

# Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts

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## Lesson 7 : Works that present philosophical theories about alchemy.

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The group of works we looked at in the previous lesson were focussed on the alchemist's cosmological exploration of the origins of the world. As alchemy evolved over the centuries it began to develop a number of different alchemical theories about the nature of the world – of how matter can take on different forms, of how one type of matter could be transmuted into another.

We can list just a few of these alchemical theories

The doctrine of the four elements (and the four qualities)

The Sulphur-Mercury theory

The idea of the Three Principles behind all things

The idea of the growing of metals in the earth

The idea that the stars worked in substance

The idea of a hidden fire

The idea of nitre in the air

The Phlogiston theory of combustion

The work 'The Theatre of Terrestrial Astrology' usually ascribed to Edward Kelly, though it only appeared in a book printed in 1676, some 80 years after his death, is an example of a work presenting to us a philosophical theory about matter.

*We must next treat of the nature of the said metals. It is clearer than daylight that there are seven planets, seven days, seven metals, and seven operations. The metals are called after the planets, because of their influence and their mutual relations. The mineral principles are living Mercury and Sulphur. From these are generated all metals and minerals, of which there are many species, possessing diverse natures, according to the purity and impurity of the Mercury and Sulphur, resulting in the purity or impurity of the generated metal. Gold is a perfect body, of pure, clear, red Mercury, and pure, fixed, red, incombustible Sulphur. Silver is a pure body, nearly approaching perfection, of pure, clear, fixed white Mercury, and Sulphur of the same kind; it is a little wanting in fixation, colour, and weight. Tin is a pure, imperfect body, of pure, fixed and unfixed, clear, white Mercury outside, and red Mercury inside, with Sulphur of the same kind. Lead is an impure, imperfect body, of impure, unfixed, earthy, white, fetid Mercury and Sulphur outside, and red Mercury inside, with Sulphur of the same quality. Copper is an impure and imperfect body, of impure, unfixed, dirty, combustible, red Sulphur and Mercury. It is deficient in fixation, purity, and weight, while it*

*abounds in impure colour and combustible terrestreity. Iron is of impure, imperfect, excessively fixed, earthy, burning, white and red Sulphur and Mercury, is wanting in fusion, purity, and weight, abounding in fixed, impure Sulphur and combustible terrestreity. Nature transmutes the elements into Mercury, just as Sulphur transmutes the first matter. The nature of all metals must be the same, because their first substance is the same, and Nature cannot develop anything out of a substance that is not in it.*

Here the writer is trying to explain the different properties of the metals as arising out of the Mercury and Sulphur that dwells within them. He theorises that these two principles exist in different ways in metals, being pure or impure, the sulphur being combustible or incombustible, the Mercury fixed or mobile. He extends their properties further so that there are white and red forms of Mercury and Sulphur, and uses the idea that metals can have an inner and an outer Sulphur or Mercury. Thus lead has a white mercury outside or on its exterior, and a red mercury inside its nature. Here we see the writer adapting the simple idea that metals are formed of mixtures of Sulphur and Mercury, by elaborating various additional properties to explain the diversity of metallic forms.

In another work ascribed to Kelly, *The Stone of the Philosophers*, printed in the same book as the foregoing, the writer explores a different alchemical theory.

*Metals are nothing but Mercury digested by different degrees of heat. Different modifications of heat cause, in the metallic compound, either maturity or immaturity. The mature is that which has exactly attained all the activities and properties of fire. Such is gold. The immature is that which is dominated by the element of water, and is never acted on by fire. Such are lead, tin, copper, iron, and silver. Only one metal, viz., gold, is absolutely perfect and mature. Hence it is called the perfect male body. The rest are immature and, therefore, imperfect. The limit of immaturity is the beginning of maturity; for the end of the first is the beginning of the last.*

Here we seem to have the idea that the impure metals are immature forms of the perfect metal. Indeed, all metals are matured from Mercury. This is derived from the simple observation that metallic mercury is liquid and thus could be seen to be immature. The other metals share a some of these immature qualities. For example, lead melts at a low temperature and then the molten lead looks, to all outer appearances, just like liquid mercury. The same can be said for tin, which melts into a mercury-like form at a temperature only a little bit higher than lead. Thus lead is more immature than tin, which in turn is more immature than the metals which melt (or turn into Mercury in terms of this theory) at even higher temperatures. This is another alchemical theory of matter.

We see this idea explained in another way in a work entitled 'The Tomb of Semiramis'.

*The philosophers' Gold or Silver, is a metallic body, resolved into the last matter, to wit, into Mercury, which is the first matter of the Stone, and is thus proved: Everything is from that into which it is resolved: But all metals are reduced into Argent vive; ergo, they were Argent vive. For, according to the common opinions of philosophers, that which the wise men seek is in Mercury. Moreover, Mercury is the radix in Alchymy, because from it, by it, and in it are all metals. And Theophrastus (that most profound sea of the spagyrick-philosophy) thus*

*speaks concerning the first matter of metals: To extract Mercury from metallic bodies, is nothing else but to resolve or reduce them into their first matter, that is, running Mercury, even such as it was in the center of the Earth, before the generation of Metals, to wit, a moist and viscous vapour, which is the philosophers' Gold or Silver, containing in it invisibly the Mercury and Sulphur of Nature, the principles of all metals, which Mercury is of ineffable virtue and efficacy, and contains divine secrets.*

An interesting short text, 'A hundred aphorisms concerning the whole body of Magic' which is found in a manuscript in the British Library, explores a number of theories

*He that can join light with darkness can multiply things in their own kind, and change the nature of them....*

*He that can join a spirit impregnated with the virtue of one body with another, that is now disposed to change, may produce many miracles and monsters.*

*The first variety of the disposition of bodies proceeds from the various concoction of water.*

*The second, from the various mixtures of the three principles, Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury.*

*These dispositions flow from the various positions of the stars, especially from the Sun.*

*Every thing has so much vitality as is required to produce the natural actions of the species.*

*Nothing begins to be made that does not receive some vitality from Heaven by which it can work somewhat.*

*He that knows how to infuse the propitious heaven or Sun into things, or the mixtures of things, may perform wonders, and hereupon depend all magical operations.*

Here the author seems to compress together, and present to the reader at breakneck speed, many of the alchemical theories into one whole. Thus within just a few short sentences, he uses the idea that matter is transformed light, that the spirit somehow transmutes one material into another, that one can effect change by altering the proportions or qualities of the Salt, Sulphur and Mercury in a substance, and he finishes off with the flourish that the properties of substances are determined by the influences of the stars. It will be a good exercise for us to look at this entire text and try and identify all the different theories of matter it explores. This is included as an exercise.

By the late 17th and into the 18th centuries, alchemical authors were exploring the nature of the world with deep philosophical ideas. They searched through their alchemy for some explanation of how things came into being, how they had different properties and how they seemed to be transformed from one substance into another. At this time, our now commonplace idea of atoms, and of the chemical elements had not yet been conceived, but alchemist explored all sorts of philosophical ideas in their quest to explain the nature of substance. Here is an example from the opening section of the 18th century *Golden Chain of Homer*, in which the idea is presented that there is some invisible fire inside substances which serves the transform them from one state into another.

*Thus God created first this invisible fire and endowed it with an unerring instinct and a capacity to manifest itself in three Principles.*

*1. In its Original most Universal state it is perfectly invisible, immaterial, cold and occupies no space, in this tranquil state it is of no use to us, yet in this unmoved state it is omnipresent.*

*2. In its second state it is manifested by motion or agitation into light. In this state it was separated out of the Chaos, when God said, "Let there be Light." Yet it is still cold. When*

*gently moved or agitated, it manifests warmth and heat, as in the case in all frictions and in fermentation of moist things.*

*3. When collected in a sufficient quantity, and violently agitated it is manifested into burning fire. This continues burning as long as it is agitated, and has a fit subject to act upon; when that fails, it returns to its first state of tranquil universality. In the character of burning fire it manifests Light and Heat. Thus,*

*(a) We say in its first most Universal state it is perfectly invisible and immaterial*

*(b) In its second state of manifestation it is visible in Light, but remains cold and immaterial.*

*(c) In its third state of Heat and burning fire it is visible, hot or burning, and becomes somewhat material as it occupies room or space whilst in this state.*

Here the invisible fire is presented as existing in three states – in its universal immaterial state it is entirely invisible in substances, then it can manifest as cold light, and thirdly as hot fire.

We have here surveyed a few short sections from alchemical texts and found that they show alchemists exploring all sorts of philosophical theories. We must be aware of this when attempting to read these texts. It is important for our being able to read alchemical texts, particularly (but not exclusively) those of the 17th and 18th centuries, that we bear in mind that many of these authors wrote their work in order to explore philosophical ideas, rather than actual physical alchemical experimentation. Thus many of these writings are abstract rather than practical and must be read in with an awareness that it was primarily philosophical ideas that engaged the alchemical writer. For these writers alchemy was a kind of speculative philosophy. Though still often embedded in religious ideas of that period, many of these speculative works do not necessarily have the same concern with the Divine that is found in the cosmological alchemical writings.

As exercises we should now look at a number of these philosophical works. In reading them we should try and identify the main philosophical idea (or ideas) that the writer is exploring in his text.

To repeat what I have said in the previous lessons, we need not attempt to entirely understand every nuance and detail of these texts. What is important, however, is that we recognise that they are expounding some alchemical theory. Once we grasp this we will be able to read the text in its context. We will find that as we read other related texts, dealing with the same or a related theory of matter, these will throw light upon each other. Only by realising that these texts do not all exist in a vacuum but were part of a group of interrelated material, will we be able to more fully grasp what these alchemists were trying to communicate. As I have said before, alchemy is a literary tradition. Alchemists read and were familiar with each others work and indeed of alchemical works written centuries earlier. When they wrote their books they drew upon previous writers and ideas. We have to realise this if we are to understand an individual alchemist's text. A text rarely stands on its own, but it is part of an ongoing tradition transmitted through the literature.

In the exercises I just give a few examples and ask that you attempt to see how they present an alchemical theory to us.

## EXERCISE 1

Try and draw up a list of the different alchemical theories of matter contained in this text.

- 1. The whole world is animated with the first supreme and intellectual Soul possessing in itself the seminary reasons of all things, which proceeding from the brightness of the ideas of the first Intellect are as it were the instrument by which this great body is governed and are the links of the golden chain of providence.*
- 2. While the operations of the Soul are terminated or bounded, the body is generated or produced out of the power of the Soul, and is diversely formed according to the imagination thereof, hence it hath the denominating power over the body which it could not have except the body did fully and wholly depend upon it.*
- 3. In this production whilst the Soul fashions to itself a body, there is some third thing the mean between them both by which the Soul is now inwardly joined to the body, and by which the operation of all natural things are dispensed, and this is called the Vital Spirit.*
- 4. The operations of natural things are dispensed from this Spirit by the organs according to the disposition of the organ.*
- 5. The disposition of the organ depends first and primarily upon the Intellect, which disposes all things. Secondly upon the Soul of the World that forms itself a body according to the seminary reasons of things. Thirdly, unto the Spirit of the Universe that contains things in such a disposition.*
- 6. No bodily thing hath any energy or operation in itself saving so far for as it is an instrument of the same Spirit, or informed by it, for that which is merely corporeal is merely passive.*
- 7. He that will work great things, must (as much as possible) take away corporeity from things, or else he must add Spirit to the body, or else awaken the sleeping Spirit, unless he do some of those things or know how to join his imagination to the imagination of the Soul of the World, now labouring and undertaking an exchange, he will never do any great matter.*
- 8. It is impossible to take all this Spirit from anything whatsoever for by this bond a thing is held from falling back into its first matter or nothing.*
- 9. This Spirit is somewhere or rather every where found as it were free from the body, and he that knows how to join it with a body agreeably, possesses a treasure better than all the riches of the world.*
- 10. The Spirit is separated from the body as much as it is possible either by means of fermentation or drawn by his brother which is at liberty.*
- 11. The organs by which this Spirit works are the qualities of things, which merely and purely considered are able to do no more than the eyes can see without life, as being nothing else but modification of the matter of the body.*
- 12. All things operating do it to this only purpose, to make things upon which they work like themselves.*
- 13. The subject of the Vital Spirit in the body in it is received, and by it works, neither is it ever so pure but that it is joined with its mercurial moisture.*
- 14. This humour doth not specify the Spirit because it is the common matter of things apt to be made anything neither is it seen with eyes because it is pure, until it be first terminated in a more solid body.*
- 15. Neither Souls nor pure Spirits, nor Intelligences can work upon bodies but by means of this Spirit, for two extremes cannot be joined without a mean, therefore demons appear not but after sacrifices used.*

16. *If the Spirit or Intelligencer of it be specified with being, either dissipated by the contrary or changed into another thing, they cease to work there any longer, as they are allured by the vital spirits of living creatures so they are put to flight, or rather cease to work upon bodies, where sharp and venomous things are used.*
17. *The stars do tie the Vital Spirit to the body disposed, by light and heat, and by the same means do they inspire it into the body.*
18. *In generation the Spirit is mixed with the body, and directs the intent of Nature to its end.*
19. *The seeds of things are known to contain more plenty of this Spirit then anything else.*
20. *The seeds do not contain such plenty of this Spirit as is requisite to the perfect production of a thing, but the internal Spirit allures the external coming down from Heaven unites it to itself, and being fortified therewith at length it begets its like.*
21. *Before the seeds do germinate or bud, it is fermented, and by fermentation disposed to attraction.*
22. *If germination should be hindered with the advancement of attraction and assimilation, the things might be brought at length from the seed to the spirit of it in a moment.*
23. *That which is more universal doth more further attraction and more disposes their seeds to attraction as saltpetre in vegetables.*
24. *Every family of things hath some with its mixed universal, whereby the seeds are disposed to attraction and made fruitful.*
25. *He that knows how to join artificially the Universal to the seed of the animal family may produce everlasting weights, besides the terminate matrix or womb at least formally, and the like reason it is also of other things.*
26. *He that can join light with darkness can multiply things in their own kind, and change the nature of them.*
27. *The Universal Vital Spirit coming down from Heaven, pure, clear, and uncontaminated is the father of the particular vital spirit which is in everything, for it increases and multiplies it in the body; from whence the bodies borrow the power of multiplying themselves.*
28. *As the first Vital Spirit lies in the mercurial humour that is common and free, and the vital Spirit of particular things is resident in that mercurial humour imbued with the virtue of that body whose it is, which they call radical moisture.*
29. *He that can join a Spirit impregnate with the virtue of one body with another, that is now disposed to change, may produce many miracles and monsters.*
30. *The first variety of the disposition of bodies proceeds from the various concoction of Water.*
31. *The second, from the various mixtures of the three principals, Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury.*
32. *These dispositions flow from the various positions of the stars, especially from the Sun.*
33. *Every thing has so much vitality as is required to produce the natural actions of the species.*
34. *Nothing begins to be made that does not receive some vitality from Heaven by which it can work somewhat.*
35. *He that knows how to infuse the propitious Heaven or Sun into things, or the mixtures of things, may perform wonders, and hereupon depend all magical operations.*
36. *By how much the disposition or the subjects are more formal, so much more of this life they receive, and so much more powerfully they work.*
37. *As in the eye, the operations are more noble than in the foot, although they both proceed from the same Soul, because of the variety of this organ apt to receive a greater portion of life; So the constellated characters because of their formality receive a greater portion of Spirit from Heaven and perform noble actions.*
38. *This Spirit continually flows from Heaven and back again to Heaven, and in the flowing is found*

*pure and unmixed, and therefore may by a skilful workman by wonderful means be joined to anything, that increase the virtues of it according to the disposition of the subject.*

*39. The Heart of Heaven is the Sun, which by light distributes all things, as well to the stars, as to the Earth.*

*40. Opaque is nothing else but a body either wanting light or having the light asleep in it.*

*41. He that can by light draw light out of things, or multiply light with light, he knows how to add the universal spirit of life to the particular spirit of life, and by this addition do miracles.*

*42. How much light is added, so much life, and so much of the one as is lost, so much is lost of the other.*

*43. This Spirit, after the last process of maturation, straight begins by little and little to vanish.*

*44. Maturation is nothing else but the operation of the proper radiated Spirit to the perfection of the individual, as far forth as it may be perfected, proceeding to the seminary reasons expounded or proposed by Nature or the Soul, or it is an actuation of the internal Spirit as far as it can be actuated, or it is the greatest illumination of the matter that can possibly be done by such light.*

*45. The Spirit is dissipated when it strives to act upon a matter too rebellious, or when the natural crasis [combination] or mixture of a thing is altered by the stars, sometimes too much excited it breaks forth, or being called out by his brother Spirit it goeth away to it.*

*46. The matter is rebellious when by reason of a starry crasis [combination] or temperature it cannot be overcome allured by the Spirit, or when it is in the natural periods beyond which it can neither go, nor the Spirit carry it any further, for only so much Spirit is given as serves every thing to the due perfection of it.*

*47. The temperature of a thing is altered by the stars which the horoscope of the nativity comes to the degrees or positions of the planets contrary to the beginning of life.*

*48. The Spirit is too much excited by fermentation or immoderate agitation, for, moderate agitation is necessary to vital operations.*

*49. The Spirit is called out by his brother Spirit when it is too much exposed to it.*

*50. In certain things it cannot be called out by its brother, because of its straight locality with the body, but it allures its brother to him and is strongly fortified thereby.*

*51. Fermentation is the action of heat upon moisture, by which the moisture is treated and made subject to the Spirit, or it is the affect of the Spirit circulating itself in the Body which cannot remain in the same state because of the fluxibility of the Body.*

*52. He that by means and use of Universal Spirit can excite the particular Spirit of any thing to a natural fermentation, and appease and settle the natural tumults by repeating the operation, may miraculously increase things in virtue and power, the highest secret of the philosophers.*

*53. Every man knows that by means of fermentation the spirit is as pure as it possibly may be drawn, but almost all men do it without the fruit of multiplication, because they know not how to join one brother with another.*

*54. Things do abide in the same state of nature so long as they possess so much Spirit as is sufficient to perform the due execution thereof.*

*55. Everything fermented works more strongly because in things fermented the Spirits are more free.*

*56. Hence is manifest the cause of the natural death or destruction of things, every thing tends to maturation as to the perfection thereof, and when its the Spirit begins to show its force, and so by acting it is dissipated and vanishes, which at length is the cause of destruction.*

*57. He that could lay hold on this vanishing Spirit and apply it to the body from whence it slipped, or to another of the same Spirit, may thereby do wonders.*

*58. From this fountain are all natural philtres flowed; for easily may the Spirit be imbued with the*

qualities of another body causing in bodies of the same kind a real similitude, which is the violent cause of love.

59. These things are apt to intercept this particular Spirit which have the greater similitude of most natural conjunction with the parts, or which being applied to a vegetable body, are by such a contact made more flourishing. These things are to be understood of the bodies of Wight, especially of Man where philtres are of most power.

60. This Spirit where it finds a little matter disposed according to that likeness, it makes and seals the compounds produced.

61. Where the Spirit of one body being married to the qualities of that body is communicated to another body, there is generated at a certain compassion, because of the mutual flux and reflux of the Spirits to their proper body which compassion or sympathy is not easily dissolved as that which is done by imagination.

62. There can neither love nor compassion be generated without the mixture of Spirits.

63. This commixture is sometimes done by material application, sometimes by imagination, and not seldom by the disposition of the stars.

64. By natural application it is done when the Spirit of one body is implanted in another, by means of those things which are apt to intercept the Spirit, and to communicate it to another, and they are known by the signature, and by the ancients called amatoria or such things as love one another.

65. By imagination love is produced when the exalted imagination of one does predominate over the imagination of the other, and so fashions and seals it, and this may be easily done because of the volubility of the imagination. Hence all incantations get their efficacy for though peradventure they have some virtues in themselves, yet this virtue cannot be distributed because of the universality thereof.

66. From the stars love takes its beginning either when the disposition of the heavens is alike at the times of nativity as the astrologers do abundantly teach, and this is most firm and most to be desired, or when the beneficial beams of the stars being apt for the purpose are at a fit time received into matter disposed and in a due manner brought into art, as natural magic more fully teaches.

67. He that can to these manners of doing add the Universal Spirit may do wonders.

68. Thou mayest call the Universal Spirit to thy help if thou use instruments impregnated with this Spirit, the greatest secret of magicians.

69. He that knows how to make a vital particular Spirit, may cure the particular body whose Spirit that is at any distance, always imploring the help of the Universal Spirit.

70. He that can fortify the particular Spirit with the universal may very long prolong his life; unless if the stars be against it, yet by this means he may lengthen his life and health, and some state the malice of the stars as he needs confess that knows the habitation of this Spirit.

71. Nothing can be putrefied without it first feel fermentation, because nothing comes naturally to inclination but by state.

72. Putrefaction is the symptom of declining nature, or of the spirit flying away.

73. There is nothing putrefied that hath not great store of the volatile spirit.

74. All heat proceedeth from the Vital Spirit, and is said of motion neither can that Spirit subsist without heat, or at least not be mingled with bodies.

75. Everything that is putrefied hath less heat in it than it had before the putrefaction, therefore it is false that things putrefying do grow whole.

76. As much spirit so much heat is gotten, and of the one is lost so much as of the other.

77. Heat can neither be stirred up by nature nor art, but by means of light, either external or internal.



78. *He that shall call light the spirit of the universal shall peradventure not far miss the truth, for it is either light, or hath his dwelling or habitation in the light.*
79. *He that can destroy bodies without putrefaction, and in the destruction can join Spirit with Spirit by means of heat, possesses the principal secret of natural magic.*
80. *The external light heats by bringing in a new heat, and by actuating its own heat, whether it (the light) be determinate or indeterminate.*
81. *The light determinate possesses a destroying heat, and such an one as burns all things, so it be compactly actuated as in fire.*
82. *Indeterminate light giveth light, and never hurts anything but by accident.*
83. *He that knows how to make light determinate of light indeterminate, not changing the Spirit, nor receiving it otherwise than in a common medium knows exceeding well how to purge mineral and all hard bodies without loss of radical moisture.*
84. *The light which we call determinate and which hath in it the life of things being the carriage of the Universal Soul lieth hid in darkness, neither is it seen but by a philosopher to whom the centre of things is apparently discovered.*
85. *The internal heat is excited by reason of the internal Spirit whose house it is.*
86. *The Spirit is agitated by fermentation or motion, sometimes they occur or concur both together to agitation.*
87. *There is a third secret means of agitation known to the philosophers which is perceived by them in generation and regeneration.*
88. *When fermentation is distinguished from motion understand local progressive motion which comes from the imagination directing the vital Spirits to motion.*
89. *All fermentation finished before the due time is a sign of moderate putrefaction succeeding.*
90. *He that knows how to hasten fermentation and hinders putrefaction by having the Spirit of the Universe propitious, understands the philosophers contrition, and can by means thereof do minerals.*
91. *Putrefaction hath not its original from the Spirit, but from the body, and therefore it was contrary to the Spirit.*
92. *He that knoweth the Spirits of the Universe and the use thereof may hinder all corruption, and give the particular Spirit the dominion over the body; how much this would avail to the cure of diseases let physicians consider.*
93. *That there may a universal medicine be given is now agreed on all hands, because if the particular Spirit get strength it can of itself cure all diseases, as is known by common experience, for there is no disease which hath not been cured without the physicians help.*
94. *The universal medicine is nothing else but the Vital Spirit multiplied upon a due subject.*
95. *He that seeks this medicine else where than in the tops of the highest mountains shall find nothing but sorrow and loss for the reward of his pains.*
96. *The philosophers who say it is to be sought in the caverns of the Earth mean the Earth of the living.*
97. *They that hope to find it in the furnaces of the chemists are desperately deceived, for they know not the fire.*
98. *Nothing hath from the first intention of Nature more Spirit than is sufficient for it, to the conservation of its proper Spirit, yet out of everything Nature playing the midwife for him, the philosopher can produce a son nobler than his father.*
99. *The first and the last colour of things are yellow, because the stars and the Sun are yellow, those things that are of a lesser temper as the planets appear green, after they have touched the air, being naturally and most highly cerulean or blue, and working upon them makes yellow things green, but*

*being made harder they put on again their first and natural colour, out of the things that have been said thou mayest pick up mysteries.*

*100. The air is blue, and the horizon appears blue to the sight on a clear day, and the air by reason of its thinness is not apt to terminate the strong and rigorous vital beams, until they languish and grow weak by distance, but then the terminated beams show the native colour of the air. And thus much to have said at this time by way of aphorisms, if thou make not very much account of it, is too much.*

'An hundred Aphorismes conteyning the whole body of Naturall magick, being the Key to open that which goeth before and which followeth after' in MS. Sloane 1321 in the British Library.

## EXERCISE 2

*Sir, I received the letter, which you did me the honour to write me, since your return from Poland. I am very sensibly obliged to you for it is an undoubted testimony of your friendship. I shall not fail to read very speedily, the writing of Aristeus translated from Scythian language into Latin prose in rhyme, and as you sent it me to know my opinion about the matter whereof he treats; I will tell you withal the ingenuity which is practiced among philosophers, that I was charmed with the extraordinary style and reasoning of Aristeus; but I found him no less zealous of the secret of the great work, than all the rest have been who have written of it. I make no difficulty of believing the great things which they say of him, but particularly by the sincerity of his writing, that he possessed this inestimable treasure, yet he still discovers less concerning the first agents and concerning the practice than Artephius, the Abbot Sinesius, Arnold de Villanova, Pontanus, Flamel, Paracelsus, and many other ancient and modern authors have done.*

*As you gave me to understand, as you passed by this place, persuaded that the dew or spirit of the Air being like this liquor which accordingly to the philosophic language, comes out of the rays of the Sun and the Moon which contains the principle which makes all Nature grow, and without which none can live; one might and also ought to believe, that this universal matter is the true principle, the first being of beings, and this subtle air which gives them life and nourishment, according to what Aristeus says, for as much as we see no matter in Nature which better agrees with all the expressions of the philosophers. Every Nature makes use of it, says Cosmopolita, and consequently you pass your judgement, that having these great advantages, this matter, excluding every other, is this celestial water, and this Mercury of the Philosophers.*

*Considering nakedly the writings of the wise men, and reading them according to the letter, there seems to be a solid foundation in this opinion, yet it will be no hard thing for me to show an equivocation therein, and to convince you of the contrary, if your opinion be really so. I should read a great number of authors to cite you on this subject, but this would be to enter into a large dispute without necessity, since you have read them all. I will then content myself to make you reflect on that which some of the greatest philosophers have to say most possessively concerning the principles of this secret science.*

*Remember, Sir, that the philosophers agree concerning the first principles, that you must let alone all which flies from the fire, and which is thus consumed; all which is not of one nature, or at least of the metallic original. Consider that you must have a permanent Water, which congeals in the Fire, as well by itself as joined with the perfect bodies, after having radically dissolved. After this, give to the pure dew, or to the only liquor made from the Air by itself, such a preparation and such a thing as you please by all sorts of artifices, you will be obliged to own at the end of your account, that there is more curiosity than solidity in all these processes; and that it is not in the power of man to change the nature of a body nor to make an universal principle: but though one could have such a particular being, there is none but Nature which could make it herself.*

*The authors I have cited, and an infinity of others easily evince this truth to a man of good sense but I must not pass Basil Valentine in silence; I vow I am indebted to him for a great part of the most solid lights which I have attained in this divine science. See how he speaks in his 'Twelve Keys', and*

*above all in the second: But particularly what he says in the little treatise which he wrote of 'Natural and Supernatural Things' in the chapters of the spirits of metals. He shows in plain terms which bodies one must join and destroy, to obtain this spiritual liquor so sought by all the philosophers.*

Translation of an alchemical letter by Alexandre Toussaint de Limojon de Saint-Didier, written in 1688, concerning the secret of the great work.

## EXERCISE 3

*All philosophers affirm, with one consent, that metals have a seed by which they are increased, and that this seminal quality is the same in all of them; but it is perfectly ripened in gold only, where the bond of union is so fixed that it is most difficult to decompound the subject, and procure it for the Philosophical Work. But some, who were adepts in the art, have by painful processes taken gold for their male, and the mercury, which they knew how to extract from the less compacted metals, for a female: not as an easier process, but to find out the possibility of making the stone this way; and have succeeded, giving this method more openly to conceal the true confection, which is most easy and simple. We shall, therefore, set before the reader a landmark, to keep him from tripping on this difficulty, by considering what is the seed wherein the metals are increased, that the artist may be no longer at a loss where to seek for it, keeping in view the writings of our learned predecessors on this subject.*

*The seed of metals is what the Sons of Wisdom have called their mercury, to distinguish it from quicksilver, which it nearly resembles, being the radical moisture of metals. This, when judiciously extracted, without corrosives, or fluxing, contains in it a seminal quality whose perfect ripeness is only in gold; in the other metals it is crude, like fruits which are yet green, not being sufficiently digested by the heat of the sun and action of the elements. We observed that the radical moisture contains the seed, which is true: yet it is not the seed, but the sperm only, in which the vital principle floats, being invisible to the eye. But the mind perceives it, and in a true artist, as a central point of condensed air, wherein Nature, according to the will of God, has included the first principles of life in everything, as well animal and vegetable as mineral; for in animals the sperm may be seen, but not the included principle of impregnation: this is a concentered point, to which the sperm serves only as a vehicle, till, by the action and ferment of the matrix, the point wherein Nature has included a vital principle expands itself, and then it is perceivable in the rudiments of an animal. So in any succulent fruit (as, for instance, in an apple), the pulp or sperm is much more in proportion than the seed included; and even that which appears to be seed is only a finer concoction of sperm, including the vital stamina; as also in a grain of wheat the flour is only the sperm, the point of vegetation is an included air, which is kept by its sperm from the extremes of cold and heat, till it finds a proper matrix, where the husk being softened with moisture, and warmed by the heat, the surrounding sperm putrefies, making the seed, or concentered air, to expand and to burst the husk carrying along in its motion a milky substance, assimilated to itself from the putrefied sperm. This the condensing quality of the air includes in a film and hardens into a germ, all according to the purpose of Nature.*

*If this whole process of Nature, most wonderful in her operations, was not constantly repeated before our eyes, the simple process of vegetation would be equally problematical with that of the philosophers; yet how can the metals increase, nay, how can anything be multiplied without seed? The true artists never pretend to multiply metals without it, and can it be denied that Nature still follows her first appointment? She always fructifies the seed when it is put into a proper matrix. Does not she obey an ingenious artist, who knows her operations, with her possibilities, and attempts nothing beyond them? A husbandman meliorates his ground with compost, burns the weeds, and makes use of other operations. He steeps his seed in various preparations, only taking care not to destroy its vital principle; indeed, it never comes into his head to roast it, or to boil it, in which he shows more knowledge of Nature than some would-be philosophers do. Nature, like a liberal mother, rewards him with a more plentiful harvest, in proportion as he has meliorated her*

*seed and furnished a more suitable matrix for its increase.*

*The intelligent gardener goes farther; he knows how to shorten the process of vegetation, or retard it. He gathers roses, cuts salads, and pulls green peas in winter. Are the curious inclined to admire plants and fruit of other climates? He can produce them in his stoves to perfection. Nature follows his directions unconstrained, always willing to obtain her end, viz., the perfection of her offspring.*

*Open your eyes here, yet studious searchers of Nature! Is she so liberal in her perishing productions, how much more in those which are permanent, and can subsist in the fire? Attend, then, to her operations; if you procure the metallic seed, and ripen that by art which she is many ages in perfecting, it cannot fail but she will regard you with an increase proportioned to the excellency of your subject.*

*The reader will be apt to exclaim here: "Very fine! All this is well; but how shall the seed of metals be procured, and whence comes it that so few know how to gather it?" To this it is answered that the philosophers have hitherto industriously kept that a profound secret; some out of selfish disposition, though otherwise good men. Others, who wished only for worthy persons to whom they might impart it, could not write of it openly, because covetousness and vanity have been governing principles in the world: and, being wise men, they knew that it was not the will of the most High to inflame and cherish such odious tempers, the genuine offspring of pride and self-love, but to banish them out of the earth, wherefore they have been withheld hitherto. But we, finding no restraint on our mind in that respect, shall declare what we know: and the rather because we judge the time is come to demolish the golden calf, so long had in veneration by all ranks of men, insomuch that worth is estimated by the money a man possesses; and such is the inequality of possessions that mankind are almost reducible to the rich, who are rioting in extravagance, and the poor, who are in extreme want, smarting under the iron hand of oppression. Now the measure of inequality among the rich hastens to its limit, and the cry of the poor is come before the Lord: 'Who will give them to eat till they shall be satisfied?'*

From *A Guide to Alchymy*, London 1770.

## EXERCISE 4

*As we cannot ascend towards the heavenly bodies, we must judge of what is above by that which is below within our reach. The Firmament is full of Light. Light is nothing else but the attracted and repulsed, moved and manifested, fire of Nature or Universal spirit. This further agitated and concentrated produces heat and fire. Nitre is coagulated fire concealed in air and humidity. Therefore we say and conclude, that the Heavens or intermediate space between us and the heavenly bodies consists of, or is filled with a most volatile incorporeal nitre, which as it descends into our atmosphere and probably other atmospheres of heavenly bodies becomes gradually more and more corporeal. Let this suffice concerning the Spiritual heavenly nitre. That there is nitre and salt in the Air is plain by lightning, thunder and hail. Here on Earth we cannot find another subject which fulminates, thunders, and hails, besides nitre or salty things.*

*Nitre is born spiritual and volatile in the heavens. In the atmosphere it becomes acid but remains spiritual and volatile, in water and earth it assumes a visible and palpable body. How it happens that it inflames hails, fulminates and thunders in the atmosphere, we will first demonstrate theoretically by physical reasons, and then mechanically by practice.*

*Nitre does not fulminate, except it meets with a contrary agent and is excited by heat. The more volatile and subtle the nitre is, the more vehemently it fulminates and is the easier enflamed.*

*In the same manner volatile and subtle its contrary agent is the more vehement, sudden and powerful in their mutual operation. The Light heavenly fire and Life of all things is condensed in the atmosphere in the form of a subtle volatile nitre and this must have a contrary agent for its operation.*

*In order that this volatile nitre may obtain a contrary agent, there ascends continually out of the earth, ocean and rivers an equally subtle, volatile, sulphurous, alkaline earth in the shape of vapours, fumes, and fogs, filled with salt alcalicum volatile. This is the natural evaporation of the Earth excited by the central heat of the Earth. This ascends continually to meet the volatile incorporeal nitre, now, when they do meet in a dry rarefied atmosphere they are moved by the Sun's rays, which by those ascending vapours are collected and concentrated, whereby these vapours become more and more heated until the subtle nitre takes fire and fulminates with this contrary sulphurous, volatile, alkaline agent, rarefies the air all round and thunders with dreadful explosions as we observe during hot, dry, summer days.*

*When on the contrary the atmosphere is dense and loaded with humidity, these two Universal agents meet peaceably: the subtle nitre joins itself and embraces quietly the volatile sulphurous alkali without any vehement concussions: as is the case in winter, when humidity and cold prevail in our atmosphere. Humidity and cold hinder the inflammation and, consequently the fulmen.*

Extracted from the *Golden Chain of Homer*, written or edited by Anton Josef Kirchweyer, 1723.