comprehensive viewpoint embodying a nobler, grander attitude to life is an immediate threat to the client and his or her personal myth and can spur this negative transformation: the straw that breaks the camel's back might come from a school, cultural group, a religious or socio-political affiliation, or an individual higher on the psychospiritual ladder of evolution. The *nigredo* is indeed a painful reflection of the current self-conscious personality enmeshed by all its outrageous projections, fantasies, and inflations. These are hereafter scrutinized by the mediating analyst until they lose their inflexibility and self-righteousness. Suddenly everything seems uncertain, chaotic even. Order is lost and chaos reigns. Once this transpires the dark, sweltering strain of night swiftly descends to exhaust an ego-self engorged by its own projections. Anxiety begins washing over it like hydrochloric acid and liquefies the habitual old myth. The annihilation appears

in the alchemical vessel as an effervescent black mess and in the client's dreams as threats emanating from the element of water.

In the time preceding and during the *nigredo*, it's not uncommon to experience dreams and visions where one is bathing, showering, being baptized, swimming in a pool, grappling with gargantuan waves in an ocean, or clambering uphill to escape the awesome breaking force of a towering tsunami. Water is the corporeal representative of the *prima materia* and *nigredo* is nothing other than a forced reacquaintance with the undifferentiated, womblike *apeiron* of psychic dirt and transpersonal slime pleading for reconnection. During this testing and uncertain time therapist and client produce a slow burning 'fire' (rapport) that expunges the shadowy and now deactivated projections from the latter's conscious personality. These bubble to the surface of the putrefying mess and escape from the crucible (the counselling room) as vapours. Only those archetypal contents of the ego harmonious with the transpersonal energies are saved from extinction, exactly because they're the evolutionary powerhouses that will pull the psychic centre towards self-actualization. The end product of the putrefaction process is a chemical residue that assumes the semblance of a hermaphrodite lying at the bottom of the sealed vessel when illustrated in alchemical treatises. These are the elementals, the creative thought-desires about to amplify the client's *weltanschauung*.

FERMENTATIO



The *nigredo* phase in the therapeutic process is usually followed by the *fermentatio*. In alchemical terms the latter involves a conjunction of the masculine and feminine formative forces—Sol and Luna or Philosophical Sulphur and Philosophical Mercury—in the hermetically sealed alembic. *Fermentatio* is one and the same with sowing seeds in fertile fields that will confer good fortune and prosperity upon those who have elected to spend their time labouring industriously and patiently. Just like the corroborating elements of the alchemical hermaphrodite interpenetrate one another and gradually change the inner configuration of its entire form, so too do the temperaments of counsellor and client mingle in the counselling room by means of transference and countertransference. Any vital effort expended at this stage

through psychological synergy is bound to facilitate favourable outcomes.

There's a lot of mental noise going on during this all-important phase of psychotherapy; things are in the process of being worked out. Memories pertaining to the psychological disturbance or problem mysteriously funnel their way back from the confines of the client's personal unconscious into the present and archetypal dream content pours forth at a much faster rate than the perceived norm. Now is where it all starts to get interesting! On the whole, some of the more proactive clients seem to be better at making decisive inroads into the psychic anatomy of their Gordian knot than others. Those with lesser acumen needn't worry though because therapeutic cues and techniques utilized by the counsellor are always orientated towards the cultivation of the client's imagination and intuition. Of course the client's intrinsic and extrinsic situation takes a back seat to therapeutic approach and counsellor-client dynamics simply because the whole point of any psychotherapy is always going to be personal empowerment; the counsellor is there to emphasize a call to action, to assist in the proper utilization of natural resources, and to appeal to the kernel of innately held knowledge. In this way the process gains traction without inverting, hampering, or impeding evolutionary pathways that have been elected by the client's own Self as the most fitting and appropriate for its intrinsic natural potentialities. Usually remarks like "It all makes sense now" and "What you said yesterday reminded me of something that occurred weeks ago" can be taken as a sign that the psychic airwaves between the

client's conscious and unconscious have aligned and are in communion. Insights garnered during the *fermentatio* stage are bittersweet; some are genuine by-products of the ego's espousal of transpersonal energies that promote honourable, moral loyalties and love but others are collective and individual transferences or premature identifications with more comprehensive standpoints that feed contaminated instinctual desirousness for personal wealth and glory. If the counsellor doesn't take the necessary actions to ensure that projections of this type are swiftly transmuted into conscious understanding, the client can quickly slip into a regressive state where the boundaries between imaginal and real become blurred if not non-existent.

At this point we should remember that the most compelling therapeutic methods incorporate the regressive, the existential, and the transpersonal. The first area, the regressive, is characterized by a necessary withdrawal from the outside world into the inner terrain encasing the luminous gems and detritus of personal experience. Once inwardly turned the client can browse his or her memory bank, relive experiences and by doing so correctly identify choices that have co-conspired in paving a detrimental or less-than-flattering path. On the other hand the existential attempts to shuffle key events and turning points of the client's past into the present and works backward to identify conduits of causation using his or her existing circumstances as a guide. Of particular interest here is that the existential tends to emphasize contingencies of the here and now and carefully examines relationships and affiliations enrolled in mental

intercourse with the client's inner life. The third and final modulation involves the transpersonal, that is the propensity to detach from personal circumstances and rise to a place above the dynamics of mentation from whence operations and processes are perceived to be evolutionary mechanisms deployed by higher spiritual or esoteric archons and entities for the sake of realizing the transcend divine. Counsellors would probably do well to temporarily imagine themselves as the corroborating aspect of a tricolour scheme which blends modalities indigenous to all three modes, thereby creating unique shades of counselling. To do this he or she might combine psychoanalysis and bioenergetics (regressive therapy), two-chair or Gestalt-style therapy (existential therapy), and psychosynthesis or a conventional stream of Jungian analysis (transpersonal therapy). The possibilities are boundless!

From the aforementioned it should also be clear that *fermentatio* entails a distillation of unsolicited and self-destructive thoughts from the present, self-conscious personality, thereby inflicting a necessary modification to cognitive and affective aspects that underlie the mechanism of projection. The latter tend to mimic their material constituents in synaptic connections; just as later-life modifications to synaptic connections in the cerebral cortex will enable or disable learning and the formation of new memories, so too can slight changes in psychological projection shift the centre of the ego-self by a mile. To concretize this specific point I'll proceed with a more tangible example. After suffering a series of failed relationships in which he was rudely ditched for another lover or outright cheated upon,

a sensitive, reserved man is forced into psychotherapy with a sympathetic and competent transpersonal counsellor. Initially, the attitude permeating the counselling room isn't constructive or reasonable in any way, shape or form. On the contrary it's a poisonous, self-punishing, and self-sabotaging one that doesn't really do him any favours. Uppermost in his mind is an authentic nagging feeling that he *isn't good enough*; that he *isn't worthy to be loved*; and that he's *a master of unrequited love*.

These sentiments are echoed rather vociferously by what is a disconcertingly accurate unconscious tendency to choosing promiscuous and deceitful woman as possible life partners, making his persisting problem a self-fulfilling prophecy. He has been blinded by the spiritual sun of one specific elemental, a specific thought-desire that has blunted the projections coming from a great many other spiritual suns whose sum comprises a much more precise and consensual measure of objective truth. If the transpersonal counsellor plays his or her roll correctly in dismantling and scrutinizing the current myth which accounts for the fundamental attitude, the man will begin to awaken to a very different reality. The counsellor might draw the man's attention to the esoteric law of sympathies and antipathies which decrees that *like* attracts *like*, stating that perhaps he set himself up to suffer that kind of lamentable fate by presenting to the world a cold, steel-hearted, detached, and phlegmatic temperament. That's what he projected out into the universe and that universe responded by sending something of equivalent psychic substance in return. Did the handsome Greek youth Narcissus not fall in love with his own reflection? Subsequently the insight generated

spurs a gradual shift in attitude where feelings of self-pity and worthlessness detrimental to his harmonious existence become a newfound source of revelation and hope. *I'm not worthy to be loved* undergoes a constructive shift towards *I've been attracting to myself the wrong sort of women* which then undergoes further evolution and becomes *I'm just as deserving of love and companionship as every other human being on this planet*. Transformations of this sort are spontaneous and can occur after a short, succinct session or a sequence of long, drawn-out sessions of *fermentatio* that last weeks or months.

The example demonstrates the nature and beauty of the unfathomable human mystery. You never quite know what you're going to get, how the client is going to behave, or how the therapeutic process is going to unfold.

SEPARATIO



Known as *separatio*, the third alchemical phase involves a differentiation of the *prima materia* into the elements of fire, air, water, and earth. The refinement of coarse and impure chemical substances into more subtle, unalloyed ones in the alchemist's vessel through repeated cycles of distillation otherwise known as *solve et coagula* (dissolution and coagulation) is a chief exponent of this phase. The key words here are differentiation and distillation, both acts that project pairs of opposites onto the slate of unified consciousness. Alchemical manuscripts symbolically portray this phenomenon with sharp implements like knives and swords or using brutal imagery typical of death and destruction. Similarly, the projection of opposites is

expressed through the corresponding couplets of sun and moon, king and queen, husband and wife, earth and spirit, and sulphur and argent vive. When it comes to the archetypal world of dreams, the telepathic channel of the collective unconscious, these usually materialize as leitmotifs of quantitative analysis and spatiotemporal reckoning: geometric shapes and solids, clocks, tapes, measures, scales, the golden ratio, the sextant, and the plumb line.

From the cited examples it becomes apparent that the spontaneity of coming to consciousness is one and the same with the compartmentalization of phenomena where one becomes two, two becomes four, four becomes eight and so forth. But any *conscious* act of separation also manifests a desire or will to subjugate and dominate nature, thus bringing conflict and torment to a blissful, paradisaal state of rumination formerly experienced as perpetual Oneness. Nowhere is this cosmic truth better illustrated than in the ancient Egyptian myth *Isis and the Seven Scorpions*, a narrative chronicling how the just mentioned mother goddess gained mastery over created matter. At one point she intervenes to save an innocent child from being stung to death by an army of venomous scorpions through magical conjuration which involves naming each and every one, thus bringing them under her own sphere of divine power.

If we were to transpose the whole alchemical process to the psychic or psychological level, *separatio* becomes the discrimination of warring elements within a present, self-conscious personality. During this stage diligent and prolonged

analysis on the part of the mediating counsellor compels the unified One—what is perceived to be the client’s unified ego-self—to shatter into many subselves like scintillating shards of a broken mirror. These individual subselves force a further turning inward of the client’s consciousness by pairing up and then squaring off against one another within a psychic battleground that has swiftly turned hostile and noxious: the inner child might turn against an inner mother now perceived to be terrible and decapitate her; the inner father might jettison all moral inhibition and let licentiousness run rampant by copulating with the inner daughter; the inner whore might incapacitate the intellectual and righteous inner lady by offering her a poisonous apple that puts her into a lethal coma; the inner pragmatist might murder the inner idealist in cold blood; and the inner non-judgemental and wise philosopher might wrestle down and bind the inner racist politician to a stone chair in the subterranean operations room.

Looking at the underlying mechanics of this psychic process more closely, it appears that the purgatory of war has surmounted the heaven of peace and harmony again because the ego has re-entered into a cycle of disidentification and withdrawn psychological projections that encompass its present life myth. Many therapists would recognize this phenomenon as a momentary loss of *participation mystique* (meaning a subject’s identification with a particular object that is partially responsible for the creation of his or her identity). If the shunned shadow entities are consciously acknowledged the dismantled personality re-member into a new form, thereby healing the multidimensional psyche of its existing neurosis or disturbance. Egyptian myth

offers us the most vivid personification of this psychological reality by casting the saviour god Osiris in the role of the destructed-restructured personality. For Osiris to lay claim to his rightful throne as Lord of the Underworld (for a new personality to form), Isis (the individuating Self) had to first find the dismembered parts of his corporeal body (become conscious of archetypal contents not currently part of the personal ego) that had been scattered in different locations all over Egypt by the evil Seth (a more comprehensive standpoint that brings about dissolution or *nigredo*), put them back together in the guise of a mummy (reconcile the warring opposites), and then magically reanimate the whole (reidentification with new archetypal pairs of opposites) by beating her wings together.

Of course all these mythical references that imbue the mechanical processes of separation and differentiation with meaning are also beckoning us to take a closer look at cosmogony. As narratives attempting to explain vital aspects of existence, many myths are orientated towards explaining the origins of our universe. They speak of birth or *creation* in terms of separation. In psychotherapy, it is impossible for an awareness of opposites and inner hierarchies of being to spontaneously manifest without an exploration of the formative forces that have contributed to the formation of the present, self-conscious personality. These forces are usually members of the client's immediate family and are intimately connected with his or her past. For this reason alone probing the nature of relationships with parents, foster parents, grandparents, siblings, and even close cousins becomes a necessary evil given that it can pinpoint

the underlying reasons for an existing problem or disturbance. The one thing to remember here is that any dive into the depths of one's past is bound to recollect memories involving the experience of mental pain or anguish, and so as a rule of thumb mediating counsellors that choose to traverse the emotive waters of *fermentatio* should make concerted efforts in reading and looking for subtle changes in their clients' bodily-kinaesthetic language. Wretchedly the predisposition for Western tradition to reward phlegmatic and stoic dispositions and shun the continuum of emotional ones as undesirable, suspicious, and irrational has inadvertently walled up many of the psychic channels that allow unconditional access and interaction with the intermediate realm of feeling and imagery, the imaginal. Therefore it can take quite some time for the counsellor-client synergy to penetrate the superficial layer of intellectual acumens and make truly meaningful connections with gut-level feelings.

To concretize the discussion I'll proceed with a tangible example. A woman parts with rustic life in southern Europe at the tender age of sixteen to marry the man she is enamoured of and moves to another country halfway around the world. The melancholy of leaving her own family behind—her father, mother and sisters—to seek her fortune in a country whose language and customs she is not familiar with secretly nurtures a security complex, an unconscious fear of being deserted and left alone. Unaware of the unresolved chaos brewing within her own subconscious she projects these undesirable sentiments onto her own children, smothering them with excess love until the overbearing attitude gets a bit much and they extricate

themselves from it by moving far away. The proliferation of unconscious yearning for companionship and the deep sense of security that only family provides has in effect invited into the phenomenal world the malicious demons she'd been contending against since her adolescent years. So the moral of the story here is that unresolved conflicts and traumas deeply entrenched in formative stages of development will grow roots and suck the psychic nutrients out from the humus on which later relationships wish to sprout forth from, often in ways that force an individual to engage with a monotonic and repetitive cycle of projections and behavioural constraints put in place by the original defence mechanism.

©CALCINATIO



Calcinatio, the fourth phase of the therapeutic process, is primarily concerned with the unconditional acceptance of warring opposites within one's psyche. Alchemy understands this procedural aspect of the Work as a chemical reduction of metals like copper and iron into granular powders, ashes, or dust. Writing specifically about this phase of alchemical transformation in his *Philosophia maturata* during the seventeenth century, Lancelot Colson (ca. 1627-1687) decreed that the prime or base substance to be worked on is "our Crows Bill, far blacker than Pitch, which thou may'st set on fire, by putting a kindled Cole

into it; so as it should be calcined... into a most yellow Earth; But this Calcination sufficeth not for its perfect cleansing; put it therefore into a Reverberatory with a moderate heat, for eight dayes, and so many Nights following, increasing the heat and flame, till it be white as Snow.” The abovementioned statement draws our attention to *calcinatio* as an operation mediated by the fire element on unrefined, impure, or unalloyed metals and substances for the sake of exorcising any elementary components prone to volatization. Alchemical manuscripts of all ages have acknowledged and encrypted this phase into its hidden knowledge system using such vexing symbolic images as lions devouring suns, ravening wolves feasting on kings, and dragons engaged in autophagy. By far the most renowned treatise detailing aspects of this chemical, psychological, and cosmic drying-out phenomenon is Basil Valentine’s *Twelve Keys*.

The principles of *calcinatio* remain constant when transposed to the psychological level. If physical fire can reduce a metal or substance into a fine calx, then the ethereal fires of the heart that derive from concupiscence—from possessive love, lust, and desire—should also be able to perform analogous operations in the multidimensional psyche. The reality of the latter becomes blatantly obvious by following the trajectory of objective human consciousness as it descends to the realm of the unconscious and eventually overcomes desirousness birthed from the wellspring of pure instinctual urges. In the preceding therapeutic phase of *separatio*, we saw how even an equivocal awareness of warring opposite *subselves* within oneself promotes the maturation, development, and evolution of a mind that can rise above its own

circle of egoistic projections and perceive the ruptures, aberrations, and omissions inherent to each corresponding set of opposites. *Calcinatio* is basically a concretization or coagulation of proliferating self-awareness attained in such a manner. Psychologically speaking fire is a by-product of one's own mentation that spontaneously ignites when instinctual desirousness continues to proliferate unchecked until it floods the present ego-conscious in a pool of prodigious pretensions and illusory autonomy. Its potency is usually equivalent with the nature of the complex or disturbance as unearthed by the counsellor-client synergy. In layman's terms we could say that the strength of an action spawns a reaction of the same kinetic force.

How these hermetic fires are produced isn't all that hard to understand. Habitually what happens is that the incapability of the ego-self to contain shadows reverberating up from the transpersonal areas of the psyche frustrates it beyond reckoning, creating an inner friction whose subtle rubbing sparks the fires of dissolution to life. These spontaneous eruptions purge the ego of any identification with unruly emotions that might inflate it or encourage pride and leave behind only the charred ashes (thought-desires) compatible with transpersonal authority. Sometimes, the denied justifications leading to the reduction of ego consciousness into 'white ashes' and 'white foliated earth' occur within synthetically produced circumstances (counselling rooms) and at other times through more authentic channels. In this fashion a powerful essence is created that makes the psychic membrane of the present, self-conscious personality less permeable to emotional vibrations coming from within and

without and concomitantly guards the individuating aspect of the soul from intense affect. The counsellors main task during this phase is to ensure that all telepathic or physical (dream or bodily) symptoms identified as deriving from frustrated desires that have produced neurosis or psychological disturbance are amplified using techniques sensitive to the client's disposition and circumstances. In most cases, the likelihood of the schism being healed will rest on the shoulders of the mediating counsellor who must pertinently and correctly identify the symptomology of the underlying complex. Failure to make a positive identification at this stage may terminate transmutation of the inner and render the rest of the process defunct. Furthermore, if the relationship between counsellor and client isn't bound by trust, empathy, and mutual respect by now, *calcinatio* can initiate a downward spiral into destructive negativity, paranoia, and in the worst case scenarios drive the client over the edge into madness.

Because this intermediary phase is somewhat concerned with an examination of the hierarchical order of the intellect, the emotions, and other forms of mentation that comprise consciousness there is always the risk that the whole therapist-client synergy—a dynamic system that has hitherto been operating smoothly and efficiently—might be subjected to scrutiny and re-evaluation. It is not uncommon for a client to witness cracks forming on the alchemical vessel, to experience doubts about his or her professional relationship and project them onto the mediating counsellor. Until now the latter has been perceived as a superior motherly figure with a soteriological function; to solve or help solve any psychological hindrance blocking pathways to

freedom and tranquillity. But the eradication of preconceptions means that the perception of a good and nurturing mother figure can quickly become the terrible, cold-hearted one interested only in monetary gain. This flipping open of Pandora's Box only complicates matters further and raises a great many more questions than it answers. *Who is this person who feigns flawlessness? Why should I listen to or believe anything he or she says? What makes this person so qualified to speak about and untangle knots that he or she may also have become knotted in at some stage in life?*

The best course of action that a therapist can take if a scenario of this sort comes to pass is to contain doubts and questions about motives in any way possible. Some of these are bound to strike inner keys and sound like emotional chords that intuitively speak to his or her own life myth. If such a scenario were to eventuate then the counsellor would do well to seek support and supervision with another counsellor who becomes a conduit through which accumulating emotional steam might be let out. Typically, suspicion projected onto the arbitrating counsellor in the form of questions and nagging doubts never seems to last all that long; I guess the client's shifting inner perspectives are still quite protean in composition and just don't allow protracted fixation of assumptions. An attack on the counsellor can quickly dematerialize and rematerialize as grovelling sentiments of sorrow and self-pity. A client might ask, "Why do you even counsel people for? What's in it for you? Oh, hold on a second. I think I know why. It's for the money. Why should you care about somebody you don't even know from a bar

of soap?” Conflicting feelings are bound to produce questions such as these and the best line of recourse for any mindful counsellor is to straddle the line between the personal and the professional. For the most part a response such as, “What we’ve been doing together in these sessions really means a lot of me and I would dearly like to continue until we get you back onto the path of your heart’s desire.” This statement is soothing, reassuring, and prevaricates the backlash that might come with verbal declarations of detachment or more intimate ones that flirt with the transgression of professional parameters.

In a much broader psychotherapeutic context *calcinatio* signals a gradual shift in the gravity of one’s consciousness. The many modifications that have been made to the inner composition of the present, self-conscious personality in the last few stages of transmutation are either changing the nature of the symptomology or eradicating it from the *dreambody* altogether. At this point the client might also experience a sense of satisfaction and achievement; the feeling that he or she has travelled far from the time origin (the beginning of the therapeutic process). Another good thing that usually materializes here is a lapse into a relaxed state of indifference to a persisting apprehension stemming from the fear that psychotherapy is not as operative and transformational as the faculty of psychology and its faithful army of adherents make it out to be. Instinct and passion have now been channelled into a psychic conduit and are being expressed through more constructive means. Psychospiritual potential is also in the process of becoming experience. Meanwhile concentration and

continuous focus of the will are producing essence. The 'white ashes' are about to be blown about by the spiritual winds and engender deeper and higher phenomena that until now had been confined to the realm of potential like little sunflower seedlings.

ALBEDO



During the alchemical rotation, the putrefying black matter in the alembic wrought by the *nigredo* phase undergoes an intrinsic change expressed visibly as a pattern of white flecks and eventually becomes white. In describing this pivotal transformation, the seventeenth century alchemist Eirenaeus Philalethes pronounced that “when by continuance of decoction the colour changeth to white, they call it their Swan, their Dove, their white stone of Paradise, their white Gold, their Alabaster, their Smoak, and in a word whatever is white they do call it by.” From his words we garner the sense that the shade associated with this polar shift is white. The condition of albification or becoming white evokes an agglomeration of vital qualities interwoven into a single multi-coloured tapestry by esoteric systems of correspondence that have attempted to descry the

noumena: purity, wisdom, electromagnetism, love or Eros, heat, and the powerful vital life force underrunning all organic material.

The first two are particularly interesting because they yoke the beautiful shade to physical and mental limpidness, a state where the physical body has been extricated of its many impurities and has become imbued with newfound virginity and virtuousness. When such a condition predominates the transcendental spirit can easily imprint new psychic patterns or imprints upon the soul. Alchemically, the rendering of darkness and primordial chaos into an orderly paradisaal state of inert wholesomeness is personified by natural landscapes involving silver trees and silver apples, tying it to the lunar orb and the sphere of the Divine Feminine. The esoteric connection between these concepts becomes clear when we look at the continuum of images used by alchemical manuscripts from about the time of Zosimos of Panopolis (c. 300CE) onwards to illustrate whitening or albification—white queens, white foliated earth, white ashes, the lunar sphere, the dove, the virgin goddess Artemis, the white rose and lily, milk, the swan, and the metal silver. In teasing out the qualitative connections between the pre-eminent leitmotifs, we see that parading beneath the banner of a phase often called *albedo* or *leucosis* is the notion of a return to the womb from whence everything emerged and to which everything will return in time; to the Adamic state of uroboric wholeness before the fall. Within a paradise now re-membered the alchemist witnesses a miraculous transformation in the vessel being heated; the decaying mass mysteriously coagulates into a ‘white stone’ or

'elixir' able to transmute lead or mercury into silver and to heal all illnesses indefinitely.

Psychology tends to view the *albedo* as the dawning of a new consciousness, albeit one that exists as an idyllic, abstract state disengaged from human experience and relationships. What this means is that psychological disturbances, neuroses, or complexes that were previously nagging the individual have now ceased to exist. The client is no longer at the mercy of symptomology coming from the *dreambody* mechanism. It is the end result of a long line of scrupulous cross-examinations of inner psychic contents spurred by a more comprehensive standpoint, customarily an arbitrating counsellor or a public figure of some kind. During this time the one engaged in inner work has trudged up along the slope of a mountain to the peak where the temperature and wind conditions are markedly different from those at ground level. The peak is an abode of perfect stillness and quiet; a bit like being in the eye of a storm or in tropical doldrums. For the most part the height puts distance between oneself and the moisture and corrosive waters of emotional turmoil below. Further still it nurtures an optimistic feeling of stability and indestructibility; from up here cosmic phenomena produced by spiritual winds like psychological twisters, oceanic greybeards, and thunderstorms are less threatening and harrowing and can be observed, measured, and philosophized with a certain detachment.

However, those who dare to peer down from the towering peak prematurely risk suffering vertigo, a bout of strange

dizziness that comes from the realization of having progressed so far into an exotic void. Developmental leaps of this kind are often bittersweet in nature simply because they invite into one's newfound virginal psychic state the deepest sense of surrealism. *Am I really free of my symptoms? Of my problem? Is the pain that has just disappeared going to return? Have I really been liberated from the chains which bind me to the ground, or am I trapped inside a metaphysical dream woven together by the counsellor that is bound to end the moment we stop seeing one another? Have I really surmounted this challenge, or is this peaceful peak on which I find myself really a rumbling volcano about to send a mushroom cloud of a different kind over my head?*

As we all know life processes are mutable, gyratory, and interpenetrative in nature. Hence it's not realistic to assume that psychospiritual ascent to any peak of Self is going to be a linear or straightforward affair. Those who manage to behold *albedo* do so after a meandering journey riddled by many ascents and descents, comings and goings, and attempted ascensions that become way too steep and lead to dead-ends. Why is this so? Well, the bundles of projections that comprise complexes, neurotic attitudes, and infantile beliefs are addictive conditions and any complete dematerialization through the avenue of behavioural therapy is bound to bring with it a gut-level feeling of loss and separation anxiety. How else will we bide our time on this earth if we're not chain-smoking or doing drugs, pining after lost lovers, falling into prosaic work patterns for the sake of acquiring material properties like jewels and clothes that temporarily feed an illusory sense of self-worth, binging on porn

to satisfy the obdurate carnal need for titillation, or rerunning decisive moments in our minds where we should have done this or that? Letting go of past habits, however destructive, can sometimes be more frightening than continuing to hold onto and being ravaged by them. It's this fear of the unknown that sometimes lingers about like a bad smell before channelling its energy into a little mechanical voice within that keeps whispering, "Better the devil you know..."

The vicious, repetitive cycles of socio-political, cultural, and religious trends underlying the entire history of human civilization definitely reflects the dynamics and functions of the inner. The hereditary psychic hardware found there seems to be programmed in a distinctive manner so that actions and activities wrought by proliferating thought-desires and attitudes never cease to circulate. The mystery which we tend to define as the ego-self straddles the ebbing and flowing of sense and nonsense; of light and dark; of Logos-cutting and Eros-gluing; and of matter and imagination in its bid to strengthen its willpower so that ensuing changes and actions made on its part are responsible, calculated, and guaranteed to garner favourable psychospiritual outcomes. Let's call this ebbing and flowing of the life process an experiment to acquire *freedom*. Unhappily, most of what seems to 'flow' in the developed Western countries nowadays is self-defeating and detrimental to spiritual evolution. As the backbone of culture, technology and science seem to have advanced consensual knowledge of the universe and improved life without as much as a backward glance to see if the collective virtue of sound moral standards is in tow.

Thus reaching the alchemical *albedo* on a personal level is no reassurance of salvation; nasty symptoms purged from a present, self-conscious personality now receptive to the total sum of projections coming from transpersonal energies latent in the collective unconscious may just be replaced by an analogous set equally undesirable and damaging. Situations of this variety seem to explode into reality when clients don't act quickly and consciously to implement decisive changes made in therapy and actualize their new philosophy through more concrete and constructive methods. One of the best ways a counsellor can ensure that the client's will to action isn't arrested by emerging doubts is to keep offering words of encouragement like: *"You need to keep remembering what we've talked about in our sessions. It won't matter unless you put in in action. I understand that in many instances you'll feel nervous and ambivalent about making certain choices or entering in the direct line of fire. No problem at all. You can always ask a relative or close friend for moral support. Nothing you do has to be done alone; never again!"* Sometimes an encouraging remark to this effect is all that's required to activate the new day-to-day approach to life and personal relationships.

Barring any setbacks of this kind *albedo* brings about a more transcendental mode of being that holds off the ego's identification with affect. Those who attain it are no longer at the mercy of their own problems and miseries. In fact, those who attain it are now acutely aware that their own passions, the pains and sufferings spawned by the circumstances of their own lives, are not really their own but rather an echo of psychic blueprints

that have travelled across space and time, as far back as humankind's coming to consciousness. This is divine *Sophia* or *wisdom* and the best thing about *wisdom* is that it comes free of charge. Looking through her whitened looking glass, the dark veil of mourning is but a necessary setback if we are to become the enlightened and spiritual beings we yearn to be. Lunar consciousness is intuitive, a scintillating mirror ready to reflect new archetypal projections coming from the realm of the individuating Self into the phenomenal world and fabricate a more inclusive life myth. In short, the *albedo* is contemplative vision.

CONJUNCTIO



Conjunctio has always been used in alchemy as a symbol of culmination and is probably the most common and celebrated image of the Great Work. It means to unite or bind and together with the *separatio* forms the rotational cycle by which the *prima materia* (i.e. lead, mercury, salt, water, earth, etc.) is distilled of elementary impurities until it attains the refined, dense, and scintillating ruby-red quality recognized by alchemists as the 'red stone'. Under the mediation of the Mercurial spirit and its hermetic fires, the matter in the alchemical vessel increases in purity through a series of 'marriages' or conjunctions between a cosmic pair of opposites; the active, masculine, and sulphurous principle personified as the sun or Sol and its complement in the passive, feminine, and mercurial one personified as the moon or Luna. In alchemical treatises, the pictorial stand-ins for the

cosmic couplet reflect individual phases of a rectilinear and hierarchical chemical process which culminates with the transcendental union or reconciliation of the four purified elements. These, according to alchemo-Hermetic doctrine, synthesize the crown jewels of matter-gold, the 'red stone', and the elixir of immortality. At the crudest and most rudimentary level the couple are portrayed as copulations between animals like male and female dragons or birds of prey, hen and rooster, and dog and bitch; at the intermediary level by human sexual intercourse between a red man and a white woman; and at the highest and most sophisticated level as the royal wedding of a Red King to a White Queen.

Looking at the alchemical processes with psychological binoculars it becomes clear that all lesser conjunctions or cycles of solve et coagula leading to the triumphant synthesis of the Philosopher's Stone are contaminated reconciliations between the archetypal configuration of the ego-conscious and the unconscious. Here I characterize the reconciliation as 'contaminated' because the psychic transmutations which occur in the cellar of the multi-tiered human psyche don't always succeed in transforming the putrid and blackened slime of instinctive thought-desires into snow-white flakes of conscious sapience. Indeed, the ego frequently falls into the trap of prematurely embracing transpersonal contents irrupting from the collective unconscious as well as idealizations irreconcilable with the individuating Self's natural tendencies that cannot be lived out in any practical, concrete, and meaningful way. This doesn't

occur just once or twice; it's an ongoing cycle that keeps recurring until the day we cease to be.

At this time the whole point of therapy is to ensure that contemplative vision brought about by the 'lunarized' or intuitive conscious mind isn't tainted again by invalidated projections streaming internally from the realm of shadow and Self and externally from comprehensive perspectives expressed by public figures, socio-political factions, religions, and cultural leagues. But once shone onto the whitened and spiritualized state of ego consciousness, all psychological projections are like double-edged swords; on one hand they can put the individual back on the royal road which leads to the eternal kingdom of enlightenment through perseverance and patience bestowed by grace, wisdom, and divine love, and on the other they can initiate a steep descent into slimy swamps where unrepentant desires for personal glory, wealth, power, and pleasure eventually smother his or her freedom and evolution. This is exactly why the *albedo* or whitening is not the culminating phase of psychotherapy. More work needs to be done in the counselling room to ground new ideals with the universal ocean of consensual reality and stop a psychic anchor just refurbished from drifting.

When juxtaposed with the sphere of transpersonal psychotherapy, the *conjunctio* is all about expressing the shift of gravity achieved during the preceding stage (the *albedo*) and applying it to everyday life. Now the inwardly-turned focus inverts and becomes one primarily concerned with coming out of our shells; with reengaging with real people in the real world; and

with forging new relationships and healing preexisting ones. Its more comprehensive standpoint invariably means that one is much more grounded in consensual reality than before. In this illumined state one's psychological projections are far less likely to be radically skewed or alloyed with fantasy content. Focusing on body language, tone of voices, physiognomies, and other tell-tale signs of one's true unconscious will, the client can now listen and comprehend other people in a more objective manner instead of construing their words and actions to fit neatly into illusions of the world where everything is conspiring for or against his or her personal happiness and fulfillment.

For this reason alone analysands wishing to touch base with persons they've hurt or have been hurt by in the recent past are now encouraged to do so. As we already know positive, constructive interactions lead to closure and closure to healing. Jung tended to view this creative shift in terms of a man's conciliatory attitude and growing identification with his *anima* (feminine soul) and a woman's with her *animus* (masculine soul). According to Jungian philosophy re-identification fuels a newfound sense that we're a lot more than the sum of our parts; more than the contingencies that weave together the circumstances of our current lives. Security is comforting, so comforting in fact that one is now able to express what he or she wants and expects from others without being riddled by irksome fears of rejection, ridicule, or backlash. As a rule of thumb life tends to take on a much more fortuitous and harmonious shade when awakened to the fact that entitlement to love is a birthright, not a commodity.

In my eyes, the reconciliation of opposites associated with *conjunctio* is illustrated best by an Egyptian cosmographical text to be found in the second transverse chamber of the Osireion in the Upper Egyptian city of Abydos, *The Book of Night*. In a pictorial sequence relating to the passage of the dead through the sixth hour, we encounter four androgynous beings arching backwards. All appear to be deeply engrossed in the bliss that only orgasm can bring. A red dotted line connects the mouths of these figures to an image of Khephera, a scarab symbolizing the morning sun, while another connects their phalluses to a red human child. The first is a clever allusion to the Heliopolitan birth of Shu, the god of the earth, and Tefnut, the goddess of the heavens, from the spittle of Atum. The second draws attention to the act of creative expression that occurs spontaneously during the separation of sky and earth. A solar orb rolls along the chest of each androgene, warming the heart area and spurring the ejaculation of semen which contains the seed encompassing the potentiality of new life, in this case a human child.

Ultimately *The Book of Night* makes clever use of an organic mechanism of replication (human conception) to allude to the 'marriage' or what Jung called the 'mysterium coniunctionis' between opposing cosmic principles that brings about the Philosopher's Stone (the human child). A third neutral element or by-product of the reaction between fiery and watery principles has now entered into the equation and begins establishing connections with the outer world that betray a level of innovation and comprehension absent from the dynamics of its two parents. This binding element is able to coagulate opposing formative

forces as a single, undifferentiated form and is called Philosophical Salt. In psychotherapy the presence of salt is synonymous with the inauguration of parameters and clearly defined strategies for relationships of different rubric. Those involving lovers and partners will operate differently to those that involve blood relations; those of family will again be different in dynamic and scope to those involving friends and acquaintances and so forth. When salt is present we are no longer random and reactive but strategic and proactive. Like salt which is an arbitrating force between two opposites, we begin to see that the life process isn't a game monopolized by black and white but a composition of innumerable shades of grey. Other than 'yes' and 'no' there's also 'maybe'. You don't have to accept or reject propositions bound to eat up chunks of your time and draw you into long-term relationships and commitments right off the bat. You can always say, "*Let me think about this, ok? I need to mull it over a little while before I seal the deal.*" It's much better to buy time and make level-headed and calculated decisions based on facts and analysis rather than bite off more than you can chew on impulse and then end up being a bitter disappointment to everyone including yourself. Your *conscious will* should be the only thing filling out appointment slots in your diary or record book; don't let anyone else enforce their own upon you. Ever!

In relation to the other alchemical stages, *conjunctio* is a proactive movement towards the formation or reformation of complex, functional relationships with other people in the real world. It's about being able to understand where other people are coming from, accepting whatever consequences might ensue as a

result of short-term or long-term interactions, and moving on. Mulling over things that are out of our immediate control is counterproductive, self-defeating, and poisonous to a soul yearning for illumination from transpersonal contents irrupting from the collective unconscious. *Conjunctio*, then, is about conscious networking in ways that are mutually satisfying and productive for all involved. Clients who fail to forge these three-dimensional relationships in the real world are at a deadlock and cannot penetrate deeper into the therapeutic cycle.

MORTIFICATIO



The seventh stage of the therapeutic process is a recapitulation of the first (the *nigredo*) where the matter in the alembic is gradually reduced to its primordial, undifferentiated state of *prima materia* by manner of incineration. Alchemists often imagined that the vapour condensing at the top of the vessel during this phase was the liberated 'soul' of the metal, chemical, or substance undergoing blackening and putrefaction. What this means in psychological terms is that the integrated constellation of unified Oneness achieved during the preceding *lesser conjunctio* has reached critical mass and has spontaneously activated its polar opposite. The switch back to multiplication and further differentiation brings to light more dross and some of the deeper shadows of the personality that the first *nigredo* wasn't able to

liquidate. If the analysand wishes to penetrate further and achieve individuation and that illusive state of illumination, any pre-existing and newly formed projections that appropriate transpersonal energies to fulfil the ego's own personal needs, drives, gains, demands, and lower-level pleasures must be obliterated and wiped clean from the psyche's innately wired software programs. Failure to consolidate here means a death sentence for the client-counsellor synergy and the therapeutic endeavour as a whole.

Left unaided, individuation works quite like a set of dominoes or a pebble being dropped in the midst of oceanic doldrums. One act sets in motion the entire process. Thus the inner hermetic fires which 'cooked' the ego and purged it of the aforementioned contaminations in the first *nigredo* are resurrected temporarily in the second to duplicate their corrosive action again. Here, at the deepest level of the psyche, the transition to *mortificatio* is articulated telepathically by the corroborating *dreambody* through nocturnal visions and images of overflowing toilets, couples or individuals being beheaded, eviscerations, mutilations, flagellations, and all other modes of torture, suffering, and death. As the darkest operation in alchemy, *mortificatio* can be quite an overwhelming and disheartening experience. But a force that can so readily depress the human soul is also liable to raise it to heights unfathomable and imperceptible to its sister operations. What the ego perceives as a personal defeat is really an undisclosed victory for the Self, for there can be no flowering of consciousness from the seedy womb without periodic surrenders to the negative experience of

Christ-like passion and self-sacrifice. One cannot self-actualize without the *pathos* and *threnos* of suffering.

In transpersonal psychotherapy *mortificatio* can be equated with the realization that, just like everything else subject to the cosmic cycles of birth, death and regeneration, the counsellor-client synergy has an indefinite lifespan and will soon come to an end. In this way it mimics relationships built in the real world which eventually climax and run aground onto stagnant reefs once the interacting forces, the projected psychological makeup of two individuals, have exhausted one another's potential compatibilities. When performed contentiously, correctly and with much panache, relationships with professional grounding can be just as meaningful as personal ones and involve the transference and countertransference of gut-level sentiments like love, consecration, and loyalty. Furthermore, their predilection to eliciting productivity, purposiveness, meaningfulness, lucidity, and freshness in life by exalting order and raising their subject to ecstatic heights from whence he or she might behold a spiritual alpenglow is something that even the mightiest in resolve would struggle hard to abandon.

A chief aim of counselling is to propagate the opinion that a degree of self-love isn't aberrant or undesirable; in fact, it's a necessary precursor to the development of a confidence that enables one to act into the environment without the harassment and stress that comes from being the owner of an overbearing conscience or nagging self-doubts. Another of its aims is to encourage self-reliance and poise. As a general rule effective

therapy can be a very a liberating and empowering experience, originating attitudes to life worthy of eternal embracement. We can also define it as an artificial or artificial set of circumstances that work with the inner realm (not exclusively though) to make psychospiritual gold from the lead of neuroses, unusual addictions and fixations, and negative mental states. From this perspective it's not difficult to understand why termination of the process is perceived as a loss by the analysand and kicks up about as much emotional dust as what the ending of a natural relationship does.

All things considered, *mortificatio* means that all the constituent parameters that made therapy a habitual and stable part of the client's life-time, place of appointment, and level of intensity-are now dissolving and the processes of healing, reintegration, and the resolution of conflicts will either go on unaided in the natural world or enter into communion with a different counsellor. A good counsellor knows when this symbolic death is imminent and will do everything in his or her power to ensure that positive changes achieved during hermetically sealed operations in the counselling room are smoothly and subtlety transliterated into a dialect comprehensible to the rhythms and cycles of real life. The better this is done, the less likelihood there is of the analysand suffering another self-sabotaging setback, regression, or crisis in self-esteem. Of course the weight of making these transitions concrete in the real world is the sole responsibility of the analysand. The counsellor opens up all viable ways to healing through therapy yet all pivotal decision-making is faithfully left to the intuitive devices of the analysand. In the

end, whatever course of action he or she chooses to take is going to involve making a *choice* or a series of *choices*. As we so clearly witnessed from our phenomenological exploration of madness and hallucinations, building a proactive future is all about making premeditated *choices* and subsequently taking actions compatible with one's natural inclinations and inner life.

There can be no doubt that those individuals who remain motionless or hesitant for too long without going this or that way end up suffering dire consequences. But linear progression along the multifaceted therapeutic cycle from the death and defeat associated with *nigredo* to the comprehensive and contemplative vision of *albedo* is no reassurance of salvation either. Just as white contains the latent seeds of darkness and creation those of destruction, so too does a new perspective or evolutionary standpoint in life contain within it the very real potential for a second devolution and dismemberment at the hands of the psyche's own inner doubting Thomas. New ways of thinking can slip back into rusty old psychic frameworks, personal relationships might be reassessed under the mediation of a far more critical and judgemental eye, and the problem of transference and countertransference can rear its head in more prominent ways than before.

This second baptism into the deleterious fires of torture, death, and decomposition is always bound to stir up overwhelming, fiery emotions like frustration and anger. The analysand might voice these sentiments through negative declarations like: "*Why has this issue come up again?*", "*Why the*

same feelings again as before?”, or *“I feel like we’re just going around and around in circles.”* It’s important for the facilitating therapist to address and dissolve thought-desires of this colour and intensity in the counselling sessions preceding termination otherwise the client can leave feeling that the psychological synergy with the counsellor hasn’t been terminated; that business remains incomplete; and that he or she is free to walk back into therapy from the unstipulated pause at any time. Actually, the critical importance of hermetically sealing termination through the illumination of boundaries and conditions cannot be stressed enough!

SOLUTIO



Solutio comes under the mediation of the ethereal element of water and pertains to chemical liquefaction. Think of this alchemical operation as dropping a piece of ice into a bottle of tepid water. Gradually the ice cube will melt and become a part of the larger body of water. This re-joining and becoming one with a parent membrane typically personified as a goddess, a woman, or an earthy and seedy womb is a primal act of *solutio*! Alchemists professed that this stage was a facet of the blackening process, the *nigredo*, where the matter in the *vas* or alembic was reduced to a primordial and homogeneous sludge pile termed *prima materia* so that it could be raised anew as a nobler, a more stable, and a more indestructible form.

The analytical psychology pioneered by Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) in the early twentieth century uses the laboratory

framework of liquefaction at the hands of a chemical solvent to shed light upon a specific phase in the individuation process whereby the active, sulphurous principle of the personality (the personal ego) has been dissolved into its constituent psychic elements by the sulphurous waters of the collective unconscious. During these excruciating moments of its inconsequential life the ego becomes plagued by instinctual sensations of being drowned. These might crop up in the realm of dreams and hypnagogic imagery as acts of swimming, drowning, and being baptized; as deadly floods and terrifying tsunamis; and as daily hygienic activities such as showering and taking baths. Experiencing leitmotifs of this kind essentially means that inflated projections are generating excess psychic acid in the bottommost layers of the individual psyche. After a short while these swamp and dissolve the governing ego-self. In the end the only way that the ego can save itself from suffering total extinction is to offer up leftover amounts of energy-rich libido to transpersonal elements recognized as being sympathetic to its cause. Once these new associations have been made, the unconscious coagulates a newer, sounder, and more inclusive set of projections for the dismantled ego from whence consciousness can once again take root.

In the therapeutic cycle *solutio* explores major transitions from one life period to another and amplifies the lamentable situation experienced during the preceding phase, the gruesome *mortificatio*. You might choose to think of it as an extension rather than an alchemical operation in its own right. Basically, the repeated immersion of the ego-conscious in the corrosive and

poisonous waters of the unconscious mind causes some of the deeper-rooted problems, miseries, and neurotic behaviours to surface. We could equate this process to the tumultuous interaction of water and earth in the physical environment; just as the coming and going of water at the foot of a cliff eventually underruns the latter and brings down a geological layer of the earth after a prolonged period of probing, so too does long-term analysis with carefully constructed questions and statements penetrate an analysand's subsisting and deeper issues that go far in explaining why he or she acts and reacts in this or that way.

The liquefaction of the present, self-conscious ego during this deeper phase of therapy can be much more frightening and unsettling than in any of the corresponding *nigredo* phases already passed and endured. When one embraces the clear, comprehensive, and contemplative vision of whiteness produced during the *albedo* whereby the preeminent symptoms are silenced, the furthest thing from his or her mind afterwards is the possibility that the pain and suffering experienced during all the initiatory phases that garnered valuable insights and increments in consciousness might once again be questioned and scrutinized. Deductive reasoning would tell us that any therapy that extricates our symptoms and replaces them with gut-level feelings of tranquillity and contentment is a valid cosmological process, at least one which fulfils all intents and purposes for which it was mobilized in the first place. If this logic is anything to go by, then why must the analysand traverse a somewhat condensed summa of the alchemical phases preceding the albedo once again? Why

should all this pain and suffering be so necessary after one finds their footing in life?

The answer to this little therapeutic enigma is much more simple and uncomplicated than what it might seem at first. Being thrown back into the same confrontations and battles with the unconscious that led to empowerment and ascension along the ladder of *freedom* does, on the whole, feel like a psychospiritual involution rather than an evolution and a relapse into the instinctual and rudimentary drives powering the earlier alchemical operations. However any unconscious and transpersonal force that may inundate the conscious ego at this point and threaten its existence by partially submerging it in the slime of irrationality, chaos, and madness can also enact a thorough deprogramming of inflated projections and behavioural patterns, opening up a gaping psychic conduit large enough to accommodate the formative forces of love. Deeper disintegrations into darkness and putrefaction are accompanied by even deeper insights and cosmological groundings. One may find that becoming enamoured of another man or woman (often what the analysand might describe as a 'prince' or 'princess') pinches out problems that have dissipated and rematerialized at regular intervals for years on end. This liberation of unconditional and unfettered desirousness for another conscious projection of the universe gradually sews itself into all other existing relationships; it reinvents, lengthens, and deepens them way beyond the rock-pool level.

The deepest declines are also the earth on which spiritual emergencies sprout forth. Whilst holding the bundle of personal projections together at the unconscious level, the Eros-glue turns its shrewdest and most principled face to the mortified ego and as a consequence sets the stage for an affirmative long-term life transition; for the inauguration of an elusive peak experience; or for a powerful psychic opening of some sort. Fantasies and deep feelings that appeared as random and irrelevant contingencies before are now understood as interrelated pointers emanating from the nethermost regions of the soul that encode conscious instructions for inner natural potentials and psychic dowries. For the first time ever the analysand might become acquainted with the mechanics and dialectical uniqueness of their own *dreambody*. *Solutio* can be slow and dispiriting, but it is also the most rewarding and instrumental of all the infernal descents leading to self-actualization.

COAGULATIO



In the alchemical opus *coagulatio* transcribes the process whereby a liquid is chemically transposed into a solid state. The allusion to hardening and of going from an unconditional to a conditional state of existence is inexplicable linked with creation as a churning act of incarnating spirit or coming into being. All cosmogonic myths attempting to explain the origin of the universe and the birth of humankind; all conjunctions of Sol and Luna depicted in alchemical treatises across the ages; and all solidifications of subterranean magma into igneous rock after it has violently erupted onto the surface of the earth represent a particular aspect of this cosmological leitmotif.

Transposed to the psychological echelon, *coagulatio* is the fixed point at which the self-conscious ego and the transpersonal Self meet and interact. According to the laws of Jungian individuation, the sulfurous principle or dynamic impulse of desirousness aches for expression and binds the personal ego to the earthbound plane by facilitating an awareness of the shadowy aspects of one's own inner nature. This discrimination of opposites, of playing off corresponding qualities—black and white, good and evil, and masculine and feminine—off against one another to create spatiotemporal and consensual reality as we recognize it is a maleficent, criminal process because it introduces the concept personification into existence. In this state all things and aspects of the cosmos are no longer operating in unconscious unison and concord; the gravity of one's perception shifts from 'we' and 'us' to an egocentric situation of 'I' or 'me' versus an ambient background of multilayered fields, establishing the archetypal blueprints of an inner realm known esoterically as the microcosm as separate from an outer phenomenal world recognized by all as the macrocosm. As we individuate or self-actualize the conscious standpoint expands to accommodate a proliferating bundle of transpersonal projections emerging from the unconscious together, strengthening the *essence* of the contracted ego exponentially. Everything standing outside of that congealed *essence* is a potential threat to its secular sanctuary, a malignant 'evil' to be reckoned with.

One of the best ways to identify *coagulatio* (the confinement to personal space or material reality) in a client's or analysand's life process is through altered states of consciousness like

dreams and hypnagogia. Telepathic images involving social transgressions, aviation disasters, or things materializing in the sky and raining down around the client are some of the most powerful symbols associated with *coagulatio*. So too are unremarkable and common aspects of day-to-day living like putting on clothes, building edifices for residence, and eating food. The Jungian analyst Edward Edinger who dedicated a whole chapter to *coagulatio* in his book *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy* elucidates that to eat or scoff down food in your dreams telepathically connotes the reality that unconscious archetypal content is about to be projected into consciousness by the ego. On the other hand, motifs that have to make do with the establishment of human relationships and all matters concerning them are also *coagulatio* themes. To form a relationship with somebody or something means to render a transpersonal force personal and then incorporate it into the same patterned interface of entwining and interconnected dichotomies appropriated by all embodied minds to make sense out of the world. The concretization of psychic forces characteristic of *coagulatio* themes such as the ones just mentioned is of utmost importance in psychotherapy as well as in the formative development of an individual, for without it schizophrenia and a whole continuum of other psychological conditions loosely banded under the label of psychosis materialize. Acute fixations are problematic and dangerous but an inability on the part of our internal psychic mechanisms to congeal them is even more consequential. I guess the line

separating creation and order from destruction and chaos is a lot finer than we perceive it to be.

In the realm of transpersonal therapy, *coagulatio* is associated with the hardening up of archetypal contents that broke through the thick layers of unconsciousness during the *olutio* phase or the third *nigredo*. Owing to the steepness of this descent, the coming-to-consciousness of deeper shadowy horrors makes *coagulatio* an acrimonious and wretched stage in the alchemical cycle. Psychic projections rising from the collective unconscious to establish the new ego-self bring with them the arcane knowledge of why previous suicidal self-annihilations came about in the first place as well as the realization that emancipation, amalgamation, and transfiguration knows no definitive cosmological grounding. Moreover, the analysand might all of a sudden awaken to the notion that the personal ego-conscious is something of an illusion, a Midwestern farmhouse never quite safe from spiritual tornadoes liable to funnel their way into reality and wreak havoc at any moment.

There is something entirely negative and problematic about embracing the individuation process with open arms; the fact that knowledge of its laws are congealing under the aegis of a much more exalted ego now limits and imprisons consciousness within narrower psychospiritual demarcations and emasculates other creative potentialities yearning for expression. In actual fact, acquisitions of form or concretely actualizing psychic energies almost always evoke a sense of necrotic detachment from the Adamic perfection and infinite spectrum of creative impulses

brewing in the unconscious. What this means is that once matter has been defined and named it loses its spark, its wonder, its mystifying nature, and its enchantment. In other words it suffers inertia and becomes lifeless. Any loss that involves the destruction of such instrumental life qualities as beauty and sympathetic resonance to all of creation as a whole is bound to be a saddening and disheartening experience for the individual psyche. Remaining resolute and stoic in the face of such losses is possible because we spend our lives oblivious to the conception that they're an omnipresent aspect of consciousness and forever transpiring.

For the most part, the *coagulatio* subjects the counsellor-client synergy to a morbid acceleration of the transference-countertransference cycle. This is due to the fact that previously rejected content is now emerging from the cavernous depths of the unconscious, connecting and imbuing the client's most excruciating past and present life experiences with meaning. The meaningfulness, initially perceived as a vice, places an enormous amount of stress on an affiliation loosely held together by professional bonds and obligations and tests its endurance. Regrettably, the unconscious act of transmuting transpersonal energies into 'earth' and thus rendering the hitherto undeciphered roots of very dark psychological problems and neuroses comprehensible is no assurance of salvation. New material pouring forth is likely to be the catalyst for experiences both favourable and unfavourable, producing feelings of ambivalence that the client might easily mistake for misguidance, a distortion of the phenomenology of experience, or just plain

apathy towards his or her emotional welfare. The spontaneous inversion of an attitude that has now gone from honouring, respecting, and exalting the facilitating counsellor to perceiving him or her as an implement of the devil can be infuriating and patience-testing for the latter.

Because the movement from the *albedo* or whiteness to *citrinitas* or yellowing involves a lateral shift which is not polar in nature and unprecedented, the client may become stuck in a semi-permanent state of delusional dejection and develop a false conviction that the therapeutic endeavour has been derailed by darkness and will never again realign with the tunnel leading out into the spiritual light. During this 'dark night of the soul', it's not at all uncommon for an analysand to attack the mediating counsellor with statements like, "*Do you actually know what you're doing or are you trying to drive me mad intentionally?*" or "*I feel like you don't understand me anymore. What's gotten into you?*" If the counsellor cannot correct these unfounded perceptions by actively applying his or her sphere of self-knowledge and past experiences to the therapeutic method, three things are bound to eventuate: firstly, the professional relationship will be rocked right down to its very foundations; secondly, the clarifying vision of the *albedo* will escape like a beautiful white dove from an opened birdcage; and finally the final breakthroughs anticipated in the next stage will forever remain an unrealized aspiration.

Throughout this later phase, the personal ego begins to bridge many previously unconnected experiences and make sense

out of them in the manner that a pre-schooler methodically joins all the points in a connect-the-dot-puzzle to form an image perceptible to its intellect. Often deeply traumatic phenomena thrust to the slimy seabed of the collective unconscious and under rug swept for extended epochs of one's life will announce themselves like spiritual emergencies. Aided by the counsellor's continual synthetic and calculated probing, childhood memories associated with sexual, physical and emotional abuse may incite the personal *dreambody* into action which begins churning them out from beneath the psychic lithosphere of suppression, detachment, and amnesia through telepathic and kinaesthetic conduits. Beginning as vague tingling sensations in the dark pits of oblivion they diffuse across into the imaginal world, into the realm of symbols and archetypes and manifest there as a whole continuum of dreams and hypnagogic images before entering contracted state of ordinary waking consciousness as transcribed chronological sequences of spatiotemporal events called memories. These thicken and congeal and become as palpable as a shiner obtained during a violent midnight brawl at the local pub. Major inroads into some of the most harrowing and mysterious psychological conditions like dissociative identity or multiple personality disorder (also known as split personality) are more than likely to eventuate during this deeper and heavier alchemical stage. Given that the hermetic fires and heat that reduce preeminent 'forms', projections, and psychic contents into *prima materia* are at their fiercest in the third and last putrefactio, it makes sense that the likelihood of fusing fragmented *subpersonalities* operating independently with the

dominant host personality or into a former ego pattern would increase exponentially here.

Under immense pressure coming from the fiery element, metals bend and break and pieces of glass fuse together. So too do the ingredients brewing in the personal container called the psyche.

SUBLIMATIO



Alchemists have always understood *sublimatio* as an ascending movement of the cyclic process of purification that releases the pure spirit from the primordial slime or *prima materia* in the alchemical vessel, the *vas* or alembic. In defining the process, the fourth-century Greek bishop Synesius explains that “when our stone is in the vessel, and that it mounts up on high in fume, this is called *Sublimation*, and when it falls down from on high, *Distillation*, and Descension.” Understood from the perspective of modern science it is the transformation of matter directly from a solid to a vaporous state, a chemical process also known as sublimation. During the conversion fumes rising up to the mouth and along the sides of the hermetically sealed vessel rapidly

condense into beads of water vapour. Their phenomenal inclination to ascend and expand is the predominant and defining characteristic of *sublimatio*.

The act of rising or floating upwards is synonymous with the transposition of a transient and contracted everyday ego-consciousness confined by spatiotemporal laws to an eternal and transcendental state of being free from concrete systems that allow for the world and for consensual reality to be perceived through psychological projections of warring opposites. Furthermore, elevation also implies putting distance between one's self and the detrimental thought-desires that chain one to the earth; in other words detachment from the very problems, moods, and mental states that destroy willpower and focus, and replace them with dampened, futile feelings about one's life path and destiny. Hence, this particular phase of the alchemical circulation is about forming an idealistic and stoic attitude of self-reflection and self-regulation. It's all about being able to blow about one's passions and fixations, to band and disband one's thought-desires and projections, and to disperse and re-member past ego-centres and formative personalities in an impersonal way. We could personify psychological ascent as a puppeteer employed to stage a performance of an artistic legacy with which he has no affiliation or connection. Under such circumstances the puppeteer's overall disposition is bound to be cold and distant. Likewise, with the *sublimatio* phase the long sequence of previous *nigredos* or *putrefactios* has created a transpersonal soul-centre able to submit to painful and unprecedented experiences without losing its eye for objectivity. Perhaps the greatest mystery of this

final integration pertains to the nature of consciousness; once evolutionary leaps have been made by any integrated individual, they begin cropping up in the archetypal dreams and visions of others progressing along the same royal road to individuation.

Clients in the midst or onset of *sublimatio* experience dreams and visions characterized by an upward movement of some kind. This breed of qualitatively-related leitmotifs is also the most common amongst dreamers. The action of climbing mountains, peaks, staircases, and ladders; that of levitating or flying through the skies in aeroplanes, helicopters, and other winged machines; and that of flocks of birds sweeping overhead or about the dreamer are all *sublimatio* symbols suggestive of experiences or situations about to be consciously skewed in a much more objective way and in the context of a loftier, more comprehensive matter. A consequence of this phenomenon is that problems and negative emotional states are rendered insignificant, releasing the client's ego-self from imprisonment in its own inflated projection. The definitive ascent of this cosmological operation associated with the ethereal element of air extends to all states of consciousness. Looking at and interpreting the phenomenology of dreams and visions as well as experiences garnered during waking state from the standpoint of a holistic, metaphysical, Platonic, or some other hermeneutical model embodying theories of higher causation can also be thought of as an exponent of this process. On the whole, *sublimatio* is all about being intimately acquainted with the bigger picture and being able to zoom in on all the different vantage points, interpretations, and possibilities.

In transpersonal psychotherapy, *sublimatio* is the harbinger of the much awaited and final breakthrough, the moment when the analysand embraces the thawed out fear and pain of deeper oppositions that arose during the preceding *coagulatio* phase. If yellowing was concerned with unearthing deeply ingrained neuroses, fixations, and other psychological problems that manifested during one's formative years of development, then psychotherapeutic *sublimatio* must connote a psychic situation of perverted intercourse with them. True rebirth and transmutation of the soul can only transpire by means of inner friction whereby detrimental fixations, traumas phobias and other psychological disturbances are overcome through the conscious application of persisted concentration. By applying this concentrative energy to every situation that hovers about threatening the dissolution of the ego-self, the analysand can assimilate unconscious material into what is now a reasonably expanded consciousness without suffering the horrors of complete annihilation and disbandment.

This ability to merge and embrace with what one dreads most in his or her life is to see profound wisdom and constructive vision hiding within flecks of the deepest darkness. It is also foremost of the characteristics exhibited by a well-integrated or what is often referred to as a 'together' individual. Having developed the 'astral body' of unconscious willpower and drive, 'together' individuals are able to detach from the violent *conunctios* between the two aspects of mind (conscious and subconscious) which brings about excruciating putrefaction of all un-individuated and 'impure' selves. Detachment is imperative to the process of self-actualization, for it elevates one's psychic

essence or self-centre to places far beyond the reach of raging hermetic ground fires set ablaze by egoistic inflation. The further we are from the inner fires of disintegration, the less likelihood there is of losing those psychological projections that have putrefied and resurrected numerous times over and the more likely we are to awaken to the reality of the continuity of self.

With the coming of the fifth and culminating *conjunctio*, the ego-self is no longer alike to an animated piece of organic matter transitory in its lifespan and sensitive to the temperament of the elements in the phenomenal world. Now it has undergone a dynamic transformation into a noble metal able to withstand tremendous pressures and temperatures without suffering changes to its inner electronic configuration. Suddenly the paradoxical eternity indigenous to being emerges; 'I' am an accumulation of separate 'I's' created by the perpetual struggle between the inner and outer bands of reality but I am also a unicellular organization of psychic energy whose consciousness continues to expand and grow through the triune cycle of birth, death, and regeneration. The ability to reconstitute oneself after suffering complete dismemberment at the hands of the blackening of the *nigredo* or *putrefactio* higher, nobler, and more complete than what one was before is quintessentially a validation of the immortality and transcendental nature of the Self. For most this transposition of personality is a pivotal and definitive moment in life. When one finally awakens to the fact that the ebbs and flows, the coming and going of the creative life process flows through all conscious minds and unites them under one behemoth of a macrocosmic superconscious, the consolation

of seductive falsities epitomised by neuroses, addictions, and fixations on which the ego depends for fulfilment suddenly appear trivial and insignificant. We could think of this integrative process as an individual suffering from retrograde amnesia, one who has only just started to remember events, identities, relationships, memories, and dreams that defined his or her life preceding the trauma or accident that led to the condition's inception.

In many ways the awakening and breakthrough of the *sublimatio* is like the intermediary state of consciousness known as *hypnagogia* where we are transitioning from the imaginal and archetypal world of sleep to the contracted waking consciousness of everyday life. The serenading trumpets compel us to harken to the sounds of the culminating purification.

RUBEDO



According to alchemical doctrine, the unremitting addition of mercury to the *prima materia* in the alembic or retort and the repeated cycles of distillation to which it is subjected spurs a violent reaction, causing it to attain a deep red hue that can be likened to blushing. Fiery red is a colour of rage, anger, passion, emotion and activity, as well as the unconscious will to dominate, subjugate and rule over nature. It is also the colour associated with the culminating phase of the alchemical opus, the *rubedo*, where the *prima materia* becomes *ultima materia* or the Philosopher's Stone. The latter is habitually described as an

elusive dense, red powder that scintillates in the daylight like shards of broken glass. So many miraculous feats are attributed to it, the most notable being the transmutation of base metals into gold and the conferral of immortality upon the individual who ingests it. Like earthly quicksilver, it was supposed to coagulate into a wax-like jelly when subjected to high temperatures and reacquire its original solid state again upon cooling. In describing this, the most desirable of alchemical stages, the seventeenth century alchemist Eirenaeus Philalethes (the peaceful lover of truth) posited that: 'And so the Red they name their Vermilion, their red lead, their Poppy of the Rock, their Tyre (i.e. Tyrian Purple), their Basilisk, their red Lion, and in sum it borrows the names of all red things.' Red flowers like roses and lilies, the ruby gemstone, and the red King are also symbols of the alchemical *rubedo*. The last of these is inexplicably linked with the sun, a material constituent of the collective and personal conscious. Hence the *rubedo* alludes to the exaltation of the conscious mind under the auspices of an integrated unconscious; what Carl Jung called individuation.

A cosmographical interpretation preceding the foundation of this concept subsists in *The Book of Night*, an ancient Egyptian text to be found *in* the second transverse chamber of the Osireion in the Upper Egyptian city of Abydos. In an illustrative sequence related to the twelfth hour of the night, the sun-boat travelers are creatively propelled forward from the sacred pudendum of the sky goddess, through the infernal regions of her bloodied birth canal. The act of coming through it involves further tribulations of resisting dissolution and death, but it also involves

revivification with the vital life force, the subtle body that enables the physical body to operate on the earthbound, spatiotemporal plane. After their final purification, the night travelers can be born again anew onto the earth from amidst multicolored shades of dawn redness perceived to be the creative juices of the Nut goddess in her moment of giving birth to her divine child, the sun. Contained within the aurora are all the emotional irruptions, the warmth, heart, and splendid wonder that can only come with the realization that something of ourselves survives the corrosive forces of nocturnal death and emerges again distended or changed in some fundamental way. This is redness or reddening. One of the most fascinating aspects of the twelfth hour imagery is that it combines leitmotifs and titles of divinities that are both solar and lunar in nature, implying that culminating aspects of the everlasting cycle of cosmic birth and rebirth encompasses a unified sphere of positive and negative, the feminine and masculine reconciled. Given that the ancient Egyptians were masters of utilizing puns, allegories, verbal nuances, and other language techniques to express Hermetic processes of creation pregnant with multiple layers of meaning, it shouldn't be all that difficult to comprehend how this concluding aspect of the Egyptian underworld journey corresponds with the reddening of psychological integration and the mechanics of self-actualization. In truth the more comprehensive, holistic, and overarching former embodies the reductionistic, dualistic, and 'scientifically-justified' phenomenological approach of the latter.

Transpersonal psychology envisions the alchemical *rubedo* as the creation of a new, pneumatic state whereby any egoic projections

of desirousness and personal exaltation emerging onto the virgin slate of the soul are instantly transformed into a creative fluid ready to utilize the client's inner natural tendencies when forming interpersonal relationships. In this way psychic connections are not only genuine and open, but full of significance, resolve, and an adroit capacity for rejuvenation. Unlike many foregoing stages, the *rubedo* signals a permanent change to the composition of one's personality; now, irreconcilable and hostile forces are resisted and the frightening *putrefactio* caused by internal friction more easily endured because of its constructive and beneficial aftereffects. Somebody who has reached this level of development through clinical work or the life process is fueled by spiritual love and fundamental harmony, operating in ways that deepen and enrich personal and collective experiences. They are concerned for their own welfare; the welfare of their brothers and sisters; and for the betterment of transnational ethos and lifestyle. Well-balanced, measured, and calculated in their thinking and consequent actions, integrated individuals emit positive, benevolent vibrations that radiate outwards and enrapture those in their immediate vicinity; their cheerful disposition is so infectious and soul-nourishing that others vibrating on lesser wavelengths want to be around them all the time. High vibrations are energizing and everyone wants to be energized.

Rubedo, then, might be described as a permanent psychospiritual shift within the client or individual involving the appearance of objectively-sensed truths. The most important of these relates to the nature of the relationship between the inner

and outer planes, between microcosm and macrocosm or mind and matter. Integrated clients *know* that to pursue the fulfillment of thought-desires orientated towards the acquisition of material properties is futile because the desirousness of the ego-self is perpetual and can never be completely gratified. How does one quench an unquenchable thirst? Having climbed onto the sturdier ground on which the ‘superior’ personality or ‘diamond body’ rests, he or she now understands that the ego’s desire to possess bits and pieces of the phenomenal world and call them ‘mine’ arises from a persistent concentration on exterior visual imagery, one that imbues their corresponding internal constituents with emotional significance and personal worth. When unaccompanied by mental processes able to internalize images and assimilate them into an intricate personal labyrinth of interconnected meanings and purposes, matter is meaningless and worthless. In other words there is no *worth* or *value* in anything unless matter is appropriated by the dualism of the human mind. Everything is within, not without. Logically then, relations and actions with the outer world—movements, possessions, behaviors and attitudes, and the scope and depth of active participation in interpersonal relationships—are all splinters of a mirror reflecting core *worth* or *values* that currently preside over the integrated or un-integrated soul of a particular individual.

If this esoterically-flavored philosophy is to be believed, then what we call reality and objective truth are in truth internal affairs; a subjectively-constructed situation of each person’s ‘heart’. Contemplating this truth, mulling it over, and then ‘earthing’ it by applying it to relationships and to life in general is

what reddening or the *rubedo* is all about. Just like the *ultima materia* or ruby-red Philosopher's Stone, fulfilling the spiritualization of consciousness in this psychotherapeutic stage is about being able to project oneself into foreign psychic spaces, withdraw from them at will, and rise to extraordinary places in the heavens from whence the action of the spiritual winds on the collective and personal psyche becomes fully coherent. It's about programming the mind to be unconditional and non-judgmental, pulling down fixated and neurotic obstructions, and being about to infuse oneself into foreign modes of thought and being. The imaginal world is its inheritance and creative vision is its language. Its dialect is subtle. This is *rubedo* or red.

Are you seeing red yet?

SHORT BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Paul Kiritsis (b. 1979) is the author of over two hundred articles on meta-psychology, consciousness and transpersonal studies, and the history of Western esotericism. Currently, he is attempting to harness a more adequate view of the nature of mind and is immensely interested in ‘psi’ phenomena and their manifestation in severe mental illness. Paul holds a Bachelor of Psychological Science and a Graduate Diploma in Professional Writing and Speech (Latrobe University); a Master of Western Esotericism (Exeter University); and a Bachelor of Metaphysical Science, Master of Metaphysical Science, and Doctor of Philosophy (Sedona University). Paul also has three poetry collections and twelve literary awards to his name, and currently holds the position of Vice Present of the Greek Australian Cultural League. He enjoys adventure travel, scuba diving, and weightlifting.