

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts

Lesson 17 : The style in which a text is written - devices of rhetoric, allegory and supposed biography.



We have in the past five lessons looked in depth at five alchemical texts, three major ones - the *Mirror of Alchemy*, the *Treasure of Treasures* and Flamel's *Philosophical Summary* - and two perhaps lesser known, though important items - the *Lily among the thorns* and the *Terrestrial Heaven*. I hope the method of providing a reading in parallel with the text will have been found useful to you. I have tried to provide an accurate "translation" of the text into more modern language and at the same time explaining some of the technical terms. You will see how I have avoided pushing an interpretation onto the text itself, but tried rather to elucidate and express the author's ideas in more modern English.

When we read such texts we should avoid merely viewing them through our own preconceived ideas. Thus we could imagine a person with a strong interest in the kabbalah wanting to find their favourite ideas, the Sephiroth, paths on the tree of life and the four kabbalistic worlds in an alchemical text they were reading. Or perhaps someone who has a deep interest in spiritual, esoteric or new age ideas, might go fishing around in an alchemical text looking for parallels to what they are familiar and comfortable with. I hope I have shown that this is not a valid approach, as you end up reading what you want out of a text and not what the original writer put into it in the first place.

I have also tried to show that alchemical texts were often rhetorical and didactic, that is they were presenting a definite view of alchemy and attempting to teach this to their readership. Alchemical texts were rarely purely documenting or precisely describing some experiment. Often when they appear to be telling about some events that happened, we find on reading the text clearly that such events are inconsistent and could not have occurred in the way described. When philosophical ideas are presented, a text may attribute these to a certain historical personality in order to suggest that these ideas derived from that individual and not from the writer. These are all devices of rhetoric, which was widely used in the philosophical discourse of the time. We should all be familiar with such rhetoric as it is part of the fabric of our political, scientific and artistic tradition today. It would be entirely foolish for us to listen to a politician's speech today and naively accept the rhetorical points they are making. Instead we have to contextualise what they are saying and realise why they are using a particular phrase or construct. If we do not do this then we will be led to make decisions about such matters based on false information, implications and conclusions. In much the same way, we must not read an alchemical text without considering what the alchemist/writer was trying to achieve through his writings. If we merely read them as naïve truth then we could miss the point entirely and become lost in a maze of competing rhetorical statements. For this reason I have tried to show something of the posture or stance the writer was adopting

towards his readership, and reveal something of the subtlety of the rhetoric which shaped their text.

Thus in order to proceed to a clear reading of alchemical texts we must try and become aware of something of the intentions of the writer in creating his work. This is a very difficult thing to do and indeed this can only come when you have experience of reading many hundreds of such texts so that you can begin to see the patterns, contrivances and devices that alchemists used in their books. A key to the writers intentions in creating his work can often be seen in the way he address us as readers, and what stance he takes towards us.

He may adopt the role of a rather patronising teacher. Here we will find ourselves being addressed as “My son...”. An example of this is seen in the piece entitled *Treatise on Mercury and the Philosopher’s Stone* from the *Aurifontina Chymica* printed in 1680, which is in lesson five, or of course, Hermes in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, see lesson three. We are being forced, merely through the style of writing, into the role of pupils before a wise master.

Another literary device used, is to present his text as autobiography, an account of things that had really happened to him. We saw Johann Grasshoff writing in this style in his *Lily among the thorns* of lesson 13. Here we, as readers, are in a sense being drawn into the writer’s confidence, being given privileged information. This puts us into the difficult position of having to accept what the writer says, as here he is confiding directly in us. This can be a rather persuasive style.

Another style often used is for the writer to attribute a text to an earlier authority. This was done in order to give a text some gravitas. Often an unknown alchemist writing his text felt that it might not be taken very seriously, or would merely be ignored unless he could make it appear as if these ideas emanated from some ancient authority. We saw this in the case of the Roger Bacon, Paracelsus and Nicolas Flamel works, lessons 12, 15 and 16. It is wrong to see these as forgeries. They are usually coherent and significant alchemical works by some unknown author who chose to attribute his own writings to earlier authorities who had influenced him. Often the writer felt he was articulating the ideas of his predecessor, and relaying these, as he understood them, to his readership. Thus there was often no real attempt at deceptive forgery involved.

Texts purporting to document alchemical transmutations became especially popular at the end of the 16th century. This is a whole species of alchemical literature in itself. Often these stories use common motifs. These sort of texts seem to be presenting to us as readers, a documentation of some alchemical transmutation. We are given tantalising (but often incomplete) information, even lists of witnesses and the events surrounding the transmutation.

Some writers choose to write in allegory. This removes them entirely from the text. Instead, as readers, we are being asked to step into a kind of created world. We know this is a fiction and yet at the same time we know it is written to communicate something about the alchemical work. Some of these allegories are rather simple extended metaphors, but others are elaborate, convoluted and well thought out imaginative structures. As readers we are being placed into the position of having to read the alchemy out of the allegorical story. Sometimes the author may give us a great deal of help in doing this by means of explanation, but in other cases the alchemical meaning of the allegory remains obscure and clouded. These kinds of works are very challenging. They can infuriate because they seem to outwardly present alchemical knowledge to us, but then hide it in some allegorical way.

These are just a few of the devices of style found in alchemical writings. We will look at some of these over the next few lessons. As an exercise you should take a look at the alchemical texts on the alchemy web site and just speed read some of them to identify the style, not attempt to understand them in depth, but rather see if you can quickly recognise in what style they are written. In time you will need to be able to see in what way the alchemical writer of a text is addressing us as readers, for this gives us some clues to the way in which we should approach and read the work.

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Let us now just look at one device used - the idea of an ancient alchemical author leaving behind a will or last testament, bequeathing his alchemical knowledge to future generations. The readers were supposed to be impressed by being able to hold in their hands an intimate testament of an ancient alchemist's most treasured secrets, which he was leaving as his legacy to future generations. Here are some examples. Firstly, Ramon Lull had a number of alchemical texts attributed to him. In the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries Lull was seen as a major figure in European intellectual and philosophical history, and despite the reality of Lull's total lack of interest in alchemy, later writers created works which they attributed to him. Of course, people in this age did not possess the textual scholarship which would allow them to see that Lull could not have written these alchemical texts.

*The Codicil or Vade mecum of Raymund Lulley
that very learned Philosopher.
In which the fountains of the alchemic art
and more hidden philosophy are most copiously laid open.*

Of God, in virtue of the Trinity (in which the unity of Thy divinity is not impaired, nor confounded in any wise) we begin the present compendium, which we would otherwise have to be called a Vade mecum, of the number of philosophers, or otherwise, a Clause of a Will in form of a codicil, now granted, with a perpetual will, to the renowned Kings of England, our successive heirs. And truly in this compendium, or art, we have determined (by a perfect declaration) the effect of the whole of this practical art, with sure and effectual instruments, and the chief principles in this art, which are of three kinds.

Of course, this is not to say that the *Codicil* is not an important alchemical text. Rather one should not read it naively as emanating from the hand of Ramon Lull in the 13th century, but rather see it as a fine piece of 15th century alchemy, written by an unknown alchemist who decided it would be better to have his writings issued under the contrivance of being written by Lull. Throughout the text itself, our writer studiously keep inserting little phrases to remind us that this is being written by Lull. The text itself is a fine exploration of the alchemy of around 1450 and worthy in its own right.

A similar device was used in constructing the *Last Will and Testament of Basil Valentine* which appeared in the 1620's and the *Testament of Nicholas Flamel*, which seems to have been created in the late 18th century. Please now read through this text and see how it could not have been written by a 14th century figure like Nicolas Flamel. If you have time and the enthusiasm, why not attempt

to produce a parallel reading of the text as I have done in the previous five lessons. Perhaps you should at least attempt the first section (paragraphs 1-8). The second section, the practical part, is perhaps a little more challenging.

Testament of Nicholas Flamel.

London: Printed by J. and E. Hodson... and sold only by the Editor. 1806.

[In French and English on facing pages.]

1. I Nicholas Flamel, a scrivener of Paris, in the year 1414, in the reign of our gracious Prince Charles the VIth, whom God preserve; and after the death of my faithful partner Perenelle, am seized with a desire and a delight, in remembrance of her, and in your behalf, dear nephew, to write out the whole magistery of the secret of the Powder of Projection, or the Philosophical Tincture, which God hath willed to impart to his very insignificant servant, and which I have found out, as thou also wilt find out in working as I shall declare unto you.

2. And for this cause do not forget to pray to God to bestow on thee the understanding of the reason of the truth of Nature, which thou wilt see in this book, wherein I have written the secrets word for word, sheet by sheet, and also as I have done and wrought with thy dear aunt Perenelle, whom I very much regret.

3. Take heed before thou workest, to seek the right way as a man of understanding. The reason of nature is Mercury, Sun and Moon, as I have said in my book, in which are those figures which thou seest under the arches of the Innocents at Paris. But I erred greatly upwards of 23 years and a half, in labouring without being able to marry the Moon, that is quicksilver, to the Sun, and to extract from them the seminal dung, which is a deadly poison; for I was then ignorant of the agent or medium, in order to fortify the Mercury: for without this agent, Mercury is as common water.

4. Know in what manner Mercury is to be fortified by a metallic agent, without which it never can penetrate into the belly of the Sun and of the Moon; afterward it must be hardened, which cannot be affected without the sulphureous spirit of gold or silver. You must therefore first open them with a metallic agent, that is to say with royal Saturnia, and afterward you must actuate the Mercury by a philosophic means, that you may afterward by this Mercury dissolve into a liquor gold and Luna, and draw from their putrefaction the generative dung.

5. And know thou, that there is no other way nor means to work in this art, than that which I give thee word for word; an operation, unless it be taught as I now do, not at all easy to perform, but which on the contrary is very difficult to find out.

6. Believe stedfastly, that the whole philosophic industry consists in the preparation of the Mercury of the wise, for in it is the whole of what we are seeking for, and which has always been sought for by all ancient wise men; and that we, no more than they, have done nothing without this Mercury, prepared with Sun or Moon: for without these three, there is nothing in the whole world capable of accomplishing the said philosophical and medicinal tincture. It is expedient then that we learn to extract from them the living and spiritual seed.

7. Aim therefore at nothing but Sun, Moon and Mercury prepared by a philosophical industry, which wets not the hands, but the metal, and which has in itself a metallic sulphureous soul, namely, the ignited light of sulphur. And in order that you may not stray from the right path, apply yourself to metals; for there the aforesaid sulphur is found in all; but thou wilt easily find it, even almost similar to gold, in the cavern and depths of Mars, which is iron, and of Venus, which is copper,

nearly as much in the one as in the other; and even if you pay attention to it, this sulphur has the power of tinging moist and cold Luna, which is fine silver, into pure yellow and good Sun; but this ought to be done by a spiritual medium, viz. the key which opens all metals, which I am going to make known to you. Learn therefore, that among the minerals there is one which is a thief, and eats up all except Sun and Moon, who render the thief very good; for when he has them in his belly, he is good to prepare the quicksilver, as I shall presently make known to you.

8. Therefore do not stray out of the right road, but trust to my words, and then give thyself up to the practice, which I am going to bestow on thee in the name of the Father, of Son, and Holy Ghost.

The Practice.

9. Take thou in the first place the eldest or first-born child of Saturn, not the vulgar, 9 parts; of the sabre chalybs of the God of War, 4 parts. Put this latter into a crucible, and when it comes to a melting redness, cast therein the 9 parts of Saturn, and immediately this will redden the other. Cleanse thou carefully the filth that arises on the surface of the saturnia, with saltpetre and tartar, four or five times. The operation will be rightly done when thou seest upon the matter an astral sign like a star.

10. Then is made the key and the sabre, which opens and cuts through all metals, but chiefly Sun, Moon and Venus, which it eats, devours and keeps in his belly, and by this means thou art in the right road of truth, if thou has operated properly. For this Saturnia is the royal triumphant herb, for it is a little imperfect king, whom we raise up by a philosophic artifice to the degree of the greatest glory and honour. It is also the queen, that is to say the Moon and the wife of the Sun: it is therefore both male and female, and our hermaphrodite Mercury. This Mercury or Saturnia is represented in the seven first pages of the book of Abraham the Jew, by two serpent encircling a golden rod. Take care to prepare a sufficient quantity of it, for much is required, that is to say about 12 or 13 lbs. of it, or even more, according as you wish to work on a large or a small scale.

11. Marry thou therefore the young god Mercury, that is to say quicksilver with this which is the philosophic Mercury, that you may acuate by him and fortify the said running quicksilver, seven or even ten or eleven times with the said agent, which is called the key, or a steel sharpened sabre, for it cuts, scythes and penetrates all the bodies of the metals. Then wilt thou have the double and treble water represented by the rose tree in the book of Abraham the Jew, which issues out of the foot of an oak, namely our Saturnia, which is the royal key, and goes to precipitate itself into the abyss, as says the same author, that is to say, into the receiver, adapted to the neck of the retort, where the double Mercury throws itself by means of a suitable fire.

12. But here are found thorns and insuperable difficulties, unless God reveals this secret, or a master bestows it. For Mercury does not marry with royal Saturnia: it is expedient to find a secret means to unite them: for unless thou knowest the artifice by which this union and peace are effected between these aforesaid argent-vives, you will do nothing to any purpose. I would not conceal any thing from thee, my dear nephew; I tell thee, therefore, that without Sun or Moon this work will profit thee nothing. Thou must therefore cause this old man, or voracious wolf, to devour gold or silver in the weight and measure as I am now about to inform thee. Listen therefore to my words, that thou mayest not err, as I have done in this work. I say, therefore, that you must give gold to our

old dragon to eat. Remark how well you ought to operate. For if you give but little gold to the melted Saturnia, the gold is indeed opened, but the quicksilver will not take; and here is an incongruity, which is not at all profitable. I have a long while and greatly laboured in this affliction, before I found out the means to succeed in it. If therefore you give him much gold to devour, the gold will not indeed be so much opened nor disposed, but then it will take the quicksilver, and they will both marry. Thus the means is discovered. Conceal this secret, for it is the whole, and neither trust it to paper, or to any thing else which may be seen. For we should become the cause of great mischief. I give it thee under the seal of secrecy and of thy conscience, for the love I bear thee.

13. Take thou ten ounces of the red Sun, that is to so say, very fine, clean and purified nine or ten times by means of the voracious wolf alone: two ounces of the royal Saturnia; melt this in a crucible, and when it is melted, cast into it the ten ounces of fine gold; melt these two together, and stir them with a lighted charcoal. Then will thy gold be a little opened. Pour it on a marble slab or into an iron mortar, reduce it to a powder, and grind it well with three pounds of quicksilver. Make them to curd like cheese, in the grinding and working them to and fro: wash this amalgama with pure common water until it comes out clear, and that the whole mass appears clear and white like fine Luna. The conjunction of the gold with the royal golden Saturnia is effected, when the mass is soft to the touch like butter.

14. Take this mass, which thou wilt gently dry with linen or fine cloth, with great care: this is our lead, and our mass of Sun and Moon, not the vulgar, but the philosophical. Put it into a good retort of crucible earth, but much better of steel. Place the retort in a furnace, and adapt a receiver to it: give fire by degrees. Two hours after encrease your fire so that the Mercury may pass into the receiver: this Mercury is the water of the blowing rose-tree; it is also the blood of the innocents slain in the book of Abraham the Jew. You may now suppose that this Mercury has eat up a little of the body of the king, and that it will have much more strength to dissolve the other part of it hereafter, which will be more covered by the body of the Saturnia. Thou has now ascended one degree or step of the ladder of the art.

15. Take the faeces out of the retort; melt them in a crucible in a strong fire: cast into it four ounces of the Saturnia, (and) nine ounces of the Sun. Then the Sun is expanded in the said faeces, and much more opened that at the first time, as the Mercury has more vigour than before, it will have the strength and virtue of penetrating the gold, and of eating more of it, and of filling his belly with it by degrees. Operate therefore as at first; marry the aforesaid Mercury, stronger one degree with this new mass in grinding the whole together; they will take like butter and cheese; wash and grind them several times, until all the blackness is got out: dry it as aforesaid; put the whole into the retort, and operate as thou didst before, by giving during two hours, a weak fire, and then strong, sufficient to drive out, and cause the Mercury to fall into the receiver; then wilt thou have the Mercury still more acuated, and thou wilt have ascended to the second degree of the philosophic ladder.

16. Repeat the same work, by casting in the Saturnia in due weight, that is to say, by degrees, and operating as before, till thou hast reached the 10th step of the philosophic ladder; then take thy rest. For the aforesaid Mercury is ignited, acuated, wholly engrossed and full of the male sulphur, and fortified with the astral juice which was in the deep bowels of the gold and of our saturnine dragon. Be assured that I am now writing for thee things which by no philosopher was ever declared

or written. For this Mercury is the wonderful caduceus, of which the sages have so much spoken in their books, and which they attest has the power of itself of accomplishing the philosophic work, and they say the truth, as I have done it myself by it alone, and thou wilt be enabled to do it thyself, if thou art so disposed: for it is this and none else which is the proximate matter and the root of all the metals.

17. Now is done and accomplished the preparation of the Mercury, rendered cutting and proper to dissolve into its nature gold and silver, to work out naturally and simply the Philosophic Tincture, or the powder transmuting all metals into gold and silver.

18. Some believe they have the whole magistery, when they have the heavenly Mercury prepared; but they are grossly deceived. It is for this cause they find thorns before they pluck the rose, for want of understanding. It is true indeed, that were they to understand the weight, the regimen of the fire, and the suitable way, they would not have much to do, and could not fail even if they would. But in this art there is a way to work. Learn therefore and observe well how to operate, in the manner I am about to relate to you.

19. In the name of God, thou shalt take of thy animated Mercury what quantity thou pleasest; thou wilt put it into a glass vessel by itself; or two or four parts of the Mercury with two parts of the golden Saturnia; that is to say, one of the Sun and two of the Saturnia; the whole finely conjoined like butter, washed, cleansed and dried; and thou wilt lute thy vessel with the lute of wisdom. Place it in a furnace on warm ashes at the degree of the heat of an hen sitting on her eggs. Leave this said Mercury so prepared to ascend and descend for the space of 40 or 50 days, until thou seest forming in thy vessel a white or red sulphur, called philosophic sublimate, which issues out of the reins of the said Mercury. Thou wilt collect this sulphur with a feather: it is the living Sun and the living Moon, which Mercury begets out of itself.

20. Take this white or red sulphur, triturate it in a glass or marble mortar, and pour on it, in sprinkling it, a third part of its weight of the Mercury from which this sulphur has been drawn. With these two make a paste like butter: put again this mixture into an oval glass; place it in a furnace on a suitable fire of ashes, mild, and disposed with a philosophic industry. Concoct until the said Mercury is changed into sulphur, and during this coction, thou wilt see wonderful things in thy vessel, that is to say, all the colours which exist in the world, which thou canst not behold without lifting up thy heart to God in gratitude for so great a gift.

21. When thou has attained to the purple red, thou must gather it: for then the alchymical powder is made, transmuting every metal into fine pure and neat gold, which thou maist multiply by watering it as thou hast already done, grinding it with fresh Mercury, concocting it in the same vessel, furnace and fire, and the time will be much shorter, and its virtue ten times stronger.

22. This then is the whole magistery done with Mercury alone, which some do not believe to be true, because they are weak and stupid, and not at all able to comprehend this work.

23. Shouldest thou desire to operate in another way, take of fine Sun in fine powder or in very thin leaves: make a paste of it with 7 parts of thy philosophic Mercury, which is our Luna: put them both into an oval glass vessel well luted; place it in a furnace; give a very strong fire, that is to say,

such as will keep lead in fusion; for then thou has found out the true regimen of the fire; and let thy Mercury, which is the philosophical wind, ascend and descend on the body of the gold, which it eats up by degrees, and carries in its belly. Concoct it until the gold and Mercury do no more ascend and descend, but both remain quiet, and then will peace and union be effected between the two dragons, which are fire and water both together.

24. Then wilt thou see in thy vessel a great blackness like that of melted pitch, which is the sign of the death and putrefaction of the gold, and the key of the whole magistry. Cause it therefore to resuscitate by concocting it, and be not weary with concocting it: during this period divers changes will take place; that is to say, the matter will pass through all the colours, the black, the ash colour, the blue, the green, the white, the orange, and finally the red as red as blood or the crimson poppy: aim only at this last colour; for it is the true sulphur, and the alchymical powder. I say nothing precisely about the time; for that depends on the industry of the artist; but thou canst not fail, by working as I have shewn.

25. If thou are disposed to multiply thy powder, take one part thereof, and water it with two parts of thy animated Mercury; make it into a soft and smooth paste; put it in a vessel as thou hast already done, in the same furnace and fire, and concoct it. This second turn of the philosophic wheel will be done in less time than the first, and thy powder will have ten times more strength. Let is wheel about again even a thousand times, and as much as thou wilt. Thou wilt then have a treasure without price, superior to all there is in the world, and thou canst desire nothing more here below, for thou hast both health and riches, if thou useth them properly.

26. Thou hast now the treasure of all worldly felicity, which I a poor country clown of Pointoise did accomplish three times in Paris, in my house, in the street des Ecrivains, near the chapel of St. Jacques de la Boucherie, and which I Flammel give thee, for the love I bear thee, to the honour of God, for His glory, for the praise of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The French correspondent [who had provided the French version to the editor for translation into English for this publication of 1806] adds: "This is what I find at the end of the Manuscript"

They assert that the original of this work was written upon the margin of a vellum Psalm-book, in Nicholas Flamel's own handwriting in favour of his nephew. The process was written in cyphers, the better to conceal the secret. Each letter was shaped in four different ways, so that to make up the whole alphabet therewith 96 letters were employed. Father Pernetti and Monsieur de Saint Marc decyphered this writing with much difficulty. M. de St. Marc was on the point of giving it up; but Father Pernetti, who had already found out the vowels, encouraged him to go on with the work, which they at last overcame, with complete success, about the year 1758.

This text is obviously a fabrication. It was probably written by someone in the late 1700's. Can you perceive what his intention was in creating this text ? Why does he want to link this to Nicolas Flamel? Is the alchemy in this text a traditional alchemy? Does it suggest influences from other writers? What is the role of the first section of the piece? Does the second section stand on its own? In what way does it relate to the first section? Does reading the first section influence the way you read the second?