

# Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts

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## Lesson 5 : How to read coded or obscured texts of practical alchemy.

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The group of practical alchemical texts we examined in the first lesson were relatively easy to read once we had a proper understanding of the special terms and glyphs used in these texts. As we have seen in lesson two there are some texts which are obviously describing practical procedures and yet disguise key parts of the process using a number of different methods. It is this group of texts we shall explore in this lesson.

One of the main things we have to pay attention to is the apparent motive for the alchemical writer to use obscure and coded terms.

- \* The writer wants to disguise an actual real substance or process from the casual reader.
- \* The writer intends to confound the reader, by using incomprehensible statements, and sometimes pretending that they have access to some special privileged information.
- \* There is an intermediate type of work where a writer genuinely misunderstands a term, say by copying information about a process from a previous work, or using a term commonly used by other alchemists.

Samuel Norton in the preamble to his long work entitled the *The Key of Alchemy* is kind enough to provide his readers with a list of some terms by which alchemists previous to him had sometimes obscured their writings.

*To finish the last part therefore, let us come a little to explain some terms, which may seem at the first somewhat difficult to understanding Therefore the philosophers minding as much as in them lay, to uncolour their writings with obscure speeches; did not openly use to name the metals with their accustomed names, but sometimes with devised names of each one's own particular invention; but most commonly they gave them the names of planets, as unto lead, Saturnus; unto tin, Jupiter; unto Iron, Mars; unto quicksilver, Mercurius; unto copper, Venus; unto Gold, Sol; and unto silver, Luna and marked them with the characters of the planets. Lead also is by Rodagivius named Capricornus and being burnt or calcined they call that: Minium. So writeth Anaxagoras; Tin calcined they name Cerusa; Iron, crokeferr, or Crocus Martis; Quicksilver calcined with corrosive water, precipitate; and with dry and pulverised, corrosive sublimate; copper calcined Aes Adust; gold or silver, Calces prepared.*

*Moreover when they meant to hide the material of the vegetable stone, they then termed their Lead, Lead of philosophers; and being calcined which they afore termed Minium they again*

*called Adrop; and the gum which to the vegetable work proceedeth of that matter; they call Sericon; The oil which proceedeth of that gum menstrie, moreover, they termed the gum the green lion of the philosophers; and this menstrie is called the blood of the green lion. The liquors which proceed from that, they gave the names of elements. For imitating the law and works of Nature, we set her operations before us as a plate and frame of Nature, for as there was four elements divided out from that; which is termed [Greek word] so out of our prime hyle, we divide or separate four substances which we call elements; of which that which riseth with most lent fire, we call air, or ardent water; and being thoroughly rectified upon the earth; that Raymond termed his Lunarie. The other water or liquor, which is more weak and of color more greyish, is the flood, or phlegme. The red liquor which is of goldenish color or somewhat more deeper red, is counted the oil or fire. That which remaineth, is called the earth or lees. Sulphur of Nature, is the salt or sublimed lifted up earth of bodies, after the complete putrefication. The bodies are the metals. This sulphur is also named foliate or congelate; which sulphur being dissolved into oils, or liquors are called oils incombustible, especially the oils of gold or silver, which is the ferment of the stone; Either being assigned to the Sun or Moon which are the chief lights of the world. They figuratively adapt the same names and are called the lights of the stone, for as the sun and moon are lights to the world and besides give influence in creatures, so the ferments are lights to the stone, giving it his chief influence; Moreover it is also called the soul which quickeneth the whole stone; for as the soul in man is cause of quickness and motion; So the ferments are quickeners and movers of the whole stone, without which it can never be observed. So therefore we say join body, soul and spirit. By bodie we mean his sulphur, or his [...] alterate calces. By soul the ferment. By the spirit the tincture whether white or red. The Fire, ardent water. Lac virginis, or lunarie, is the white tincture. The oil or fire is the red tincture.*

Norton thus belongs to our first group of alchemists who thought to use strange terms to obscure the identity of some substance or process, yet they wrote clearly enough about the practical work. There follows an example from later in Norton's text where he discusses the making of the mineral stone. We can see that Norton is not trying in any way to actually deceive us, but he occasionally uses a strange term to disguise a substance. Thus he seem to suggest, that 'sharp vinegar' is a here a form of sublimed argent vive, rather than actual common vinegar.

*So continuing solutions and fixations until you may have the medicine fixed and flowing which is to be fermented in this manner. Let the medicine be dissolved in his own water by himself; and let the white calx of (Luna) also be distilled with the same water in an other vessel. Then let the solutions be mingled together and fixed together and doe with this as aforesaid in the other; And out of the vinegar if it be convenient lie putrefient for 10 days in balneo, there may the elements be separated out to serve for the uses aforesaid uses shown; And therefore says Ripley; Let there also be made water of Ar: Vi: sublimed, as you know, which is called our Sharp vinegar and let the calx of white or red ferment be dissolved with vulgar dissolution until it be clear water with which the stone shall be fermented if you list [wish]. And thus I trust I have sufficiently declared the practise of the Mineral Stone.*

This piece entitled *Treatise on Mercury and the Philosopher's Stone* is from the *Aurifontina Chymica* printed in 1680, though said to have been by George Ripley is probably pseudonymous and

written in the 17th century. It must have been a bit annoying for the reader, who finds himself encouraged in the second paragraph to put three things into an alembic in order to make the Philosophers' stone. However, the first paragraph has so bombarded the reader with a confusing muddle of different names and ill defined substances, that he knows not what to use as his prima matter.

*And now, my Son, that I may say something of the Philosophers Mercury, know that when thou hast put thy Water of Life to the Red man, who is our Magnesia, and to the White woman, whose name is Albifica, and they shall all have been gathered together into one, then you have the true Philosophers Mercury. For after that in this manner all is joined with a Male and Female, then it is called the Philosophers' Mercury, the Philosophers' Water of Life, the Blood of Man, his red Flesh, his Body and Bones. Know therefore, that there are many sorts of Milk, namely, Virgins' Milk, Woman's Milk, and also Mans' Milk. For when first they are joined in one, and she is big, having conceived, then the Infant must be nourished with milk: But then you may know that this Milk is not Virgins' Milk, but rather the man and the womans' Milk, wherewith it is always to be nourished, till it is grown to that strength, that it may be brought up with stronger and fuller food. That food which I mean is the leavening of it, which gives it form, that it may perform virile work. For until the Infant, that is, our Stone, be formed and leavened with its like, the Blood of the green Dragon, and the red Blood of the red Dragon, whether it be the white Stone or the red, it will never do a perfect work. Know therefore, Son, that the first Water is that Water Rebar, which God made of Nature, and it is the cause of Generation, as I said before; but when after the conjunction which arises from the Marriage, it begets the Water of Life, and the Philosophers' Milk, with one of which, or both, you must augment and feed your Stone perpetually.*

*Much more could I say to thee, Son, concerning this first Matter, but let this suffice, that setting aside impertinences of words, we may now, Divine Grace favouring us, proceed to the practice itself of the Philosophic Stone. See therefore, my Son, that thou diligently put all these Matters (which though they are three things, yet are they but one only) in a glass vessel, and let them quietly putrefy: then put an alembic upon your vessel, and by distillation draw out all the Water, which may be thence distilled.*

A text like this is designed to deceive and confuse the reader, and is a good example of our second class of texts. Hidden within this riddling are often some strange concepts. Here we have the idea of three 'milks', extending the common alchemical idea of the virgin's milk, by adding the woman's milk and the man's milk, to create a triplicity, the philosophical milk. The author, surely not good Sir George Ripley, excels himself in mystification towards the end of the work, seemingly playing a game with the reader.

*But now to speak something more of our Brass; know, that Brass signifies continuance, or continuing Water. But what is farther to be considered in the nature of the name of Brass, you may easily gather from its English Tetragrammate name, that is, its name consisting of four letters, to wit, B.R.A.S. First therefore, by B. is signified the Body of our Work, which is sweet and bitter, our Olive and our Brass continuing in its form: by R. is signified the Root of our Work, and the Spring of continuing Radical Humours, which is our Red Tincture, and Red Rose which purifieth all in its kind: A. signifies our Father Adam, who was the first man, out of whom was born the first woman Eve; whence you understand, that therein is Male and*

*Female. Know therefore, that our Brass is the beginning of our Work, our Gold and Olive, for it is the first Matter of Metals, as Man is the first Man and Woman. S. signifies the Soul of our Life, and Spirit of Life, which God breathed into Adam, and all the creatures; which Spirit is called the fifth Essence.*

*Moreover, Son, by these four Letters, we may understand the four Elements, without which nothing is generated in Nature. They also signify Sol and Luna, which are the causes of all life, generation, and augmentation of all things born in the World. In this name therefore of four letters, consists our whole Work: For our Brass is Male and Female, of which arises he who is called begot. Therefore, Son, take good notice what is signified by our sweet Brass, what is called our Sandiver, or the Salt of our Nitre, or Nitre; what also by the Blood of the Dragon, what Sol and Luna, our Mercury, and our Water of Life, and many other things, concerning which Philosophers have spoken darkly, and in riddles.*

What are we to make of this class of practical alchemy works? Should we merely dismiss them as muddled nonsense and ramblings, or is there a way to read a message out of such texts? They are not intended to provide the reader with a guide to performing a practical process, but rather to present to him, the idea that the secret of alchemy is real and can be found if one has a key to these apparently riddling sentences.

Some texts use this device just to tease or intrigue the reader, perhaps even to put off the casual enquirer who glances at the opening sections of the book, but may well express the alchemical work in a more clear way further into the volume. An example of this is the work *Hyle und Coahyl* printed in 1722 and written by the possibly pseudonymous Abtala Jurain. Early in the work is this marvellous piece of confusion he weaves around the substance 'coahyl' that he has introduced to alchemy.

*You can find this Coahyl everywhere, and you may not give gold or silver for it because the world does not know it, and therefore it has no name and you will find no sign other than that it has no name.*

*It is dew and one does not call it dew; it is frost, and it is not called as such; it is snow, but it is not called snow; it is rain and its name is not rain; it is water and will not be called water; it is salt, but it is not called as such because one does not know it; it is gold and silver and it is not called either gold or silver; it is antimony coahyl, and its name will not say so; it is everything, and yet it is not called anything, and if someone wanted to call it something it would have to be: the salt of the earth which comes from heaven or the salt which is in the earth and from heaven.*

One would be forgiven for abandoning the book at this point, but in fact as one reads further into it, one comes to see that it is a quite typical work of our first category, disguising substances or processes from the casual reader, but articulating and describing quite clearly some alchemical operations.

*In the caves of the mountains where the workers labor and dig out gold or silver, a white oil drips out and when it has disappeared in the ground in which there is this Coahyl or the seed and the beginning of the gold, there will be something glowing from the earth like a tear or like a white blood, and like a tear of a plant or a grapevine when they are cut, and it is similar to drops of light water in its seeping out, and after a day or night it will coagulate*

*and be similar to the saliva of the mouth or the milk or water foam. And after a certain time when you see it, you will find it slightly reddish and this redness will increase every day, and when it is redder than coagulated blood, but not yet hard as stone, but soft and like a salve and cream, then the gold in it is completed, but not yet stable in the heat of the fire, and it will not be stable until it coagulates and becomes similar to a hard rock...*

Now we have a clear statement of what to work with. Of course, we are not saying that following such a recipe will lead to the promised results, but that is not the point, for here we have a clearly stated procedure to follow. Thus we can make a comprehensible reading of the text. This kind of work presents to the reader, under a seeming confusing outer surface, a clear practical process which is disguised by using strange words and descriptions. The writer wants to share his insights, but at the same time to hide them a little from the merely curious reader.

The second class of obscured texts are somewhat more complex and difficult, but once one realizes that they are not intended necessarily to be read as an actual description of an alchemical process, then we will begin to appreciate what the alchemist was intending to convey through the creation of such a work. Although the motive seems often to lie in playing with the reader, teasing and confusing him, not all such texts are merely works of straightforward deception and dishonesty.

Let us just consider a simple example *The Epistle on the Secret Fire* by Pontanus, written probably towards the end of the 16th century. This is not an extract but the whole work.

*I, John Pontanus, who have travelled into various realms and domains on my quest to know of a certainty what is the Philosophers' Stone, journeying through all parts of the world, found but false Philosophers and deceivers. Studying still, none the less, in the books of the Wise, and my doubts increasing, I discovered the truth: and yet, notwithstanding I had knowledge of the material, I erred two hundred times before finding the operation and practice of that true material.*

*I commenced first my operations with putrefactions of the Body of this material over a period of nine months but this came to naught. I placed it in the bain-marie for lengthy periods, erring just the same. I took and placed it in the calcinating fire for three months and proceeded awry. All sorts and kinds of distillation and sublimation spoken of, or apparently spoken of by the Philosophers - Geber, Archelaus, and almost any other - have I attempted and tried, and found equally nothing. In brief, I tried to come at and perfect in every way conceivable the subject of all the Art of Alchemy, be this by manure, bathing, ashes, or the thousand other sorts of fire mentioned by the Philosophers in their works, but nothing did I discover of worth.*

*It was for this reason that I set myself to study the books of the Philosophers for three years continual, studying among others those of Hermes, whose brief words contain the whole magistracy of the Stone; though he speaks quite obscurely of things above and below, of Heaven and of the Earth.*

*All one's application and care must then be only to know the correct practice in the first, second and third Works. It is not at all the fire of the bath, dung or ashes, nor any of the other fires of which the Philosophers sing or describe for us in their books.*

*What, then is this fire which perfects and achieves the entire Work, from beginning to end? Certainly all Philosophers have hidden it; but for myself, touched by a moment of pity, I would declare it and the achievement of the whole Work.*

*The Philosophers' Stone is unique, and one, but hidden and veiled in a multiplicity of different names, and before knowing it you will have seen much struggle: only with difficulty will you come to know it by your own genius. It is watery, airy, fiery and earthy, phlegmatic, choleric, sanguine and melancholy. It is a sulphur and equally Quick Silver.*

*It has several superfluities which I assure you by the living God, transform themselves into one unique Essence, if only there be our fire. And whoever - believing such to be necessary - would subtract anything from the subject, knows of a certainty nothing of Philosophy. For the superfluous, unclean, foul, scurvy, miry and, in general, entire substance of the subject, is perfected into one fixed spiritual body, by means of our fire. Which has never been revealed by the Wise, thus making it that but few succeed in this Art; imagining that some foul and unworthy thing must be separated out.*

*Now must one make appear, and draw out the properties of our fire; if it agree with our material in the way of which I have spoken, that is to say, if it be transmuted with the material. This fire burns the material not at all, nor separates anything from it, nor divides nor puts apart the parts pure and impure, as is told by all Philosophers, but converts the whole subject into purity. It does not sublime as Geber or Arnold and all others who have spoken of sublimation and distillation sublime. And it makes and perfects itself in little time.*

*This fire is mineral, equal and continual, and never evaporates unless over excited; it has certain of the characteristics of sulphur, is taken and originates elsewhere than in the material. It ruptures, dissolves, and congeals all things, and similarly congeals and calcinates; it is difficult to find by industry or by Art. This fire is the epitome and abridgement of the Work in its entirety, taking no other thing else, or very little, and this same fire introduces itself and is of mediocre heat; for with this little fire the whole Work is perfect, and all due and necessary sublimation achieved together.*

*Those who read Geber and all other Philosophers shall never come to an understanding of it though they live one hundred million years; for this fire may not be discovered but by the sole and profound meditation of the mind, following which one will understand the books, and not otherwise. Error in this Art, consists only in the acquisition of this fire, which converts the material into the Stone of the Wise.*

*Study, then, this fire, for had I myself found it at the first, I should not have erred two hundred times upon the veritable material. By which am I no longer surprised if so many come not to the accomplishment of the Work.*

*They err, have erred and will ever err, in that the Philosophers have placed their veritable agent in but one, single thing, which Artephius named, but speaking only for himself. Had I not read Artephius, nor penetrated and understood, never would I have arrived at the accomplishment of the Work.*

*Here, then, the practice: take the material with all diligence, grind and pulverise it physically and place it in the fire, that is within the oven; but the degree and proportion of the fire must also be known. To wit, that the external fire excite only the material; and in a little time this fire, without that one put a hand to it in any manner, will assuredly realise the Work in its entirety. For it will purify, corrupt, engender and bring to perfection the whole work, making appear the three principal colours, the black, white and red. And by our fire the medicine will multiply, not only in quantity but also in virtue, if joined with the material in its raw state.*

*Search, therefore, this fire with all strength of your mind, and you shall reach the goal you have set yourself; for it is this that brings to completion all the stages of the Work, and is*

*the key of all the Philosophers, which they have never revealed in their books. If you think well and deep upon this above-mentioned fire, you will know it. Not otherwise.*

*Thus, moved by a moment of pity, I have written this; but, and that I satisfy myself, as I made mention above, the fire is in no wise transmuted with the material. I wished to speak this and to warn well the prudent concerning these things, that they spend not in vain their money, but know in advance what it is that they seek and, by this means, arrive at the truth of the Art; not otherwise.*

*God keep thee.*

Here Pontanus talks about 'Our fire'. He gives it paradoxical properties which make it unrecognisable as fire. It does not burn, or sublime or distil. It is not a fire that the philosophers talk about or describe for us in their books. In short, this fire is an enigma. Pontanus by exploring the nature of fire and excluding all the usual possibilities, forces us as readers to confront the nature of the fire that is used in alchemy. The message of the text is that we should think clearly about the nature of fire itself. He is suggesting that we abandon our preconceptions about fire and think about it anew. Thus we should see Pontanus as a clear thinker rather than someone out to deceive us.

Not all such enigmatic texts, however, are as simple, insightful and straightforward as this one is. Once the format of puzzling and confounding the reader had become established early in the development of alchemical literature, then it was taken up both by those who could use it to enlighten, such as Pontanus, as well as those whose only talent was to confuse, deceive and antagonise their readership.

Here is an example, somewhat in the style of Pontanus, and perhaps with a similar intention, from a 17th century work called *Sanguis Naturae*. It is perhaps not so well crafted.

*This Vitriol is not common but Philosophical Vitriol. This admirable secret lurks in Vitriol and Urine, for the golden (sulphureous) seed, is in Vitriol, the Mercurial in Urine, hence these 2 have great affinity.*

*Now I will speak of Vitriol and Urine in which that wonderful secret of our Quintessence lies hid, which few know and very many will not believe; for it is hidden by Divine providence, lest the ignorant and unworthy should know it as well as the Wise men.*

*Vitriol is a salt which not without weighty considerations, is taken into the Composition of the Quintessence, for it is a Salt of the nature of fire, full of tincture, red and white; and it is often black, persevering in the fire, of a vegetable nature, and it is green and yields a green tincture in Vinegar.*

*Such is our Vitriol, much differing from common Vitriol, whose qualities are most noble, and powerful, nor so fixed and Tinging as the qualities of this golden Vitriol, for it hath so wonderful a Tincture, as is scarce credible, because of the great projection which it makes upon Venus, which it turns into gold. This is such a tinging substance as none in the world is, to it.*

*This Vitriol is found everywhere and no creature can live without it, for in it is shut up that Ethereal Water, the Nutritious substance of all things, and-here also fixed, that it may operate so much the stronger.*

*Behold now I have already clearly described it, and if you do not apprehend me, you ought to confess yourselves ignorant, because the description of this substance is so clear.*

How is it possible to read this text? We have to become aware that the author is using the

common substance vitriol and using it to illustrate an alchemical principle. He is asking us to extend our idea of common vitriol and instead come to see it analogously as a vast principle working in the world. This 'Philosophical vitriol' is in all things and no creature can live without it. We are here far, far, away from common vitriol, the green crystals of iron sulphate. For this alchemist, 'Vitriol' is the alchemical principle that carries the sulphur, and 'Urine' (not the common urine of course) is that which bears the mercurial. He has expanded our concept of vitriol far beyond its common meaning. In a sense he was searching for a language in which to articulate these large scale ideas about alchemical principles and here decided to use vitriol for this purpose. We should read this work in much the same way as we did the Pontanus. In using terms like 'vitriol' and 'urine' in this unusual way our author did not necessarily want to deceive us, but rather to enlighten us. Whether this idea was entirely successful is not so certain.

Other writers using such devices seem not to have had a clear picture of what they were trying to communicate. What they write seems to confuse them as much as it does their readers. They copy terms and the style of obscured alchemical texts, but seemingly without any clear program, structure or idea of what they are attempting to communicate.

*Enough has been said in other sections to convince an unbiased reader that common sulphur in any form or combustion does not "enter" into the work. The terms "sulphur" and "salt" cannot be separately discussed—at least, not usefully—for they are intimately intertwined in theory and in practice; thus, the sublimed salt in the second process—and which is "much like the common sublimate"—is properly called the "Sulphur of Nature." In contradistinction to the volatility of philosophic mercury, sulphur is that which is fixed, and which gives fixity, or permanence of manifestation on the plane to which it belongs. It coagulates and fixes "mercury," and although sulphur is said to be made volatile by conjunction with the mercury, yet both this fixity and volatility are only relative or comparative, not absolute. It is a harmonizing of, or a compromise between the two qualities: each gives of its own, and partakes of the other's distinctive attributes. It is the ideal wedded state.*

*The sulphur is not "sulphur" only, it also contains its own inherent "mercury"; so also "mercury" contains its own inherent, but inactive, "sulphur." When sulphur is added to mercury it constitutes a true inoculation; this occurs twice in the work, by different sulphurs. Therefore the alchemist said, in Hermetic Arcanum, Canon 26 : "Nevertheless spiritual love polluteth not any virgin; Beia might therefore without fault (before her betrothal to Gabritius) have felt spiritual love, to the end that she might thereby be made more cheerful, more pure, and fitter for the union." This is rather unnecessary sophism.*

We are here surely being taken into an alchemical world seemingly being entirely stripped of sense. What does this text say to us? How can we read its intention? It surely fails to enlighten. Sadly, this is not a piece written back in the 16th or 17th centuries, but work of the modern period, R.W. Councill's *Apollogia Alchymiae*, written in the 1920's. Councill seems to have become the victim of reading far too many alchemical texts without understanding them, with the sad result that he writes an incomprehensible one of his own. Far from explaining obscure alchemical texts he adds his own obscurity. I include this as an obvious example of a mind struggling to make some sense of alchemical material but instead falling more deeply into incoherence. There were alchemical writers in past ages who similarly fell into this confusion and then passed this muddle on to their readership.

If you wish you can now read through some of the exercises, trying to identify the points where the author introduces coded or obscuring language.

## EXERCISE 1

*Take fresh, pure, quick, white and clear,  
Tie him hands and heels so near,  
With a most puissant cord and yoke,  
That he may be mortified and choked.  
Reduce him by his like homogeneous Nature,  
To his first being, or primogeneous feature,  
Within the close Chamber or House of putrefaction,  
According to Dame Nature's indication:  
Then you will have a living Spiritual Fountain,  
Flowing bright and clear from Heaven's Mountain,  
Feeding on its proper flesh and blood,  
Therewithall increasing to an endless flood.*

*Let him, that by Divine assistance obtains this blessed Water, render thanks unto God, for he has the key in his hands, wherewith he may open the fast locks of all metallic chests, out of which gold, silver, gems, honour, power, and health are to be had. This blessed Water is called by the philosophers, the Daughter of Pluto, having all the treasures in her power. It is also termed the white, pure, delicate, undefiled Virgin Beja, without which no generation nor increase can be effected. And therefore the Philosophers espoused this delicious pure Virgin unto Gabricius, to the end they may raise up fruit; and when Gabricius lay with her, he died, and Beja out of excessive love swallowed and consumed him, as Arisleus in 'Turba Philosophorum' speaks of it. And Bernhard in his 'Practica' says: "The Fountain is as a mother unto the King, for she doth attract him, and causes him to die, but the King by her means rises again, and unites himself so firmly unto her, that no man can hurt him." And therefore the philosophers say, although Gabricius be costlier, dearer, and more esteemed by the world than Beja, yet he alone can bring no fruit.*

*This virgin and blessed Water the philosophers named in their books with many thousand names. They call it Heaven, Celestial Water, Celestial Rain, the dew of Heaven, May-dew, Water of Paradise, parting Water, Aqua Regis, a corrosive Aquafort, sharp Vinegar, Brandy, Quintessence of Wine, growthful green Juice, a growing Mercury, a viridescent Water, and Leo Viridis, Quick Silver, Menstruum, Blood, Urine, Horse-piss, Milk, and Virgins Milk, white Arsenic, Silver, Lune, and juice of Lune, a Woman, Feminine Seed, a sulphureous vapouring Water and smoke, a fiery burning Spirit, a deadly piercing poison, and Basilisk that kills all, a venomous Worm, a venomous Serpent, a Dragon, a Scorpion devouring his Children, a hellish fire of Horse-dung, a sharp Salt, and Salt-Armoniack, a common Salt, sharp Soap, Lye, a viscous Oil, Ostrich's Stomach which doth devour and concoct all, an Eagle, Vulture, Bird of Hermes, a Vessel and Seal of Hermes, a melting and calcining Furnace, and innumerable other names of beasts, birds, herbs, waters, Juices, milk, bloods, etc.*

*And they writ figuratively in their books of this Water, to be made of such things, whereas all the unwise which sought it in such like things, have not found the true desired Water. Know therefore, my dear Son, that it is only made of Mercury vive, and no other heterogeneous thing in the World; and that the Philosophers therefore gave it so many names, that it might not be known to the unwise. And with this item I will conclude this treatise, whereby thou may understand and learn, that without this fire all the labour of the whole world is merely lost, all Chymical processes false, lying and useless.*

*From 'Hydropyrographum Hermeticum' in the Aurifontina Chymica, 1680.*

## EXERCISE 2

*Our Matter is a heavenly salt (namely the Astral Salt is first extracted out of its slimy fat water and is kept) by means of which we open (this happens in a free fire, in a crucible the earthly body (namely Sol or Luna) and during that time the elixir is born, and the Salt out of which the solution is achieved, and also the mineral (namely aqua viscosa) out of which this salt is made, are neither costly. Johann de Monte Raphaim says: This Universal Mercury is nothing else than the Astral Salt, which a few call Heavenly; by the ancients, however, it is called the Salt of Metals; not only do all metals have their beginning and growth from this spirit, but also all animals, vegetables and insects must suffocate and decay if they should be robbed of this solar-lunar moisture, heat, cold, life and motion. Philos. Vater Herz Cap. III says: It is a corporeal spirit or a spiritual body (that one sees glittering if one looks into the Sun), which certainly is the saltpetre of the wise. It is really a fat, heavy and juicy earth, which is very useful and very precious, hidden to the ignorant, but quite common to the knowledgeable.*

*One can catch hold of this splendid Matter everywhere, in valleys and level fields, in mountains and caves or galleries, even in one's own house. It is the dew of heaven, the fatness of the earth, and the esteemed natural saltpeter of the Sages. It is in everything the Quintessence of the viscous earth, out of which Adam was made; briefly, our Matter is a virginal earth, on which the Sun (which is her father) has never shed its rays, and the Moon is her mother; our virginal earth is really a nurse-mother of the gods, because from her come forth not only gold and silver, but also all other metals, minerals, vegetables, and animals, and take life, breath and air and growth from her; Also the perfect and abundant influence of heaven is conveyed daily through each thing: who now wishes to gain a certain understanding and fathom all things, how, why, and wherefore all things produce and survive, that person lacks nothing, but all can be well brought about, a bit more should ensue in the following....*

*.... In sum, such a spiritual substance, that is neither celestial nor infernal, but rather a pleasant clear pure substance, the fixed middle between the lowest and the highest, also the most elect, and most precious under the heavens. It will not be known by those who have no understanding of it, or first begin with considerations of value, for it is the meanest of all, and most unesteemed, yea, as a rejected thing; which however is sought by many, but found by few, may be found everywhere, collected and taken, seen by everyone, but its separation known by few. Now it is certainly true, what Salomon Trismosin says: No perfect tincture comes forth except from a true and perfect root, so, the beginning of the work is our solution, nothing is brought about in the work unless the semen of man conjoins with the femininity of woman. Who is now desirous to attain to the treasure of the red lion, that one must be able to draw the Sun out of the mountains, quench the same with its heat with the lion's blood, thus will the hidden spirit increase in strength...*

*... In order that no one may complain that I have not fulfilled my promise, I want to point out some more sincere teachings. The evidence of Nature says: God has created mankind in his image, but it deviates so far from Nature, that for that reason Nature addresses the fanciful worker thus: "You have neither Art nor the correct Materia, neither theory nor knowledge nor my acknowledgement, you churlish asses break glasses, char coals so that the fumes make you lightheaded, you cook alum, salt, auripigment, chimney soot, boil black barren metals, attempt to separate and distil great and small, and require various vessels and furnaces. I am ashamed of your folly, for you sicken me with your brimstone smoke; you presume through your strongly burning fire to fix the Argent vive, but that is only the ordinary volatile, and not the same thing out of which I make a metal; if you don't go another way, you perform nothing, because you do not understand my*

*art. It is better for you to stay your actions, than for you to perform so much daubing through dissolution, distillation, separation, cohobation, alembics, cucurbits, and pelicans. You will never ever make Argent vive coagulate thus. You need for your vivification to reverberate, fire, and that so hot, that everything flows; but at the end you spoil it, and others with you, if you don't enter into my smithy in which I forge metals without ceasing within the earth. For in there will you see the matter with which I work, and learn the truth."*

From Johann Friedrich Fleischer, *Chemical Moonshine*, 1739.

## EXERCISE 3

[For this exercise make a list of all the coded or obscured terms for substances in this text, which without proper identification entirely prevent the reader from just going out and performing the process.]

*Now when you have the substance indicated (which is in part heavenly in part earthly, and in its natural state a mere confused chaos without certain name or colour), and know it well (for this knowledge the sages have always accounted the principal part of this work, then you must give your whole mind to manipulating it in the proper manner...*

*...Now when you have exercised yourself with exceeding diligence in the oratory, the matter being ready to your hand, go into the laboratory, take the substance indicated, and set to work in the following manner.*

*Above all things you must let it be your first object to solve this substance (or first Entity, which the sages have also called the highest natural good). Then it must be purged of its watery and earthy nature (for at first it appears an earthy, heavy, thick, slimy, and misty body), and all that is thick, nebulous, opaque, and dark in it must be removed, that thus, by a final sublimation, the heart and inner soul contained in it may be separated and reduced to a precious essence. All this can be accomplished with our Pontic and Catholic water, which in its refluent course irrigates and fertilizes the whole earth, and is sweet, beautiful, clear, limpid, and brighter than gold, silver, carbuncles, or diamonds. This blessed water is enclosed and contained in our Matter.*

*Then the extracted Heart, Soul, and Spirit must once more be distilled and condensed into one by their own proper salt (which in the interior of the substance is first of a blood-red colour, but then becomes of a bright, clear, and transparent white, and is called by the Sages the Salt of Wisdom). You have thus first, by what is called the anterior process, separated the pure from the impure, and first rendered the visible invisible, then, again, the invisible visible or palpable (but yet no longer so gross and shapeless as it was at first), and it is now a bright body with a pleasant, penetrating smell, and withal so subtle and ethereal that if it were not fixed it would evaporate and vanish away. For this reason the Sages call it mercurial water, or water of the sun, or mercury of the sun, or mercury of the wise. But so long as it remains in the aforesaid form it would, if used as a medicine, produce no good effect, but rather act as a poison. If, therefore, you wish to enjoy its glorious virtue, and manifold power, you must subject it to some further chemical processes.*

*For this purpose you must diligently observe the working of Nature (extending over a considerable period of time), and strictly follow her guidance. When you have this knowledge, you should take two parts of the aforesaid prepared aqueous matter, and again three different parts.*

*The first two parts you should keep; but to the three parts add another matter, viz., the most precious and divinely endowed Body of Gold, which is most intimately akin to the First Matter. Of this add one twelfth for the first fermentation; for both, the spiritual and heavenly prepared substance, and this earthly Body of Gold, must be joined together, and coagulated into one body.*

*But it should be noted that common gold is useless for this purpose, being unsuitable and dead. For though it has been declared by God the Omnipotent to be the most precious and beautiful of metals, yet so long as it lay hid in the mine its perfect growth and development was hindered. Daily use, moreover, blunts its indwelling powers, namely, sulphur, or its soul, and it is continually becoming mingled and defiled with other things that are foreign to its nature. Hence it becomes daily more and more unfit to be the subject of art. You must, therefore, seek to obtain gold which has a pure, living spirit, and of which the sulphur is not yet weakened and sophisticated, but is pure and*

clear (by passing through antimony, or by the heaven and sphere of Saturn, and being purged of all its defilement): otherwise the first substance, being spiritual and ethereal, will not combine with it. For this Magistry deals only with pure bodies, and suffers no unclean thing near, on, or around it.

Now when these unequal parts of the water and gold (differing not only in quality, but also in quantity, for the first is, after its preparation, ethereal, thin, subtle, and soft, while the other is very heavy, firm and hard) have been combined in a solutory alembic, and reduced to a dry liquid or amalgam, they should be left six or seven days exposed to gentle heat of at least a tepid character. Then take one part of the three parts of water, and pour it into a round, oval glass phial, similar to an egg in shape; put the tempered liquid in the midst thereof, and leave it once more for six or seven days; the Body of the Sun will then be gradually dissolved by the water. Thereupon both will begin to combine, and one will mingle with the other as gently and insensibly as ice with warm water. This union the Sages have shadowed out in various ways, and likened it, for instance, to the wedlock of a bride and bridegroom (as in the Song of Solomon). When this is done, add the third part (which you have kept) to the rest, but not all at once, or in one day, but in seven different instalments: otherwise the Body would become too liquid, and entirely corrupted by too much moisture.

For as seed, when cast into the ground, is destroyed and rendered useless by an excess of moisture and rain, so our work cannot prosper unless the water is judiciously administered. All this being done, let the phial be carefully closed and sealed, to prevent the compound from evaporating or losing its odour; and place it in the furnace, there exposing it to a gentle, continuous, airy, vaporous, and well-tempered heat, resembling the degree of warmth with which the hen hatches her eggs.

[NOTE. The Sages have said much about vaporous fire, which they have called the fire of wisdom, which is not elementary or material, but (according to them) essential and preternatural. They also call it the Divine fire, i.e., the water of mercury, roused into action by common fire.] Digest and heat it well, yet take care that none of it is sublimed, or, in the parabolic language of the Sages, that the wife does not rule the husband, and that the husband does not abuse his authority over the wife, &c. - if you do this, the whole will proceed normally, without any interference on your part (except that, of course, you must keep up the fire). At first the earthly Body of the Sun is totally solved, and decomposed, and robbed of all strength (the Body, which was first of a muddy impurity, changing to a coal-black colour, called by the Sages the Raven's Head, within the space of forty days), and is thus despoiled of its Soul. The Soul is borne upward, and the Body, being severed from the Soul, lies for some time, as if dead, at the bottom of the still, like ashes. But if the fire is increased, and well tempered, the Soul gradually descends again in drops, and saturates and moistens its Body, and so prevents it from being completely burned and consumed. Then, again, it ascends and descends, the process being repeated seven times. The temperature you must keep at the same point from beginning to end. Haste slowly - for it is of the greatest importance that the influence of the fire should be brought to bear gently and gradually. In the meantime you will observe various chemical changes (e.g., of colour) in the distilling vessel, to which you must pay careful attention. For if they appear in due order, it is a sign that your undertaking will be brought to a prosperous issue.

First there appear granular bodies like fishes' eyes, then a circle around the substance, which is first reddish, then turns white, then green and yellow like a peacock's tail, then a dazzling white, and finally a deep red - until at last, under the rarefying influence of the fire, the Soul and Spirit are combined with their Body, that lies at the bottom, into a fixed and indissoluble Essence, which union and conjunction cannot be witnessed without unspeakable admiration and awe. Then you will behold the revived, quickened, perfected, and glorified Body, which is of a most beautiful purple colour

*(like cochineal), and its tincture has virtue to change, tinge, and cure every imperfect body, as we shall hereafter show more in detail. When thus, by the grace and help of God, you have happily attained the goal of your labours, and found the Phoenix of the Sages, you should once more return thanks to Him with your whole heart, and use His unspeakable gift solely for His glory, and for the advantage of your suffering brethren. Thus I have most faithfully explained to you the whole process by which this most noble Art, and highest achievement, to wit, the Egg of the Sages, or Philosopher's Stone, may be begun and successfully completed.*

From Johann Ambrosius Siebmacher, *Waterstone of the Wise*, 1619.

## EXERCISE 4

When you have the time and enthusiasm, go onto the alchemy web site pages of alchemical texts, look at the practical texts and draw up a list of all the terms you can find which appear to be used to disguise, code or mask the identity of physical substances from the reader.

<http://www.levity.com/alchemy/texts.html>