

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 13 : The Lily among the thorns

This work *The Lily among the thorns*, was part of a work in German entitled *Der kleine Bauer* ('the lesser countryman') supposedly written by Johann Grasshoff. The first edition of this that I have been able to locate was printed at 1618 in Strassburg. This work together with a companion piece *Der grosse Bauer* seems to have proved very attractive to the alchemical readership and it continued to be issued in a number of editions through the 17th and well into the 18th century. The 'Lilium inter spinas' ('the Lily among the thorns') was the first section of the book *Der kleine Bauer*.

In this lesson, and subsequent ones, the original text of the piece will be given in italics, followed by a reading of this in upright text. This reading will follow very closely the original, and rather than interpreting and pushing ideas onto our understanding of the text, you will see that this is an attempt to read the meaning directly out of the text itself. Some terms need explaining or expanding upon, but we always remain within the alchemical context, and avoid rushing off into wild esoteric speculations which entirely miss the point of what the author was trying to say to us. Most texts are really very straightforward when one adopts this approach.

There was once an old adage or proverb that went "after great suffering there usually comes great joy." Sic et contra. Such was also the case for me, unfortunately, a few years ago. There are no doubt many others as well, who, when they begin at first without a true basis or foundation, end up approximately in the condition that I will describe at length. For, because I thought that I held the whole world in my hands, I succeeded in less than nothing. Because the glass in which I had set my well-being broke with a great crash, the material besplattered my Mutos Philosophos and books now and again to my great damage and detriment, concerning which I will forebear to communicate further, except to say that I was very benumbed, stupefied and frightened by this unanticipated setback, even to the extent that in my sorrow and affliction I did not know where I was, what I had intended, nor what I should do next, for all my joy, delight and bliss had been transformed and transmuted into vain poison and bitter gall, instead of into gold and silver (as I had hoped).

Our writer begins in a seeming autobiographical mode, with a kind of warning, that in the pursuit of alchemy one can anticipate the great joy of success following on the pain of continual failure, and on the contrary also expect great despair and suffering to follow on the enthusiastic joy one experiences when with great hopes one began the work of alchemy. Our author presents himself as thinking he had understood everything when he began the work, and even felt he held the whole world in his hands, but only to fail. His glass vessel broke and his alchemical material splattered over his books (his silent philosophers). All his joy and naïve hopes were, through this, transmuted into bitterness,

rather than into the success of gold.

After I had come a little to myself, I first considered my great damage and detriment, and began, with hot tears, bended knees and heartfelt sighs, to lament and complain about this to Him who lives from Eternity to Eternity (for God gives and takes as it well pleases Him, and to whomsoever He will), earnestly praying that He might yet now befriend and have mercy on me, that it might be possible that He should lead, guide and show me the correct path to the mirror of His Majesty through the Spirit of Truth and Wisdom. I consoled myself in this through the thought, that Dionysus and Zacharias had said that most of the philosophers had also erred greatly in the beginning, and nevertheless had finally come despite this to a happy and fruitful end.

He turned to God for a consolation. For to him, God is the provider who can either give or hold back success, as He pleases. He remembered the account of *Denis Zacheire* (written in the mid 16th century) which tells of a long struggle with many setbacks but which eventually triumphed in his success. Our author takes comfort from Zacheire's autobiographical account.

After I had troubled myself at length with gloomy thoughts, I was struck with a question of doubt that went beyond them: Whether Almighty God would even allow us poor sinners, who now live in these last and evil times, to have, share in and know such an exalted secret. After much thought and emotion, I came at last to the conclusion that even those who had possessed this mystery before us had themselves been sinners, and that they attained and received this, not from merit, but from grace. Therefore even now one who behaved piously and held God before his eyes could, through the grace of the loving God, attain it and grow powerful as well as they.

Our author struggles with the gloomy idea that perhaps God would not allow sinners like himself to gain access to the secrets of alchemy, but he realises that those earlier alchemists who possessed the secret, must themselves have been sinners like himself, and therefore attained the mastery of alchemy through the grace of God. He then comes to believe that even in his time, that if one behaved piously and kept one attention fixed on God then was possible through His grace to gain the secrets of alchemy.

Thus, I once again seized courage and valiantly took up my philosophers, magi and Mutos Reges, especially Count Trevisan. For although I had read him before many times thoroughly, nevertheless I could not find a sure foundation in him. But now, since the hour of revelation was at hand, I came in my reading to the passage in which he describes the Materia, and suddenly it seemed as if a fiery spark of Cabiri lead me from that place to the passages in which the power of the Work lay. I was frightened at first, but then, as I looked further, the eyes of my understanding were opened, and I could see and understand that to which I had previously been blind and for which I had yearned so long. Then I felt joy in my heart, and thanked God, requesting additionally that He might instruct me further in the means whereby I might attain to the completion of this exalted Work.

Thus our author takes heart and turned again to the books of the philosophers, magicians and silent kings of alchemy, especially Count Bernard Trevisan. Although he had read Bernard's works many times before, he had not found a solid basis in his work on which to pursue alchemy. But now, in rereading what Bernard had to say on the alchemical material, it seemed as if a gleam of light of the Kabeiroi (the Greek chthonic spirits who worked with the fire of Vulcan and protected the Mysteries

of metallurgy, magic, and fertility) illumined his way forward. Although this was at first frightening, as he looked into this more closely he began to understand more and more about the alchemical work which he had been blind to before. He asks God for further insight into how he can accomplish the alchemical work.

Thus, I soon undertook to journey after the materials (although they could be found everywhere). For I wished to obtain the Proximiozem or Propinquozem and not the remotiozem, since the one is richer than the other, whereby it better achieves the goal, as is explained by George Ripley in his Axiomata, Twelve Gates, and also by Flamel in fol. 126, 150 in fine, in these words: "Hoc vero imprimis occultissimum est, ex qua re minerali neri debeat propinquis."

He realises that the first thing was to obtain the materials for the work. This required a journey or quest, even though paradoxically these substances are found everywhere. He wished to obtain the 'Proximior' or 'Propinquoior', the closer substances and not the more remote ones 'Remotior', since as Ripley explains in his Twelve Gates (*Compound of alchemy*) the first is richer in power than the second, so that it is easier to attain the goal of alchemy when using this. Flamel in his writings also agreed, that truly this prime material is hidden, and it ought to be produced out of that mineral matter which is close by.

As I was now on the way and my heart was full of thoughts, it happened that I met a venerable old peasant between two mountains. He was clothed in a long grey cloak or smock, on his hat he had a black ribbon, around his neck a white banner, a yellow belt about his body, and also red boots on his feet.

Up till now our author, Grasshof, has been presenting a rather conventional, even boring, account of his work with alchemy, placing himself at the centre of this apparent autobiography. Now suddenly his text shifts into a different mode. If we think about the structure of this work we will see are no longer dealing with an autobiography. Instead, we are in a kind of allegorical dialogue in which one figure is to be enlightened by his meeting with another. This is a contrived device that enables the author to present a teaching from an enlightened adept about alchemy seemingly to himself. Although this is all doubtless written by Grasshof, the reader is being given the impression that our author has met with and been instructed by some adept. This is device commonly used in alchemical texts. Here he has chosen the figure of an old peasant man. Another writer might have been tempted to picture this enlightened individual in a more impressive form, perhaps as an old monk, or wise man.

Thus we find a person on the path of alchemy seeking his prima materia, and meeting an old peasant or countryman, clothed in a long grey cloak. He is wearing rather strange coloured items. Proceeding downwards from his head to his feet we note, a black ribbon in his hat, a white banner round his neck, a yellow belt around his waist and red boots on his feet. These, of course, are the classical colour stages of alchemy. Our countryman is dressed with the colours of the alchemical processes, and we are now in a world of symbolic or emblematic alchemy.

After I had greeted him and approached him more closely, I became aware that in his hand he held two star-like flowers, each with seven rays. The one white and the other red, which he was contemplating. They were very beautiful and radiant in colour, lovely in scent and sweet to the taste. Also the one was feminine and the other masculine, and yet both grew out of one root and under the

influence of all the planets. I asked the peasant what he meant to do with these flowers, for, although I knew them both well, I did not know that they had an opininem distinctam as man and woman, that is, that they were of two distinct natures.

The countryman held in his hand and was contemplating, two seven petalled flowers which had the form of stars, one white and the other red. One was feminine and the other masculine and they grew out of a single root, under the influence of the seven planets. Our seeker after enlightenment asks the peasant what he was to going to do with these flowers. He replied that they had a supposed distinction as male and female and thus were of two different natures.

He looked at me earnestly, asking who had led me to this unusual place, for it was sought by the most exalted men of the world, but it was closed and barred to them. However, after I had told him of the wonderful course of my life, of which I have already mentioned something, he laughed and, turning to me in a friendly manner, he said:

“You should know that no one may attain to the knowledge of these flowers unless he is predestined for it, or unless he achieves it by means of diligent prayer and strong, firm faith, and even then it is not given to him without great effort, trouble and tribulation, as you yourself must confess. And this is so in order that those who possess it remember this, and learn to esteem this mystery more highly and to keep it secret. But since you have now come so far, I will show you, with the permission and licence of the Divina Numinis, that from these two flowers comes the Prima Materia of all metals, but only after their conjunction, and not before it. Concerning this read Count Bernhardus in fol. 45. Almost at the end of the second part of the same book he calls these two flowers, a red man and a white woman. However, because of the dangers involved, the philosophers have always written of the Prima Materia, in order to conceal its root from the unwise, and have remained completely silent about the Secundae Materiae. For you must first obtain the Secundam Materiam, which is crude and itself the Subjectum Lapidis, and must extract from it the man and the woman, which only after their conjunction turns into the Prima Materia, which I thus reveal truthfully to you.”

The old peasant wonders how it is that our alchemical seeker has been led to this special place which was sought by the highest men in the world even though it was closed to them entering. Our seeker tells him the story of his life with its difficulties, which he has already outlined to his readers in the opening paragraphs. The peasant laughs and opens up to our seeker in a friendly way and tells him, that no one can gain knowledge of these flowers unless they are either predestined for it, or else they are so pious and diligent as to continue seeking through all the trials and difficulties they might encounter. God has arranged it this way so that those who possess this secret value it very highly and keep it secret. Since our alchemical questing hero has been able to come so far, the peasant, with the will of God, tells him some of the secrets of these flowers. He says that the Prima materia of all metals he seeks comes from these two flowers, after they are conjoined and not before. You can read about this in the works of Count Bernard Trevisan who calls these two flowers, ‘the red man and the white woman’. There is, however, a deeper secret that the alchemical philosophers, have concealed from the unwise, fearing the dangers of revealing too much. Thus the philosophers have talked about the Prima material when there is a Secunda materia they have remained totally silent about. One must firstly obtain the Secunda materia which though crude is the subject material of the stone, and from this make your man and woman, which when conjoined produce the Prima materia. Suddenly the whole process seems even more convoluted.

I was astonished at this speech and was accordingly very glad that in many points it was in agreement with my own opinion. When he had finished, I said to him: "My friend, I truthfully would not have sought such exalted wisdom from you, for you appear so plain and simple."

He smiled and said, "For precisely this reason the entire world errs and lacks my wisdom, for my externally insignificant figure usually fools them. But if they would only ask in friendliness to be allowed to take off my old grey smock, then underneath it they would find, as you now know well, a shining diamond suit of armour with a ruby lining. However, the Most High has sealed up all such things from the many, in order that they will not be able to contemplate that from which all the metals have their origin."

Our seeker is astonished by what the old peasant said to him, partly because it agreed with many of his own opinions. He tells him that he would not have thought that such wisdom could come from a simple peasant. The old countryman was amused by this, saying that the whole world is mistaken and lacks wisdom because they do not seek it in an outwardly insignificant form. If he were to take off his grey cloak, then underneath you would see a diamond suit of armour with a lining of rubies. In this way God has hidden the secrets of alchemy from the many, so that people cannot understand the prima material from which the metals originate.

I replied to this, "My dear and gentle peasant, these flowers have a glorious radiance'- are they not therefore also medicinal?"

He said, "They are indeed medicinal; but their great power properly lies hidden in them. For when they are still contained in the root they are very poisonous, for which reason the root must first be sublimated very gradually and gently. (You already know the sublimation of the philosophers, for otherwise I would have told you about it). This must be done without an extraneous or acidic agent, which could corrupt their growing power and nature, for otherwise they are of no use. These two glorious flowers grow variously, without the addition of other things, out of this poisonous mountain, and had I myself not known under which planets these Edifiers were constellated, then I would not have arrived at this miraculous place, and thus would not have come to know such a secret. In this you can believe me truly."

The seeker after alchemical enlightenment asks the peasant if the flowers had some medicinal qualities. He answers that they are, but this property is hidden deep within them. When these medicinal properties are still contained in the root they are a powerful poison, so the root must be gently and slowly sublimated using the sublimation of the philosophers'. This special sublimation does not use any external acid which would corrupt their living powers, for without these they are of no use at all. These two flowers grow in their own way, without needing the addition of anything external, upon this poisonous mountain. The old peasant says that if he had not known under which planets these edificers, these builders of substance, were ruled, then he would not have been able to find this miraculous place and never known this secret of alchemy.

I spoke further. "My dear friend, you have told me many strange things, but please tell me also whether these two flowers grow simultaneously together, or how it is that they have but one form, for I deem that the greatest art lies in this one point, (although I also consider the resolution very important), because the philosophers do not say very much about it."

As I said this, the peasant shook his head, and then remained silent for a while, but finally began to speak. "It seems to me that you are very curious about these matters (although I cannot blame you

for this), but allow yourself to be satisfied for now with my manifold account, for this is indeed the cornerstone, upon which most men stumble, for there are many of them who know the true Materia, but to whom this technique is concealed. However, come again tomorrow at this time; I will again be here, and reveal, teach and make known to you as much as has been given me.”

He asks the old peasant whether these two flowers grow together and how they have the same form (probably alluding to the fact that they are each seven pointed stars). Our seeker is convinced that this is key to understanding alchemy because the alchemical philosophers say almost nothing about this. The peasant remains silently pondering for a while, then says that he thinks our alchemical investigator to be very curious about these things and does not blame him for his curiosity, but he must for now be satisfied with the account he has given. This is indeed the foundation stone of the work, on which many alchemists have stumbled. Though there are many of them who know the prima material of the work, they do not necessarily know the technique. He does not elaborate further, but instead rather mysteriously and dramatically breaks off at this point and asks our hero to visit him at the same tomorrow when he will reveal all that he knows.

I thanked him for his true report exceedingly, left him joyfully and awaited the following day with great longing. I did not tarry, and arrived punctually at the place. The peasant was already there, holding the two flowers in his hand. I wished him a good day and reminded him of his promise of the day before, but with veneration, saying that I wished to know how to be of service to him and to please him in everything. He replied that he remembered his promise well, and desired to fulfil the same, but that I could not be of service to him in any respect, but rather I should know that if I were on good terms with God then he would be my friend; if not, then he would be my enemy. For he also must follow and obey the commandments of the Highest, and I should be content with this.

Having presented this strange device of an overnight delay in the narrative, the author takes us immediately to the following day, when our seeker meets up again with his instructor, the old peasant. The old man is again holding the two flowers. Our investigator reminds him of his promise of the previous day and asks if he can be of any service to him. The old peasant man said he would keep his promise to explain the alchemical secrets to him, but that he requires no help or service from our seeker. All he needed to know is whether he were on good terms with God. If so, then they would be friends. If not, then they would be enemies.

He spoke further: “Listen, you child of man, for now I will repeat my speech in short from the beginning, and fully report to you and teach you the entire process with all its requisites and details. However, you must pay strict attention to it, and consider my words again at home often after having prayed, for otherwise my meaning will be concealed unknown in your senses, and lead you upon void and erring ways. For it is a gift from almighty God. Believe this with certainty, and now listen. Let us set ourselves upon this green, for I am old and cold by nature, and also have an infirmity in my legs, so that I cannot stand for long. I would like, therefore, to rest on the green.

The countryman says he will repeat what he has said from the beginning and teach the entire process in all detail. He says our seeker will have to consider what he says very carefully and ponder on his words when he is back at home, for unless he does this he will not fully understand the meaning and be lead into errors. They sit down on the grass so he can begin his account of the alchemical work.

“You have doubtless read that our Magi, philosophers and kings write and speak in accord with Nature. Know from this that he who will achieve something in this Art must first know and understand the origin, birth, distinction, friendship and enmity of all metals. And perceive further that all metals grow from one root, and that their original material is of one kind, but that they are distinguished only in that one of them is purer than the other, and also more cooked and digested. All of this is written and demonstrated in the books of all philosophers, in which alone the truth is found, and not in the falsely written recipes and processes of the travelling scholars. This you may believe for certain. He who would know the ground and fundament of these things should not allow himself to be deterred from the reading of these books. Nam qui vult sentire commodum, oportet Ut etiam sentiat onus”. It would take me far too long to tell you about all of them, and when I have finished fully informing you, you will not see me again or speak to me until you have brought the Work to its conclusion. At that time I will talk with you in a much more friendly manner, and you will then also know me better, love me more strongly and hold me in higher esteem as now, and we shall thereafter not soon part - but enough of that for now.”

The alchemical philosophers all work in harmony and accord with Nature. Thus to succeed in alchemy you must know the origin of the metals, and all their associations and properties. All metals grow in the earth out of one single root substance, but they grow into different metals depending on whether one is purer than another, or whether one or more cooked and digested than another. This is all well described in the books of the philosophers, which are the sole source of alchemical truths, for the recipes and process of wandering scholars are false and misleading. Thus to learn the secrets of alchemy you must read the philosophers’ books. For he who is willing to experience the profit, it is necessary that he also experiences the burden or task. It would take too long to list all these books. The old peasant tells our seeker that when he has finished telling him all these things then he will depart as it will be time for the seeker to go and bring the alchemical work to completion. They will not talk again till after that is achieved. Then they will be closer and will get to know each other better.

“You should also be informed further, that he who understands the origin of the metals will also know well that the material of our Stone must also be metallic, but that it is not a metal, nor a mineral either, but rather metals and minerals, minerals and metals. For the nature and character of all of this is in one thing, which is called Electrum Minerale Immaturum Magnesia or Lunaria, for which reason the philosophers always use the plural form, saying “Metalla, Metallorum, Metallis,” etc. I must not speak about this more clearly, neither is it necessary, because this material is already known to you, and otherwise others may overhear it. For in these mountains there lurk very many tempters, some of whom come very close to us, and a few even all the way. Thus I do not allow myself easily to be seen with these flowers, for so I am commanded.”

The old peasant continues his instruction, saying that when you understand the origin and creation of the metals, you will see that the Stone itself must be metallic in nature. However, it is not a metal nor a mineral, but rather metal and mineral at the same time. Its nature and character is contained in one thing, namely the Electrum Minerale Immaturum Magnesia or Lunaria. Here our author seems to be playing a game with the reader. Electrum was the Greek name for a naturally occurring alloy of silver, gold with some copper, but the term was later extended by the alchemists to mean a mysterious metal. In alchemy ‘Magnesia’ is not the substance named as this today, rather it is a radiant or shining stone (often related to the philosophers’ stone). Thus here our author has brought

together all these aspects of metal, mineral and transforming stone in the phrase 'Mineral Electrum /Immature Magnesia'. Our author then resorts to a rather devious device, as he makes the old man say that he cannot tell more about this because he is fearful of having the secret overheard, by some tempters that lurk in these parts. This conveniently avoids the author having to explain this point further and thus we, as readers, are left clinging to a mere mysterious phrase.

As I have said, this mineral root must gradually be separated from the corruption that it has received from the poisonous vapours, and then the white Mercury's lily-sap must be pressed out of it. This is very delicate and volatile, and is thus to be sought in the upper parts of the flower, and its name is Azoth or Gluten Aquilae. You should also not neglect to seek the Sulphuric, incombustible, fixed, red lily-sap in the lower parts. This is called Laton or Leo Rubeus. There you have my explanation, according to your desire. Do not ask further, for I am restricted, and forbidden to explain more. Pray diligently about it and it will be given to you.

The old man moves on to discuss other alchemical matters. He says that this mineral root must be separated from the corruption of the poisons in it. Here he is surely referring to the root of the double flower which he just mentioned. This is also the root matter of the metals that he has described. From this mineral root a white Mercurial lily sap can be extracted, which is delicate and volatile, and thus found in the upper parts of the flower. It is called the Azoth or the gluten of the eagle, often seen to be a sticky white substance. This is paralleled with an incombustible, fixed, sulphurous, red lily-sap found in the lower parts of the flowers and called the Laton or Red Lion. Laton or Latten in alchemy is often a coppery or brass coloured substance which has to be made white through the alchemical process. Our author speaking through the old peasant has decided not to enlighten us further about these substances, as he opts for the device that the old man has some obligation not to say any more. One only need pray to find out more.

"It is especially astonishing that these flowers never wither or wilt, and that the one can be transformed into all sorts of forms and natures, and also loves all the planets to which it may be united, such that it may never again be separated from the house of the planet to which it is united for all eternity. To describe the virtue, nature and quality of this flower is beyond the heart, mind and soul of any man, as all wise men must confess. Now, as you can see, these two flowers rest upon a seven-fold stalk of many colours, but they have spread quite far apart from one another, because of their differing natures. For this reason, one must find a means whereby they grow together, so that, from both of them a glorious, incorruptible and eternally enduring fruit may break forth, sprout and grow, though this cannot occur without the will of GOD."

He continues, saying that it is surprising that these flowers never die and can be transformed into all kinds of different substances, and love whatever planet (or planetary metal) which it is united with. Its properties are beyond human description. Although these two flowers grow on a sevenfold coloured stalk, they have grown well apart from one another as they have entirely different natures. It is the task of the alchemist to make them grow together, so that a glorious, eternal fruit will develop and grow from them. Such a thing requires the will of God, not merely that of Man.

"Furthermore, you should know that the number of the white lily seed is very different from that of the red, which the wise have concealed very thoroughly, calling it their pondus or weight. Without this knowledge, the two lilies cannot be united, nor be mixed per minima together. The ancient

Arabians also speak of this: “Pondus masculi singulare et foeminae plurale semper esto.” This is explained by the Count, in that he says: ‘Terrena potentia super sibi resistens et pro resistantia dilata est actioagentis in altera materia’. Do you understand this?”

The number of seeds in the white lily differs from that in the red flower. The wise alchemical philosophers called this the ‘pondus’ or ‘weight’, and without knowledge of this the two flowers cannot be united together. ‘The weight of the masculine is singular, and that of the feminine always is plural’, which is further explained by Count Bernard Trevisan ‘The earthly power resisting that above itself, and through this resisting has extended the action of the agents into the two other substances.”

I answered that it was somewhat obscure. He said “Do not trouble yourself too greatly about it, for when you attain to the growth of these two lilies, then you will see yourself, from the quality and nature of each of them, what you should do. But use a gradual, gentle warmth, for otherwise the seed of the white lily will smoke forth out of it in the form of a vapour, and all your effort and work will be in vain.”

Our author then puts himself into the position of admitting that he does not fully understand this point. This perhaps is intended to draw our attention more closely to this. The old peasant says that he should not worry too much about this as what he must do will become clear when he is working and alchemically growing these two lilies. He would then have to use a slow gentle heat, in order to avoid the white flower vapourising, for then his work would have failed.

I spoke further: “You have always mentioned only these two lilies; however, the philosophers also occasionally speak of one thing alone, such as that everything sought by the wise is contained in Mercury or in Azoth, and they also talk about three things, namely Salt, Sulphur and Mercury. But mostly they refer to body, soul and spirit, and you have not mentioned these at all.”

Our author then questions the old man as to why he only mentions these twofold flowers, when some other alchemical philosophers speak of a single substance, such as Mercury or Azoth, and yet others tell of the three principles, salt, sulphur and mercury associating them with body, soul and spirit, which the old peasant has not mentioned.

“It amuses me,” he said, “that you do not yet understand the terminos philosophicos, or perhaps you wish to tempt me; but nevertheless, I will enlighten you concerning this. When they speak of one thing, then it is the Sal Metallorum, the lapis philosophorum. I have spoken here of two things, that is, corpus and anima. The third is the copula amborum, that is the spiritus, which you cannot see, but which is nonetheless concealed in both of them, and therefore also hovers above the waters, as you may read in Genesis 1. Content yourself with this; however, I will continue to speak of the two.

The old peasant is amused that our author does not seem to understand the philosophical terms. When the alchemical philosophers speak of one thing it is the salt of the metals, the philosophers’ stone that they intend. The peasant teacher says that he has spoken of two things, the body and the soul, but the third emerges from the joining of the two, which is the spirit concealed invisibly in each of the two. In a sense, this spirit is like that which hovered over the waters in the Genesis story. He is going to press on, however, with talking about the twofold aspect.

Now, when these two lilies are polished very purely, enclose them in a crystal very securely, without fire, set them in a gentle sweatbath, and soon the white lily will open wide and the red will contract and close. But because the red is of a fiery nature, and finds help from the external warmth, this warmth releases a hot balsam scent from it into the coldness of the white, so that they become disunited. For neither will accede or give way to the other because of their contrary qualities. As you know well, both grow as high as the heavens, but are again driven downward by the winds, and this repeats itself several times, until they must rest on the earth, faint, tired and sluggish from the labour of their rising and falling. This know that if the bath is not regulated sufficiently, so that their two natures do not rise simultaneously, but rather only one at a time, then you will never enjoy or share in their scent. For this reason, pay full attention to this first operation. For when these two enemies sense and perceive that neither can have an advantage over the other, then they become united, and with such love and friendship that from then on they desire to remain with each other eternally.

Our countryman alchemist is determined to tell more about how to work with the two flowers. These must be highly purified and put into a crystal vessel, a glass flask, and then set to sweat in a warm water bath and not on a naked fire. Then the white flower will open and the red close. This is because they each have contrary qualities, the red seeking the heat of the fire which releases its scent while the white seeks the coldness. Thus these two flowers become more separated. Neither gains the upper hand in this encounter. They grow up high in the flask, then are pushed down again by the winds, the vapours, in the flask. This is repeated a number of cycles, as an alchemical circulation., but eventually they tire of rising and falling in the flask through these sublimations and condensations, and finally fall down to the earthly matter at the bottom of the vessel. This is probably what was being referred to in the quotation from Bernard Trivisanus a few paragraphs earlier. Once these two different flowers realise they cannot triumph over the other then they unite together in a close bond of love, and desire to remain together for all time.

“In this union the entire firmament comes into motion, as well as the Sun and the Moon, to the extent that they both become darkened, as long as this pleases the Most High. In accord with this God in His love created his bow of many colours in the air, as a sign that you should not doubt. For God will be merciful and will not permit the drowning or flooding of these two. You may properly take joy in this, for in a short time you will see that the Moon gradually breaks forth again, and is not as dark as before. Finally it will shine again, with a pure white radiance, and will be beautifully clear. However, the Sun will still be hidden behind the Moon, and you will not be able to see it because of the earth. But if you have clear eyes of understanding, then you will perceive four planets in the Moon, which you can transform and transmute into their enduring nature through the Moon’s radiance. But when Sirius, the Dog Star, approaches near the Sun, and the heat grows ever greater and more intense, then the Moon will be darkened by the radiance of the Sun, until it is finally concealed behind that radiance.”

This is a matter of great cosmic import, and can be seen almost as if the Sun and Moon had become darkened in the heavens. Here God shows forth the rainbow of many colours. Perhaps here we are being asked to see a parallel to the rainbow in the heavens, within the flask. Though the alchemical term ‘peacock’s tail’ it is not mentioned here, perhaps cycle of colour changes in the alchemical is being referred to through the metaphor rather of the rainbow. After this the Moon shines forth again,

gradually increasing to a beautiful clear radiant white light. At this time the Sun is still hidden, eclipsed, behind the Moon and cannot be seen because of the earthly material. Our peasant then says that if your author can see with understanding, then he will recognise four planets in the Moon, which he can transmute into an enduring form through the radiant power of the Moon. Then he refers to Sirius, the dog star, approaching the Sun. By this is meant the movement of the Sun through the yearly cycle. Sirius is in the constellation Canis Major and the sun enters that sector of the heavens in the Summer months. This is a metaphor for the increasing power of the Sun, paralleled with the growth of the solar substance in the flask. This will increase so much that the former splendid light of the Moon will be hidden and masked by the sheer power of the Sun's radiance.

The Sun will grow intensely angry, due to the impurity of the other planets, and through its wrath will turn first yellowish and finally blood-red. But because they humble themselves before him as their lord (since God has so ordained it) he will again favour them with his pardon, and make them all similar to him, so that they may always remain with him in his kingdom and reign forever. For this they may properly have great joy, thanking and praising him, and also the Most High, through whose permission they have been so gloriously adorned, and hoping daily to use such adornment in the praise of His great name. See, now I have freed you from your doubt, and hope that you will now understand this matter perfectly, and thank God, the Creator of you and me, for it, and well know how to set forth and advance this exalted Work at home. But pray diligently, and use it correctly, or you shall never see me or find me again."

The Sun, angered by the impure nature of the other planets, will turn yellow and then blood-red. The planets will humble and bow to him, and he will make them all like to himself, transmute them all to a solar nature. At this, our peasant feels he has told the whole story of alchemy, and hopes our author will have understood everything, so that he can reproduce the process himself in his own home. This literary device of the dialogue with the peasant, enables our writer to present a rather vague and general account as if it were a detailed one given direct to the author.

In my joy I truly didn't know what I should reply to the peasant, but was nonetheless sincerely grateful, and asked him further in a friendly manner whether there was anything more than this to be done, and whether the Art could thus be completed. He answered me very gently: "You should know that the virtue of these two lilies can be renewed and propagated every three days, that they may increase in their power and seed themselves one thousand times, and that this occurs when the seed is planted and sown in the prepared earth. Thus, on the first day the darkness shall occur, on the second day the bright moonlight shall come, and on the third day the red setting sun shall break forth again. This Work may proceed as long as it pleases the Most High. The jewels and pearls of these flowers also grow forth out of Nature, but the highest thing is that which pertains to you men in regard to a further knowledge of God and a long life. For if someone should partake of only a petal of this, he shall soon recover from all sickness and disease. And although I cannot tell you now of its magic power and other exalted secrets, when I come to you again after the completion of your work, then I shall relate to you and give you to receive many of its higher virtues, qualities and circumstances. But for now you should content yourself with this and contemplate my words well. With God's permission all your desires shall be granted you, and since I have now beneficially fulfilled my duty, I must now again depart from you. Yet you shall remember me and await my arrival after the passing of several moons."

Our author then asks gently for a little bit more information. The peasant tells him that the power of the two lilies can be renewed and grown every three days. This is a variation on the conventional idea of alchemical multiplication, found in many alchemical text, in which the power of the tincture is increased a thousandfold. The seed of the lilies is planted in the prepared earth, the substance in the flask. On the first day it turns black, on the second white, and on the third it is red. Again the conventional sequence of colours in alchemy. Ingesting merely a small petal of this tincture will cure one of any illness. Again, the peasant resorts to obscurity when he says that he cannot at this time give any more details of the wonderful properties of this alchemical preparation. He hopes that our author will achieve his desire through the grace of God. As he feels he has fulfilled his duty to enlighten our author, he says he must now depart.

“Oh my dear brother and best friend,” I said, “you speak so excellently and sensibly about these exalted matters that it truthfully seems to me that you cannot really be a simple peasant, although you appear to be this externally. Furthermore, you also speak Latin wonderfully, and this I am not accustomed to find among peasants. So tell me, please, in which university you have learned all this; for you are clearly of a very high rank, such that I have never encountered your equal.” At this the peasant began to chuckle, and asked me what moved me to such a question.

I replied, “I wish very greatly to know whether you have learned this in the universities, for there men think that they possess the true philosophy.

“I am amazed,” he said, “at what you allow yourself to dream. If you intend to seek or find philosophy or truth among those who themselves despise it, verily you cannot. But in regard to my wisdom, this I have received solely from Him through Whose word and command the heaven, firmament and earth must tremble and shake. Accordingly, I have already told you that inwardly I am adorned with gold, diamonds, emeralds and rubies, and have only wrapped this grey smock about me in order to hide and conceal myself from the powerful, for they hope to catch me and gain power over me.””

At this point our author says that surely he cannot be a simple countryman, but must surely be learned at some University, as our author has never met his equal. This device happily sets up the peasant to denigrate university educated people. He is surprised that our author thinks that University learned people could possess the true alchemical philosophy. Our peasant has his knowledge direct from God and not from some University. He repeats that though he wears the outer garment, the grey cloak, of a peasant, inwardly he is clothed with precious gems. He has to hide his fine clothes from the powerful lest they hold him captive and try and gain power over him.

I asked further, “Why do the great lords and potentates not seek this philosophy from their philosophers, whom they must retain in universities each year with ever-increasing wages?”

*He answered, “They are not worth wasting many words on, because they do not allow themselves to be instructed and taught, and for this reason, will not be able to endure for very long with their useless and futile arguments and invalid reasons, God is very angry with them, because they mislead the youths with their sophisticated matters. They teach and dispute always *De lana caprina* and when the disputation comes to an end, one is always as clever as the next, and all have attained the same thing, namely a great fog. Therefore guard yourself against their vain poison-loving phantasies and allegations. They chatter a great deal concerning the nut and do not realize that the kernel within it is what is best. They teach the youths the *artes dicendi* and drill them also in the *pitius grammaticum*, but all the rest is only bellow-mongering. If they were not doctors or masters they*

would probably still practice the true philosophy. But now they are ashamed that as graduated persons they should still have to learn.

This gives the author a further opportunity to attack the University educated. God is angry with them for their futile and misleading arguments. They teach and dispute about trivial things, almost like about the wool of goats, and merely create a great fog rather than enlightenment. They teach their students the art of speaking, rhetoric rather than truth. They teach the structure of grammar, but for the rest only empty bellowing. If they were not doctors and masters of University learning, then they might be able to practice the true alchemy. Our author, seems to be using the peasant to mouth his opinions about educated people, which he clearly seems to somewhat despise.

Therefore the true philosophy must be innocently cursed with the appearance of falsity, and be persecuted and slandered to the utmost, but this must occur so that the wisdom of God is called foolishness by the world, and vice versa. “Nam devs non sine gravi iudicio sapientum sub nomine stultitiae voluit esse revelatari ut nimirum mysterium virtutis suae effet arcanum: sed tandem bona causa nostra triumphabit.’ And we esteem them far less than they think, and can do without them or advise them far more easily than they can do without or counsel us.”

The true alchemical philosophy is despised and slandered by the foolishness of the learned, but God is willing to have this secret knowledge revealed under the name of foolishness, and eventually our good cause will triumph.

I said “My dear peasant, I must also confess to you that I am of the same opinion, for, in regard to the precious truth, I must say that I have learned much more outside the university than through the pseudo-philosophers, who have also been repugnant to me, because their doctrines are too trivial.”

“For me, “said the peasant, “that is enough of that, and besides, it is soon time for me to go to my previous place.”

“Please do not leave me now my dear brother,” I said, “but rather grant my friendly request for one more question, so that I may master this doctrine. Then I will gladly be content, although I am already so sincerely thankful for everything, for then it can be mine.”

“I don’t know,” he said, “it may be the sort of question that I can allow you, but it might also be something that I am forbidden to reveal to you now; but speak on.”

Our author agrees that he also despises the pseudo-philosophers that are found in the Universities, whose doctrines are far too trivial. Our peasant is clearly keen to be on his way, but our author holds him back for a final question.

“The wise philosophers,” I said, “all write that the greatest Art resides in the mastery of the Fire, especially since this should be kept uneven. And then I would also like to know, what should be the propinquior or first material of the Stone, from which I should or could extract the formam specificam or the two flowers. For, although I know a materiam generalem I am nonetheless uncertain about the former. For Clangor writes that barely a quarter ounce of what is suitable for the Work can be extracted from an entire pound, which would be very little; however, I consider it possible that several ounces should be preparable from one pound: both of the white and the red.”

For this final question our author returns to the beginning. He is still unsure of what the prime matter

is that he must start with, in order to extract the two flowers. Although he knows a general material, he is unsure about the first matter of the Stone. He has read in the *Clangor Buccinae* (a much quoted early alchemical work), that only a small amount (one quarter of an ounce) of this can be extracted from an entire pound, whereas he believes as much as several ounces can be extracted. He is confused on this point.

“I see well how the matter lies,” he replied, “you want to know too much, and not to seek and work yourself. No, my brother, nothing will come of that. It is called the Liliun inter spinas (Lily among thorns), and if someone tries to pluck it so easily, he will only cut his hands. For this reason one must first gradually remove the thorns with industry and labour, and then proceed delicately and cleanly to the glorious lilies, in order that one may finally enjoy them. Besides, you have mixed two questions together, but you have only asked for one answer. Nevertheless, I may indeed tell you that you should consider well the four parts of the year and should distribute the parts of the Work accordingly. The books of the wise discuss this sufficiently. Thus, you perceive well that it is hotter in the dog days than in the spring, and colder in Winter than in Summer. At this point many might be clever and say that even children know this. But, my companion, you do not yet know what Winter and Summer are (for the Philosophers). So don’t proceed too quickly toward it; you have sufficient time to attain it. I can tell you no more about it, but since you must fail in it at first (which will nevertheless be a great blow for you), I will now teach you a method by which you can abundantly restore your losses, and be able in a little while to have and achieve your nourishment. See, under my grey cloak I have a green lining. If you polish it with flint and iron rust and the fixed Red Eagle, then my green lining will become much more glorious. This you should immerse in the pure Moonlight, and the Moon will borrow and receive three ounces from the Sun, and give and impart these to you for your nourishment. This you may enjoy almost every eighth day, which you should calculate. Even a large man, who needs a lot of nourishment, can nurture and preserve himself abundantly with it, and the cost is not great. This you should keep secret and thank God for it. And now, farewell.”

Our knowledgeable peasant chides our author a bit, saying that he wants to know too much, whereas one finds out these things by working oneself. Then we have a reference to the title of this book. This lily of alchemical knowledge is found among the rough spines. One must work carefully to gradually remove the impeding thorns then delicately proceed to obtain the glorious lilies. He further scolds the author for asking two questions in one. He then says that one must consider carefully the four seasons of the year. This might seem simplistic and that even children know this. Here we may have a reference to the famous alchemical saying that alchemy is “woman’s work and child’s play”. To the alchemical philosophers summer and winter have specific meanings, but our peasant decides no to tell him any more, instead saying that he must fail in this work at first in order to succeed. Instead he will tell about a method for restoring ones loses. He says that under his grey cloak there is a green lining. If you polish this green material with flint and iron rust (iron oxide is an abrasive often used to polish gems and semi-precious stones), and the fixed red eagle, then this green lining will become more glorious. If you put this into the pure moonlight, and the Moon will borrow three ounces of substance from the Sun, and give these to you as a nourishment, which you should take every eighth day. Even a large man can be nourished on this, and the cost is low. This mysterious and entirely confusing recipe, seems to be added as a kind of parting shot to the previous discussion. It is entirely disconnected from the earlier ideas presented, even invoking an entirely new matter, the green lining of his grey cloak.

And when he had said this to me, the peasant leapt hurriedly and quickly disappeared into the mountain, but the two flowers remained, and stood on the place where the peasant had vanished, I hastened toward them in order to pluck them, but they swayed to and fro, eluding my hand. And when I snatched at them quickly to catch them, behold, there lay a piece of the proper, crude and true materia lapidis, weighing several pounds, before me in their place. Then a voice came forth from the mountain, saying: "Deus sua bona vendit laboribus." After this I heard and saw nothing more.

With that, the old peasant vanished into the mountain, leaving behind the two flowers. Our author rushed to grasp them but they swayed and avoided his hand. Then when he finally seized them, he found instead of the flowers, he held in his hand a piece of the true matter of the stone weighing about two pounds. Then a voice sounded from the mountains, echoing the sentiments expressed often by the old peasant, that God provides his good gifts to those who work for it.

I then fell down upon my knees, thanking and praising Him Who lives from Eternity to Eternity, Who is Himself Wisdom, praying that He might fill and enlighten my heart, mind and soul with the Spirit of Wisdom, that I might gain and receive such a precious, exalted and worthy treasure, promising and swearing further that I would use and employ this in honour of His holy name, for the benefit of the Christian Church and especially for the highest good of my neighbour and of the blessed poor. And thus now you as well, my dear ones, have received in abundance the true foundation of the highest, most precious and worthy treasure, with all of its details. Do with it as I have, be of good enterprise; avoid the sophists and hold God before your eyes, and you shall not labour so often in vain, but rather see and sense perceptibly the miracle of God, whose name be praised and blessed from Eternity to Eternity, Amen.

Our author then falls on his knees and thanks God for what he has received.

*Petite et dabitur vobis
Feliciter absolutum in arce
Anno aere salutis 1598. Julii 9. stylo veteri.*

Seek and it will be given to you.
Unconditional joy at the summit.
Greetings from the heights, July 9th 1598 (old style).

* * *

This work began as if it were an autobiographical account of the author's difficult life, but quickly switches into a didactic instructional dialogue, through the author's supposed meeting with the peasant adept (the lesser countryman 'kleine Bauer' of the title). Through the middle section of the text, this peasant gives instruction to our author through the dialogue, a common literary device of the time for explaining something at length to the readers, but at the end it moves closer to an allegory, with the strange events when our author sees under his teacher's outer grey cloak and then

attempts to seize the flowers which immediately change into the true matter of the Philosophers' stone. This exciting climax, now returns us to the biographical mode of the opening section, and seems intended to leave us with the impression that the author of this piece has been able to obtain a substantial quantity, two pounds in all, of the key substance from which Philosophers' stone can be made. This work neatly shifts between seemingly real biography, the literary device of an instructional dialogue, and allegory. Often in alchemical writings we will find ourselves, as readers, being shifted and smoothly segued between such different literary formats, each with a different reality. Here biography, fiction and allegory are stirred together in the crucible of the text.