

# Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts

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## Lesson 16 : Flamel's Philosophical Summary

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It appears that the 'Summarium Philosophicum' was first published in a collection of French alchemical material *De la Transformation métallique*, issued in 1561, and in Latin translation in a compilation of alchemical treatises made by Gerhard Dorn in 1583. It was then included in the first volume of the important Latin compendium the *Theatrum Chemicum* of 1602, and was also published in another major alchemical compendium the *Musaeum Hermeticum* of 1625. There do not appear to be any earlier manuscripts of this work. The Nicolas Flamel who lived in Paris in the 14th century is now not considered to have been involved in alchemy and the famous works which went under his name are now thought to have been written in the closing decade of the 16th or the early decades of the 17th century. This does not denigrate the 'Flamel' works themselves, but it is important to see them in their proper context. The 'Philosophical Summary' as we will now see bears almost no relationship in content to the 'Book of the Hieroglyphic Figures'.

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*If you would know how metals are transmuted, you must understand from what matter they are generated, and how they are formed in the mines; and that you may not err, you must see and observe, how those transmutations are performed in the bowels or veins of the earth.*

*Minerals taken out of the earth, may be changed, if beforehand they be spiritualized, and reduced into their sulphurous and argent vive nature, which are the two sperms, composed of the elements, the one masculine, the other feminine. The male sulphur, is nothing but fire and air; and the true sulphur is as a fire, but not the vulgar, which contains no metallic substance. The feminine sperm is argent vive, which is nothing but earth and water.*

In order for us to understand how transmutation works with metals, we have to consider how metals are formed in the mines under the earth, because metals are formed there by transmutations in the underground mineral veins. Minerals taken from the earth may be transformed if we are able to spiritualise them and turn them back into their original sulphuric and mercuric nature. Our author is obviously a firm advocate of the Sulphur-Mercury theory. For him the Sulphur principle is male and has only the elements of fire and air in it. This true Sulphur is like a fire itself, but ordinary sulphur, of course, is not like this and does not contain any metallic substance. Mercury, the counterpart to the Sulphur, is the feminine seed of the metals and contains only the elements of earth and water.

*These two sperms the ancient sages called two dragons or serpents, of which, the one is winged, the other not. Sulphur not flying the fire, is without wings; the winged serpent is argent vive, borne up*

*by the wind, therefore in her certain hour she flies from the fire, not having fixity enough to endure it.*

The old alchemical philosophers named these two seeds of the metals as two dragons or serpents. The dragon serpent associated with Sulphur, does not fly from the fire, because it has no wings. The dragon of Mercury on the other hand does have wings and can fly in a volatile form from the fire, as Mercury does not have sufficient fixity in itself to endure being heated.

*Now if these two sperms, separated from themselves, be united again, by powerful Nature, in the potentiality of mercury, which is the metallic fire: being thus united, it is called by the philosophers the flying dragon; because the dragon kindled by its fire, while he flies by little and little, fills the air with his fire, and poisonous vapours. The same thing does mercury; for being placed upon an exterior fire, and in its place in a vessel; it sets on fire its inside, which is hidden in its profundity; by which may be seen, how the external fire does burn and inflame the natural mercury. And then you may see how the poisonous vapour breaks out into the air, with a most stinking and pernicious poison; which is nothing else but the head of the dragon, which hastily goes out of Babylon.*

If these two seeds of metals, having become separated from each other, are brought together by the activity of Nature in the power of Mercury, the metallic fire, then these united together are called the flying dragon by the philosophers, because the dragon is enlivened by its own fire, and as it flies around it fills the air with its fire and poisonous vapours. This is the same with common mercury if you place it in a vessel on a fire. It then becomes enflamed within its own heaviness, and we will then see the external fire burning the mercury so that it goes into the air as a stinking, poisonous vapour. This is called the head of the dragon which comes out of Babylon, perhaps a reference to the image described in the Book of Revelation (chapters 17 and 18).

*But other philosophers have compared this mercury to a flying lion, because a lion is a devourer of other creatures, and delights himself in his voracity of every thing, except that which is able to resist his violence and fury. So also does mercury, which has in itself such a power, force, and operation, to spoil and devastate a metal of its form, and to devour it. Mercury being too much influenced, devours and hides metals in its belly; but which of them so ever it be, it is certain, that, it consumes it not, for in their nature they are perfect, and much more indurate. But mercury has in itself a substance of perfecting sol and luna; and all the imperfect bodies or metals, proceed from argent vive; therefore the ancients called it the mother of metals; whence it follows, that in its own principle and centre, being formed, it has a double metallic substance.*

Other philosophers have called this Mercury a flying lion, because of the way it devours the other beings and delights in its own strength. It is similar with common mercury which has the power to dissolve and amalgamate with various metals. It is thus able to hide these metals in its own belly, but is not able to consume, destroy or change these metals, for they, having their own perfection, remain unchanged, and are in fact harder than is mercury. Mercury has within itself a substance that leads towards perfecting gold and silver. All the imperfect metals and minerals are born and come out of argent vive, mercury. Thus mercury itself, has a double metallic aspect in its own being.

*And first, the substance of the interior; then the substance of sol, which is not like the other metals; of these two substances, argent vive is formed, which in its body is spiritually nourished. As soon*

*then as Nature has formed argent vive, of the two fore-named spirits, then it endeavours to make them perfect and corporeal; but when the spirits are of strength, and the two sperms awakened out of their central principle, then they desire to assume their own bodies. Which being done, argent vive the mother must die, and being thus naturally mortified, cannot (as dead things cannot) quicken itself as before.*

Argent vive, that is, Mercury, is formed out of two spiritual substances – an interior substance and a substance of sol unlike other metals – both of which nourish the body or material of mercury. Nature creates Mercury from these two spirits, and tries to make both of them perfect and yet material in form. But when these spirits are strong, then the individual seeds of these two spiritual substances, being awakened to their essence, desire to grow their own way and form their own material bodies. If this happens then Mercury, the mother of these two, will die and be unable to come to life again.

*But there are some proud philosophers, who in obscure words affirm, that we ought to transmute both perfect and imperfect bodies into running argent vive; this is the serpent's subtlety, and you may be in danger of being bit by it. It is true, that argent vive may transmute an imperfect body, as lead or tin; and may without much labour, multiply in a quantity; but thereby it diminishes or loses its own perfection, and may no more for this reason be called argent vive. But if by art it may be mortified, that it can no more vivify itself, then it will be changed into another thing, as in cinnabar, or sublimate is done. For when it is by the art coagulated, whether sooner or later, yet then its two bodies assume not a fixed body, nor can they conserve it, as we may see in the bowels of the earth.*

There, are however, some arrogant alchemists, who say in a mysterious way, that we should be able to transmute imperfect as well as perfect bodies into liquid mercury. This is untrue, being like the deceit of the serpent in the garden of Paradise, so one should avoid this lie. It is true that mercury can transmute an imperfect substance such as tin or lead and even multiply it, but then the mercury loses its own perfection and is no longer mercury. If, by using the alchemical art, mercury is killed so that it is no longer living, then it will be changed into another substance, such as cinnabar (mercuric sulphide) or mercury sublimate (mercuric chloride). When mercury is hardened by using an alchemical process, then the two spiritual bodies within the body of mercury, cannot any longer remain in a fixed solid metallic form, and thus cannot sustain the form of mercury, which can be observed in the mines in the earth.

*Lest anyone should therefore err, there are in the veins of lead some fixed grains or particles of fine sol and luna mixed in its substance of nourishment.*

The author tells us that we should realise that in the veins of lead there are actually a small amount of gold and silver bound up within the material. The implication here is that the making of small quantities of gold or silver from lead is not true transmutation but rather the extraction of gold that was already mixed in the metal ore.

*The first coagulation of argent vive is in the mine of saturn; and most fit and proper it is to bring him unto perfection and fixation; for the mine of saturn is not without fixed particles of gold, which particles were imparted to it by Nature. So in itself it may be multiplied and brought to perfection, and a vast power or strength, as I have tried, and therefore affirm it. So long as it is not separated from its mine, viz. its argent vive, but well kept, (for every metal which is in its mine, the same is an*

*argent vive) then may it multiply itself, for that it has substance from its mercury, or argent vive, but it will be like some green immature fruit on a tree, which the blossom being past, becomes an unripe fruit, and then a larger apple. Now if any one plucks this unripe fruit from the tree, then its first forming would be frustrate, nor would it grow larger nor ripe; for man knows not how to give substance, nourishment, or maturity, so well as internal nature, while the fruit yet hangs on the tree, which feeds it with substance and nourishment, till the determined maturity is accomplished.*

The first hardening of argent vive is seen in the mine (ore) of lead (the Saturn metal). This is most proper for lead ore contains particles of gold. These can be multiplied and perfected by alchemy using a powerful force, as the author can testify as he has himself tried this. As long as it is not separated from its ore, which contains its mercury, then it may be multiplied. For it takes and grows its substance from the mercury in the ore. This is like some fruit growing on a tree – first it is a flower, then an unripe fruit then finally a mature apple. If one interrupts this by plucking the unripe fruit then its full growth is interrupted and frustrated and it will never ripen. For we do not know how to grow and unripe fruit to maturity, that remains the task of Nature working within the tree feeding the growing fruit and bringing it to fruition.

*And so long also does the fruit draw sap or moisture for its augmentation and nourishment, till it comes to its perfect maturity. So is it with sol; for if by Nature, a grain, or grains are made, and it is reduced to its argent vive, then also by the same it is daily, without ceasing, sustained and supplied, and reduced into its place, viz. argent vive, as he is in himself; and then must you wait till he shall obtain some substance from his mercury as it happens in the fruit of trees. For as the argent vive, both of perfect and imperfect bodies is a tree, so they can have no more nourishment, otherwise than from their own mercury.*

Just as the fruit draws its substance from the sap of the tree in order to grow and develop to maturity, so it is the same with metals growing into gold. For if by Nature some small grains of gold are made (as we noticed in the ores of lead), and these are reduced into the mercury of the ore, then if this mercury continues to be supplied, day be day, in the mine, then these grains of gold might grow more of their substance from this mercury, just as happened with fruit trees. Our author here parallels the ‘Mercury’ in the veins of ore in a mine with the sap in the tree branches.

*If therefore you would gather fruits from argent vive, viz. pure sol and luna, if they be disjoined from their mercury; think not that you, like as Nature did in the beginning, may again conjoin and multiply, and without change, augment them. For if metals be separated from their mine, then they, like the fruit of trees too soon gathered, never come to their perfection, as Nature and experience makes it appear. For if an apple or pear be once plucked off from the tree, it would then be a great vanity to attempt to fasten it to the tree again, expecting it to increase and grow ripe; and experience testifies, that the more it is handled, the more it withers. And so it is also with metals: for if you should take the vulgar sol and luna, endeavouring to reduce them into argent vive, you would wholly play the fool, for there is no artifice yet found, whereby it can be performed. Though you should use many waters, and cements, or other things infinitely of that kind, yet would you continually err, and that would befall you, which would him that should tie unripe fruit to their trees.*

The author now warns us that if we think we can gather gold and silver separated them from their mercury, and like Nature join them together and let them grow, then we are wrong. If metals become

separated from their ore, then, like the fruit of the tree picked too soon, they will not develop further. It would be very stupid for a farmer to try and attach a fruit back onto the tree it had been plucked from and expect it to grow again. Indeed the more the fruit is handled the more it is withered. It is the same with metals. If you take common gold or silver and think you can reduce them into their argent vive or mercury, you are totally mistaken as no art can achieve this. Whatever waters or compounds you use to try and make this happen you will fail, like the farmer who attempted to tie an unripe fruit back onto the tree it had fallen from.

*Yet some philosophers have said truly, that if sol and luna, by a right mercury or argent vive, be rightly conjoined, they will make all imperfect metals perfect; but in this thing most men have erred, who having these three, vegetables, animals, and minerals, which in one thing are conjoined; for that they considered not, that the philosophers speak not of vulgar sol, luna, and mercury, which are all dead, and receive no more substance or increase from Nature, but remain the same in their own essence, without the possibility of bringing others to perfection.*

Some alchemists have truly said that if gold and silver be joined by the correct mercury, they will be able to change imperfect metals into perfect ones, however, most men trying to do this have failed. They have tried to unite together the vegetable, animal and mineral species into one thing, but have not realised that the alchemists who wrote about this were not referring to ordinary common, gold, silver or mercury, which are all dead substances that cannot receive any further nourishment from Nature, and will remain in the same state without developing the property of transmuting other metals.

*They are fruits plucked off from their trees before their time, and are therefore of no value or estimation. Therefore see the fruit in the tree, that leads them straight to it, whose fruit is daily made greater with increase, so long as the tree bears it. This work is seen with joy and satisfaction; and by this means one may transplant the tree without gathering the fruit, fixing it into a moister, better, and more fruitful place, which in one day will give more nourishment to the fruit, than it received otherwise in an hundred years.*

Our author continues his horticultural analogy, making the point that these ordinary metals are like fruits plucked too soon from their tree. We must instead take our lead in the alchemical work by observing the lesson of the fruit daily growing on the tree. Indeed, it is possible even to transplant the tree into a richer, moister soil without gathering the fruit, so that it may be nourished even better by the tree. Our author seems to be implying that this is a parallel to the true work of alchemy.

*In this therefore, it is understood, that mercury, the much commended tree must be taken, which has in its power indissolubly sol and luna; and then transplanted into another soil nearer the sun, that thence it may gain its profitable increase, for which thing, dew does abundantly suffice; for where it was placed before, it was so weakened by cold and wind, that little fruit could be expected from it, and where it long stood and brought forth no fruit at all.*

Our author expands a little on this analogy, saying that if Mercury, like the tree, which has gold and silver in its power, growing within it, can be taken and transplanted closer to gold, then it may increase the growth of the silver and gold within it. He says that if the tree (or Mercury in the ore) was badly situated it would be weakened by cold and wind and might not bring forth any fruit at all

He says that for the purpose of growing the metals, dew is very useful. This is an analogy that was taken literally by some later alchemists who saw dew almost as the prime matter. Here 'dew' is obviously used metaphorically.

*And indeed the philosophers have a garden, where the sun as well morning as evening remains with a moist sweet dew, without ceasing, with which it is sprinkled and moistened; whose earth brings forth trees and fruits, which are transplanted thither, which also receive descent and nourishment from the pleasant meadows. And this is done daily, and there they are both corroborated and quickened, without ever fading; and this more in one year, than in a thousand, where the cold affects them. Take them therefore, and night and day cherish them in a distillatory fire; but not with a fire of wood or coals, but in a clear transparent fire, not unlike the sun, which is never hotter than is requisite, but is always alike; for a vapour is the dew, and seed of metals, which ought not to be altered.*

The analogy with horticulture continues with our author saying that the alchemists have a garden where they like farmers nourish their growing gold fruit with sweet dew, and transplant their trees into pleasant meadows. The alchemist can then increase the development of the work of growing gold. Where it might take a thousand years in the cold, the alchemist can achieve the same in one year. We are thus to take the gold and silver and foster them in a fire of distillation. This fire is however not made with wood or coal, but is a clear transparent fire somewhat similar to the fire of the sun. This fire is never hotter than is needed and is always constant, for the dew and the seed of metals is a vapour which ought not to be changed.

*Fruits, if they be too hot, and without dew or moisture, they abide on the boughs, but without coming to perfection, only withering or dwindling away. But if they be fed with heat and due moisture on their trees, then they prove elegant and fruitful; for heat and moisture are the elements of all earthly things, animal, vegetable, and mineral. Therefore fires of wood and coal produce or help not metals; those are violent fires, which nourish not as the heat of the sun does, that conserves all corporeal things; for that it is natural which they follow.*

If fruits are left on the tree but have insufficient moisture then they will wither, but with the correct heat and necessary moisture they will form perfect fruit. Heat and moisture are thus the key necessities for all earthly things, whether animal, vegetable or minerals. The fires made of wood and coal do not aid the growth of metals as they are too violent. They do not nourish as does the heat of the sun that enables the growth of all bodily things.

*But a philosopher acts not what Nature does; for Nature where she rules, forms all vegetables, animals, and minerals, in their own degrees. Men, do not after the same sort, by their arts make natural things. When Nature has finished her work about them; then by our art they are made more perfect. In this manner the ancient sages and philosophers, for our information, wrought on luna and mercury her true mother, of which they made the mercury of the philosophers, which in its operation is much stronger than the natural mercury. For this is serviceable only to the simple, perfect, imperfect, hot and cold metals; but our mercury, the philosophers' stone, is useful to the more than perfect, imperfect bodies, or metals. Also that the sun may perfect and nourish them without diminution, addition, or immutation, as they were created or formed by Nature, and so leave them, not neglecting any thing.*

An alchemist does not work the same things as does Nature. She forms all animals, vegetable and minerals in their own form, while men do not make natural things but rather by their art make them more perfect. In this way the old alchemists worked on luna (silver) and mercury (the mother of luna) and they made the Mercury of the Philosophers which is much more powerful than our common mercury. The common mercury is useful only for the simple, perfect, imperfect, hot and cold metals, but the Mercury of the Philosophers, the Philosophers Stone is used for the highly perfected metals, and imperfect bodies. It is also true that the sun may perfect and nourish the growth of the metals, without adding, taking away, or altering them, but leaving them as they were created by Nature.

*I will not now say, that the philosophers conjoin the tree, for the better perfecting their mercury, as some unskilful in the nature of things, and unlearned chemists affirm, who take common sol, luna, and mercury, and so unnaturally handle them, till they vanish in smoke. These men endeavour to make the Philosophers' Mercury, but they never attain it, which is the first matter of the stone, and the first minera thereof. If you would come hither and find good, and to the mountain of the seven, where there is no plain, you would betake yourself; from the highest, you must look downward to the sixth, which you will see afar off. In the height of this mountain, you will find a royal herb triumphing, which some have called mineral, some vegetable, some saturnine. But let its bones or ribs be left, and let a pure clean broth be taken from it, so will the better part of your work be done.*

It is not that the alchemists use an actual tree to perfect their mercury, as some ignorant alchemists believe, who work in such an unnatural way with common gold, silver and mercury that they vanish away from them in smoke. Such men are never able to make the Philosophers' Mercury. If you want to do this you must go the mountains of the seven planetary metals, and from the highest of these look down to the sixth which will be far off. On the heights of this mountain you will find a royal herb, which some have called a mineral, some a vegetable and others a saturnine material. Take this plant having removed the bones (the hard earthly part) prepare a clear broth or extract from it, and you will have achieved much of the alchemical work.

*This is the right and subtle Mercury of the philosophers, which you are to take, which will make first the white work, and then the red. If you have well understood me, both of them are nothing else, as they term them, but the practice, which is so easy and simple, that a woman sitting by her distaff may perfect it. As if in winter she would put her eggs under a hen, and not wash them, because eggs are put under a hen without washing them, and no more labour is required about them, than that they should be every day turned, that the chickens may be the better and sooner hatched, concerning the which enough is said.*

For this extract is the true, subtle Mercury of the Philosophers, which will allow us to make firstly the white work, then the red. If we have fully understood this, both the white and the red work as easily achieved, being woman's work. (A well known alchemical phrase states that the completion of the alchemical work is "Childs' play and women's work", meaning one supposes that one only needs to follow a simple procedure.) It is like the woman who puts eggs under a hen to hatch. She need not alter them in any way, say by washing them, but merely put them unchanged under the hen and turn them once a day. The idea being that this stage of alchemy is a simple repetitive task which does not need any elaborate manipulation.

*But that I may follow the example, first, wash not the mercury, but take it, and with its like, which is fire, place it in the ashes, which is straw, and in one glass which is the nest, without any other things in a convenient alembic, which is the house, from whence it will come forth a chicken, which with its blood will free thee from all diseases, and with its flesh will nourish thee, and with its feathers will clothe thee, and keep thee warm from the injuries of the cold and ambient air. For this cause I have written this present treatise, that you may search with the greater desire, and walk in the right way. And I have written this small book, this summary, that you might better comprehend the sayings and writings of the philosophers, which I believe you will much better understand for time to come.*

Following this analogy, we need not wash or purify the mercury, but put it (like an egg) in an alembic (like the hen's nest) and place it in a fire of ashes (which is like the straw of the hen's litter) so that the whole apparatus can be seen as being like a hen's house. Out of this will come forth a chicken. Its blood will cure you of diseases, its flesh will feed you, its feathers will clothe you and keep you warm. The reason why our author has written this book, is so that we will be inspired to walk the correct course. This work is a summary that will help us understand the writings of the alchemists.

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Our author here presents us with a simple view of the task of the alchemist. For him, metals grow, in their ores in veins underground, through the activity of Nature, and by means of Mercury and Sulphur working there. The alchemist has merely to reproduce these conditions and he will be able to achieve the transmutation, which is in reality merely a natural growth of the metallic seed to the perfect form of gold or silver. This Sulphur-Mercury theory lies at the basis of much of 16th and 17th century alchemy and was widely accepted. For example, Michael Maier's masterful treatise on the seven planetary metals, his *Viatorium* of 1618, is an exploration of the growth of metals in the veins of their ores in the earth. The 'Summary of Philosophy' is thus a clear explanation of this philosophical theory of matter, which provided the foundation on which many alchemists based their work.

This 'slow steady growth' idea of alchemical transmutation, struggled in the late 16th and 17th centuries against the more magical idea of a sudden, almost instant, change through the catalytic Philosophers' Stone, when in a few minutes or even seconds, baser metals could be pushed through changes which would, in the presumption of the Sulphur/Mercury growth theory, have taken centuries.

The philosophical theory of the slow growth of metals to perfection had an internal coherence and seemed to make complete sense, but as it could not be observed happening in even a human lifespan, many alchemists sought for the shortcut of a catalytic agent, the Philosophers' Stone. This came to appeal more and more to people, but alchemy retained a solid philosophical foundation in this idea of a slow natural growth of metals to perfection. Alchemy came to be seen as providing methods for accelerating this growth, compressing one thousand years of change into a few instants of time.

This 'Philosophical Summary' is thus a simple, clear, exploration and restatement of the idea of the slow growth of metals in their ores. It uses simple analogies to the growth of plants. Part of the intention of the writer in creating his 'Summary' is to restate the theory, but also to warn that if one removes metals from their natural matrix, their ore, then they will not easily be transmuted. For him the natural matrix of the ore is the rightful place for the alchemical transformation. The work gives

hope that the natural process can be speeded up so that changes can be achieved within the space of a year.