Adam McLean's Study Course
on reading alchemical texts

Lesson 19 : How to read the transmutation stories.

Texts purporting to document alchemical transmutations became especially popular at the end of the 16th century. There had been earlier stories of transmutations, say in Norton's *Ordinale* but they became more accessible in print from about 1580 onwards. As early as 1604 Theobald de Hoghelande collected together some of these stories in his *Historiae aliquot Transmutationis Metallicae* and nearly two centuries later in 1784 Siegmund Heinrich Güldenfalk published accounts of 112 transmutations.

Here is a short piece from the preface to Manget's alchemical compendium *Bibliotheca chemica curiosa*, 1702. It is an account of a transmutation told by M. Gros, a clergyman of Geneva.

About the year 1650 an unknown Italian came to Geneva, and took lodgings at the sign of the Green Cross. After remaining there a day or two, he requested De Luc, the landlord, to procure him a man acquainted with Italian, to accompany him through the town and point out those things which deserved to be examined. De Luc was acquainted with M. Gros, at that time about 20 years of age, and a student in Geneva, and knowing his proficiency in the Italian language, requested him to accompany the stranger. To this proposition he willingly acceded, and attended the Italian everywhere for the space of a fortnight. The stranger now began to complain of want of money, which alarmed M. Gros not a little - for at that time he was very poor - and he became apprehensive, from the tenor of the stranger's conversation, that he intended to ask the loan of money from him. But instead of this, the Italian asked him if he was acquainted with any goldsmith, whose bellows and other utensils they might be permitted to use, and who would not refuse to supply them with the different articles requisite for a particular process which he wanted to perform. M. Gros named a M. Bureau, to whom the Italian immediately repaired. He readily furnished crucibles, pure tin, quicksilver, and the other things required by the Italian. The goldsmith left his workshop, that the Italian might be under the less restraint, leaving M. Gros, with one of his own workmen, as an attendant. The Italian put a quantity of tin into one crucible, and a quantity of quicksilver into another. It was then poured into the melted tin, and at the same time a red powder enclosed in wax was projected into the amalgam. An agitation took place, and a great deal of smoke was exhaled from the crucible; but this speedily subsided, and the whole being poured out, formed six heavy ingots, having the colour of gold. He goldsmith was called by the Italian, and requested to make a rigid examination of the smallest of these ingots. The goldsmith, not content with the touchstone and the application of aqua fortis, exposed the metal on the cupel with lead, and fused it with antimony, but it sustained no loss. He found it possessed of the ductility and specific gravity of gold, and full of

admiration, he exclaimed that he had never worked before upon gold so perfectly pure. The Italian made him a present of a smallest ingot as a recompense, and then, accompanied by M. Gros, he repaired to the Mint, where he received from M. Bacuet, the mint-master, a quantity of Spanish gold coin, equal in weight to the ingots which he had brought. To M. Gros he made a present of twenty pieces, on account of the attention which he had paid to him; and, after paying his bill at the inn, he added fifteen pieces more, to serve to entertain M. Gros and M. Bureau for some days, and in the meantime he ordered a supper, that he might, on his return, have the pleasure of supping with these two gentlemen. He went out, but never returned, leaving behind him the greatest regret and admiration. It is needless to add, that M. Gros and M. Bureau continued to enjoy themselves at the inn till the fifteen pieces, which the stranger had left, were exhausted.

This is a classic alchemical transmutation tale. The alchemist 'projects' his powder enclosed in wax onto some molten metal - here it is molten tin with heated mercury. If one reads a number of these tales one will see they often involve a goldsmith (who provides the laboratory facilities), and an impartial observer (in this case our M. Gros). The goldsmith then tests the material which he declares to be the finest gold he has ever seen.

Here is a similar example, from the famous story of the transmutations of Alexander Seton which were said to have taken place in about 1602.

"In 1602," writes Dr Dienheim, "about the middle of summer, when returning by Rome to Germany, I found myself at the side of a man singularly spiritual, small in size, but sufficiently stout, of a ruddy complexion, of a sanguine temperament, having a brown heard cropped in the style of France. He was dressed in a habit of black satin, and had for his suite a single attendant, who could be distinguished among all by his red hair and beard of the same colour. This man called himself Alexander Seton. At Zurich, where the clergyman Tighlin gave him a letter to Dr Zwinger, we hired a boat and returned by water to Basle. On our arrival in that town, my companion said to me - you will remember that throughout the voyage, and in the boat, you abused alchemy and alchemists. You will also recollect that I promised to answer you, not by verbal demonstrations, but by a philosophical experiment. I expect, besides, another person, whom I wish at the same time to convince with you, so that the adversaries of alchemy may cease to doubt upon the subject of this art. I then went to seek the person in question, whom I only knew by sight, and who did not live far from our hotel. I was afterwards informed that he was Dr Jacob Zwinger, whose family numbered so many eminent naturalists. We now repaired, all three, to the house of a goldsmith with several plates of lead, which Zwinger had fetched from his house, a crucible which we received from a goldsmith, and some ordinary sulphur which we bought on the way. Seton touched nothing. He caused a fire to be made, ordered the lead and sulphur to be placed in the crucible, the lid to be put on, and the mass stirred with rods. After a quarter of an hour had elapsed, he said to us, 'Throw this small paper on the middle of the melted lead, and take care that nothing falls into the fire.' In this paper was a powder, rather heavy, of a colour which appeared to be citron yellow; for the rest it required good eyes to distinguish any other peculiarities. Although as incredulous as St. Thomas himself, we did all we were commanded. After the mass had been again heated for a quarter of an hour, and continually agitated with rods of iron the goldsmith received an order to quench the crucible by pouring water on it, when there was not the least vestige of lead but a quantity of pure gold, which, in the opinion of the goldsmith, surpassed in quality the best gold of Hungary or Arabia. It weighed as much as the lead of which it had taken the place. We were stupefied with

astonishment. It was as if we could hardly dare to believe our eyes. But Seton, mocking us, 'Now,' said he, 'where are you with your pedantries? You see the truth of the fact, and that is more powerful than all your sophisms.' He afterwards cut off a portion of the gold, and gave it as a souvenir to Zwinger. I also preserved a portion, which weighed about four ducats, and which I carefully kept in memory of this journey. As to you incredulous, you will perhaps mock at what I write. But yet I saw it, and I am a witness always ready to testify to what I have seen. But Zwinger also saw it; he will not conceal anything, but render his testimony to what I affirm. Seton and his domestic are still alive, the latter in England, the former in Germany, as is well known. I might also specify the precise place where he dwells, were it not an indiscretion to make researches into the affairs of this great man, this saint, this demigod."

Another classic tale of this type is the 'Story of Wenceslaus Seilerus', from a book by Johann Joachim Becher, *Magnalia Naturae* written about 1680.

Not long after, the old Father sent Friar Wenceslaus into the kitchen of the Monastery, to see if he could find an old pewter dish or plate, which was no longer fit for use, and if he could, to bring it to him; which he accordingly did, who thereupon caused a coal-fire to be made, and put a crucible into Friar Wenceslaus hand, to place therein. This was the first chemical operation that ever Friar Wenceslaus performed in all his life, and for which he was so unfit, that he placed the crucible upside down, so that the old Father himself was forced to set it in its right posture. They put the pewter plate broken and folded together into the crucible, which being presently melted, the Father took out some of the powder (so much as would lay upon the point of a knife) which was in one of the four boxes, and wrapping it in a little wax, he cast it into the crucible upon the pewter, and commanded his assistant Friar Wenceslaus to blow up the fire, adding these words, "Now I shall see whether I have well deciphered the characters, and whether I have found the use of this powder".
As soon as ever the powder was cast in, the pewter stood still, came to a sudden congelation. Then the fire was suffered to go out, and the crucible to wax cold, which being broken, there was found a ponderous mass of metals, very yellow and variegated with red lines. Upon which the Father made Friar Wenceslaus to go out into the town, upon pretence of getting a book to be bound, and wished him to go to some goldsmith, and show him this mass of metal, alleging to him, that he had some ancient Roman coins of gold, which he had melted down, but for want of a sufficient fire and other defects, he had not done it exactly; and therefore he desired the goldsmith to melt it over again, and cast it in an ingot. The goldsmith gratified him therein, and Friar Wenceslaus, at the command of the Father took off a small piece, which he preserved, and then asked the goldsmith, what the rest was worth. Who, after he had weighed and tried on the touchstone, did value it at twenty ducats (which are worth two crowns a piece) at which rate Friar Wenceslaus sold it to him, and receiving the money, returned joyfully home. The old Father did only desire the remaining portion of the gold, which he had reserved, but suffered Friar Wenceslaus to enjoy the ducats, yet with this advice, that he should discover it to none in the monastery.

There are many similar examples of this tale, each subtly varying the details and settings, but with a central coherence of the different stories. Thus we can see this as a species of alchemical literature. If one reads one or two examples of this story, one might be forgiven for taking this at face value, however, once one has read a dozen or more variations, one is impelled to see this as a literary device used by alchemical writers. The structure of the story, with its impartial observer and

attendant goldsmith to test the metal, is intended to give the reader confidence that we are being presented with a factual account of an actual transmutation.

Another species of transmutation story uses the creation of gold as the culmination of the adept's search - the supreme indication that his quest has not been in vain. Often the story begins with a sad tale of disappointments, failures and seeming despair on the part of an alchemical seeker, which resolves at the end with the successful transmutation. A key example of this is the account of Bernard of Treviso's long search for the secret of alchemy. This appears to have been written in the 16th century.

When I first undertook this work the Book of Rases fell into my hands in which indeed I laboured 4 years and expended 800 crowns: also in Geber's books I threw away more than 2000; many imposters soliciting and inducing me thereto that they might exhaust my substance. In this manner I inspected the books of Archelaos for three years in which I operated along with a certain monk and in the books of Rupecissa and Johannes de Sacrobosco by means of Aquae vitae (spirit rectified thirty times with the faeces, so that it went off in such acridity that no glass could contain it), in that labour I lost other three hundred crowns. Twelve or fifteen years having been consumed in this manner and innumerable monies, without benefit, after the experiments of many received ones, it dissolving and congealing common, ammoniacal, pineal, saracen, and metallic salts, then more than a hundred times calcining them in the space of two years; also in alums of all kinds, in marcasites, blood, hair, urine, human dung and semen, animals and vegetables, in copperas, vitriols, soot, eggs, by separation of the elements in an athanor, by the alembic, and the Pelican, by circulation, boiling, reverberation, ascension, descension, fusion, ignition, elementation, rectification, evaporation, conjunction, elevation, subtilation, and commixtion: and other infinite regimens of sophistications to which I stuck for twelve years having attained 38 years of age, still insisting upon extractions of the Mercuries from herbs and animals, thus had I uselessly dilapidated, as well by my own folly as by the seduction of imposters, about 6000 crowns so that I became almost despondent. But nevertheless in my prayers I never forgot to beseech God that he would deign to assist my endeavours…
….At that time I had completed the 46th year of my age when I attempted the Stone along with a learned monk called Gotfried Lepor as had been premeditated by him. We knew that every other work than the Stone was vain and frustraneous: therefore we attempted to fabricate it in the following manner. We bought two thousand hens eggs, which we separated by boiling them hard in water, calcining the shells to the utmost whiteness; but we allowed the yolks and the whites, each by itself, to putrefy in horse dung and afterwards we distilled thirty times into a white water and a red oil separately with many other useless processes, which we shall not now relate. In this vain work two years and a half were also spent without utility and at a very great expense which being finished we would have deserted the pursuit entirely if we had not been supported by new hopes: we began again to investigate the sublimation of spirits, the distillations of strong waters, the separation of the elements, various structures of furnaces and fires, in which we were occupied eight years…
…Wherefore here and there running about, investigating and experimenting, I had already consumed 10,300 golden crowns. I had also sold a certain property which was worth 8 thousand florins of German money, so that I fell into disgrace with all my relations, because I was reduced to poverty and very little money now remained to me, and I was then 62 years old and upwards…
…Before I perfected this work by an experiment, I learned the art for two years from books, nevertheless whom detestable men and damnable thieves of that description came to me, they

asserted with solemn oaths that the most manifest errors were true experiments, however they had long ago made me almost mad on account of the great expense to which I had been put.

The conclusion is almost anticlimactic, being totally understated. After many years of fruitless experiment, much loss of money, finally Bernard flatly states "I perfected this work by an experiment".

A similar account from about the same period is in Denis Zacaire's *Opuscule tres-eccellent de la vraye Philosophie naturelle des metaulx* first published in 1567. Like the Bernard account, this begins with the sorry tale of all the failures on the alchemical path.

I made acquaintance, however, with other students who had numbers of alchemical books, my preceptor himself having meddled in these workings. In fact when I went to Toulouse I carried with me a thick volume of processes, collected from all the texts which I had been able to discover... It seemed to me - being thus fortified - if I could undertake the practice, perhaps even with the least of the processes, I should prove the most fortunate of beings...
…Before the end of the first year my two hundred crowns had gone up in smoke, and my master died of a lingering fever that he contracted during the summer, largely because he rarely left his room, in which the atmosphere was terribly hot and unhealthy. I was the more troubled by his death since my parents would only send me the money for my keep instead of the amount I wanted to carry on my work…
…To overcome these difficulties, I went home in 1535, so as to avoid being under a tutor, and aggregated three years income, which came to four hundred crowns. I needed this amount of capital because I wanted to work out a recipe which had been given me at Toulouse by an Italian who said he had actually been present at the experiment. I kept him with me so that he might see the end of his process. I calcined gold and silver in aqua fortis, but this was no use because the gold and silver I used melted away to less than half the original quantity, and my four hundred crowns were soon reduced to two hundred and thirty…
…My meditations and my researches continued for another year, and then I came to a decision; but in order to carry it out I had to make some arrangements about my property. I reached home at the beginning of Lent 1549, determined to put into practice all I had learnt. So, after some preliminaries, I bought everything I needed and began to work on the day after Easter. All this did not go off without some discomforts and vexation. Every now and then someone would say: "But what are you going to do? Haven't you wasted enough on this nonsense?" And someone else told me that if I went on buying such quantities of charcoal people would suspect me of being a coiner, of which he had in fact already heard rumours. As I had a degree in Law, they pressed me again to buy a legal practice. But the worst came from my parents, who reproached me bitterly for the life I was leading, and actually threatened to send the police to destroy my equipment.
You can imagine how tiresome and harassing all this was. The only comfort I had was in my work, in carrying out the operations which from day to day were becoming more successful, and to which I gave my whole mind. The interruption of all communications by another outbreak of the plague brought me into greater isolation and gave me the opportunity of concentrating wholly on my process and of realising the succession of the three colours that philosophers require before the Work is perfected. I saw them, one after the other, and I made the great attempt in the following year, on Easter Day 1550. Some ordinary quicksilver that I put in a crucible over a fire was in less than an hour turned into pure gold. You may imagine my joy. But I took care not to boast, I thanked

God for His grace and I prayed that He would not allow me to use it except to His glory.

Again we have a kind of anticlimactic account. He says "You may imagine my joy. But I took care not to boast…"

The story of Nicolas Flamel is so well known, but has a similar structure of disappointment crowned by the alchemical success.

…there fell into my hands for the sum of two florins, a gilded book, very old and large. It was not of paper, nor of parchment, as other books be, but was only made of delicate rinds (as it seemed unto me) of tender young trees. The cover of it was of brass, well bound, all engraven with letters, or strange figures; and for my part I think they might well be Greek characters, or some such like ancient language. Sure I am, I could not read them, and I know well they were not notes nor letters of the Latin nor of the Gaul for of them we understand a little. As for that which was within it, the leaves of bark or rind, were engraven, and with admirable diligence written, with a point of iron, in fair and neat Latin letters, coloured…

…Having with me, therefore, this fair book, I did nothing else day nor night but study upon it, understanding very well all the operations that it showed, but not knowing with what matter I should begin, which made me very heavy and solitary, and caused me to fetch many a sigh…

…This was the cause that during the space of one and twenty years, I tried a thousand broulleryes, yet never with blood, for that was wicked and villainous: for I found in my book that the philosophers called blood the mineral spirit which is in the metals, principally in the Sun, Moon, and Mercury, to the assembling whereof, I always tended; yet these interpretations for the most part were more subtle than true. Not seeing, therefore, in my works the signs at the time written in my book, I was always to begin again. In the end, having lost all hope of ever understanding those figures, for my last refuge I made a vow to God and St. James of Galicia, to demand the interpretation of them at some Jewish Priest in some Synagogue of Spain…

…I met with a merchant of Bologne, who made me known to a physician, a Jew by nation, and as then a Christian, dwelling in Leon aforesaid, who was very skilful in sublime sciences, called Master Canches. As soon as I had shown him the figures of my extract, he being ravished with great astonishment and joy, demanded of me incontinently if I could tell him any news of the book from whence they were drawn! I answered him in Latin, (wherein he asked me the question) that I hoped to have some good news of the book, if anybody could decipher unto me the enigmas. All at that instant transported with great ardor and joy, he began to decipher unto me the beginning…

…This learned man fell extremely sick, being afflicted with excessive vomitings, which remained still with him of those he had suffered at sea, and he was in such a continual fear of my forsaking him that he could imagine nothing like unto it. And although I was always by his side, yet would he incessantly call for me; but, in sum, he died at the end of the seventh day of his sickness…

…But in the end I had that also, after long errors of three years, or thereabouts; during which time I did nothing but study and labour… finally, I found that which I desired, which I also soon knew by the strong scent and odour thereof. Having this, I easily accomplished the Mastery, for, knowing the preparation of the first Agents, and after following my book according to the letter, I could not have missed it, though I would. Then, the first time that I made projection was upon Mercury, whereof I turned half-a-pound, or thereabouts, into pure silver, better than that of the mine, as I myself assayed, and made others assay many times. This was upon a Monday, the 17th of January, about noon, in my house, Perrenella only being present, in the year of the restoring of

mankind, 1382.

This account of 'Flamel' was no doubt written in the early part of the 17th century, some years after those ascribed to Bernard and Zachaire. It follows in their style. So we can see this as another alchemical literary form. This structure was even being used late in the 19th century by a French adept who is named only as Cyliani. The first part of the work is similarly an account of his failures at alchemy.

…I do not wish to pursue the recital of what happened to me. A description of the misfortunes that befell me would require a large volume. Once more fell into hardship. It was such that my numerous family, made up of charming well educated children, virtuous beyond expression by their decency and their talents were so unhappy because of the misfortunes of their father that they caught what in others would have been but slight diseases and, after a couple of weeks, these diseases became fatal for them. In a short while I lost my children.
Oh irreparable loss! How sad and heartbreaking it is for the paternal heart to be able to weep but tears and to feel only superfluous regrets! May the Eternal one day allow me once more to see you again and then the memory of my misfortunes will be erased for me.
Despite the broken-down condition in which I found myself, I decided to re-gather my strength in order to make one last effort. I went to see a rich person who was endowed with a great soul and equally great culture….

…Having finished my work, I took one hundred grammes of distilled mercury and placed them in a crucible. As soon as they began to smoke, I threw one gramme of my transmutating sulphur onto it, when it turned into an oil on top of the mercury and I saw this mercury successively coagulating more and more. I then increased my fire and continued to make it stronger until my mercury became perfectly fixed, which took about an hour. Having poured it into a little ingot mould, I tested it and found it better than that of the mine.

Again we are being told of an amazing final alchemical success on top of a life of despair and suffering. These alchemical stories are thus not to be read as documentary accounts but present us as readers with a structure in which we are led through all the failures of this individual, to a wonderful realisation that they eventually succeeded in their task.

EXERCISE

Examine some of the transmutation stories accessible through the web page

http://www.levity.com/alchemy/transmut.html

and see if you can identify different types of story.