

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 22 : The device of Dialogue

A further form we must consider, often used in alchemical writings, is that of the dialogue. Here usually there are two participants. In the simplest form of dialogue, one speaker adopts the role of the teacher and the other that of a pupil.

For this lesson I have for the most part taken short extracts from more extensive texts. I have tried to choose sections which are sufficiently clear that I have not needed to provide an interlinear commentary. Instead you should attempt to do this as an exercise. After twenty one lessons in this course you should now have sufficient understanding to undertake an interlinear commentary that can help reveal the meaning and structure of such texts.

Firstly let us look at an example of this from Jacques Tesson *The Green Lion*, written around 1584. The second dialogue in this work, 'On the Conduct of the Philosophers or their Great Theriac', shows us a simple use of this form in a purely didactic way, the disciple asking questions, on behalf of the reader, while the master (our author Tesson himself) has the opportunity of an answering reply. Here the 'Disciple' is reduced to the role of straight man, seeding and guiding the conversation.

Disciple. - *What is that which the Philosophers so diligently sought after and found, dealt with so obscurely in the formulation of an unknown metallic body?*

Master. - *It is an hermaphroditic substance that possesses the virtue of healing the body from all infirmities, both hot and cold, and of resuscitating all metals that died by way of accidents that occurred to Nature at the time of their decoction.*

Disciple. - *What was this substance formerly, and from where is drawn such virtue?*

Master. - *Of two opposite species, however both of one single nature and virtue.*

Disciple. - *What are the qualities of each species in particular and in its constitutions?*

Master. - *The one is hot and dry, which is the masculine, the other is cold and moist, which is the feminine. The one is hard, the other soft, the one is fixed, the other volatile. The one is citrine, the other white. The one is of the nature of Sol, the other of Luna. The one is fire, the other water, the one is stinking spirit, the other crude spirit. And let it be known that there are only these two matters, if but for the fact that the philosophers dubbed them names infinite and strange, viz. for the masculine king, old man, fire, earth, sun, stinking spirit, agent, form, male sperm, red gum, Gabricius brother of Beja, sulphur and many other names. And the woman has been called Queen, white woman, dew, fugitive spirit, snow, dove, flower of salt, living water, Beja camellia, dragon, lion, southern dog, virgin bride, dry water, vinegar, water of life, Duenech, Azoth, smoke, vitriol, mercury, milk, sweat, mother, vapour, viscous moisture, spittle of the moon, air, unknown water and many others.*

Disciple. - *What is the magnesia of the Philosophers?*

Master. - *When the philosopher has prepared his compound as required, thence is it called the true magnesia of the philosophers. It has been held that the help of the entire celestial order was needed to make this compound, viz. the Most Holy Trinity, the Angels, Archangels, Cherubim, Seraphim, Principalities, Thrones, Powers, Virtues, Dominations and all of the heavens. Such folk have not understood a thing, but I must confess that, when we want to undertake the work, we need the grace of God on our side, for whosoever shall be in the grace of God shall have all of the above for help, and as concerns the matter, it has in itself all that is necessary to multiply in its nature and for this reason, it has been called hermaphrodite.*

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A different example is found in Rudolph Glauber's 'Three Books of Dialogues', here taken from the English translation of his works printed in 1689. In this our unsuccessful alchemist 'A', takes more the role of a reader frustrated with years of study and failed experiments. Readers could more readily identify with this character.

The First Dialogue, or Conference, betwixt two lovers of Hermetic Medicine, deciphered by the letters, A. and B., the last of which has had a prosperous success on his labours, the other not, and therefore craves of this last (namely B.) a manuduction to the work, whereby he is rendered master of his desire.

B. *A good health to you, my friend! What is the matter with you now, that you are so sad, and even laden with cogitations, and mumble to yourself about I know not what?*

A. *Oh, my friend! I wish you the like very heartily; and am glad that you come so very seasonably, and at such a time, as I was just thinking on you, and most earnestly wishing your approach; witness your own writings, which I do here turn over with my hands and my mind, but yet they are so very obscure, that I cannot worm myself (as I may say) out of them, (or understand them) though I apply the utmost of my endeavours to understand them. I have likewise read over and over again, the writings of other eminent and belief-deserving philosophers, still hoping that I should yet at length attain to the knowledge of the truth. But alas, (the more is my grief) all that I find is only this, namely, that I hold in my hands the slippery tail of a slippery smooth serpent or eel which every now and then slips out of my hands, and does more and more defile me. I have therefore resolutely determined with myself, that, unless God does shortly send me some good friend, who may lead poor me out of such a notable labyrinth, I will throw all my books, all my instruments, and all such matters which I have bestowed so much time about, in vain, and lost so much by, into the fire and sacrifice them unto Vulcan, that so I may be rid of the tediousness of my fruitless labours, and unprofitable cookery. But yet if you would be but so pleased, I no ways doubt, but that you might by a few words and directions reduce me out of the snares of so many erroneous paths, and hedged up ways, into the right path. For I well know, that you have bestowed your whole age, your whole study, and all your labours and endeavours, about such great secrets, and have by the Divine assistance obtained the very truth itself. And therefore I do most humbly beg at your hands, that you would not leave me destitute of your help, but that, according to your inbred goodness and courtesy, you would succour me, your Friend, with some brotherly instruction, and manuduction. Which if you either will not or cannot do, I must even conclude, not only upon thoroughly doubting of the truth and possibility of this art, but withal, on a firm persuading myself, that those writings which are so*

stuffed with the promises of golden mountains, are nothing else but mere old wives tales, and frothy speculations of idle men, and vain dreams, though proceeding from men of so great esteem.

B. *But what is this, I hear you utter? I could never have believed you, to have been of such a broken and dejected mind. What? Would you condemn the writings of the philosophers, and slight them, because they are above your capacity, and too hard for your understanding? It is a wicked thing, to entertain such a thought, much more to utter it. I would have you, rather to persuade yourself, that you are not as yet worthy of the secrets and gifts of so great worth. For though a man should torment himself with abundance of hard labours in this world, and should afflict his body with unceasing sweating pains, yet would he not effect ought without the blessing of God.... Examine now yourself, and see how the case stands between God and you. The bestowing of such great things must proceed from God, and not from the philosophers. The philosopher may indeed write down the truth, but yet it is not in his power, to bestow upon you the Divine Blessing, which is the very hinge on which all good things depend. Secrets of such great moment are not the gifts of men, but of God, who bestows them on whomsoever he pleases.*

A. *In good time! Is this the comfort and instruction, which I begged at your hands? I did not request, you to be my Father Confessor, to hear my confession of my deeds, but rather that you would help me, being ignorant and unskilful, by some good and profitable manuduction and instruction. For I well enough knew, that wicked men are never masters of such great secrets, nor will I rank myself amongst them. Be pleased but to regard my suit, and only show me an entrance, whereby I may enter into the right and kingly way. And as for praying to God, and labouring without ceasing, leave the care of that to me. I hope, that God will not deny his blessing upon my prayers and labours.*

B. *Well! since I perceive you to be so thoroughly bent, with your utmost study and unwearied pressing on, after such an eminent thing as this is, I cannot but show you that way, which I myself have walked in, and that too, home to the very place which myself am come unto. Verily, I see the promised land before my eyes, and do daily view its coasts, nor do I doubt, but that I shall shortly enter thereunto, and have the fruition of its most pleasant fruits, if no impediment debar me of so great a happiness. And as concerning yourself, seeing that you are nimbler of your feet than I am, there is no doubt but that you will arrive thereunto, even as soon as I myself. But yet, pray first declare to me, about what things it is, that you have spent your money, your labours, and your precious time, and all to no purpose; that so I may (as much as in me lies) the more conveniently reclaim you from your wanderings and errors into the right way. It is in vain for him that is sick, to expect help and succour from the physician, if he does not show the place of his dolour and grief. Confession is a medicine to him that goes astray. Confess therefore the truth, that I may hear, by what things thou hast been misled into so many errors.*

A. *(Alas, Sir,) I could not reckon up all, in order, though I should have time enough of so doing. But your own time, which is far more precious does not permit, that it should be spent in hearing my foolish labours. Besides too, the remembrance of so many labours in vain, and of the loss of not only so much time but expenses too, causes a loathing in me, the very remembrance of which I abhor, much more to make a long rehearsal of the same. You may therefore easily guess, that by my insisting upon the bare letter only of the philosophers' writings, and not understanding the sense and meaning, I have erred from the right way, and have headlong buried myself into so many intricacies and errors. I have searched into vegetables, animals and minerals, but I see, that I have not had under my hands the true matter. For if there does appear in any of these matters the Crows' head, yet the other colours which the philosophers make a description of (as the Dragons' Blood, the Peacocks' Tail, Virgins' Milk, Coagulum, or Curdling, and principally that Red and Fire-abiding*

Salamander) did never appear (to my view). Or if these signs of Sanguis Draconis or Lac Virginis appear in sight, in some other matter, yet notwithstanding the other colours, and other signs, which the philosophers make mention of, did never discover themselves to my view. What labours soever I have used, and whatsoever matters I have dealt in, I have even laboured in vain, and lost both my pains and expense, and never have received any good from my laborious operations. Hereupon I did at last even almost thoroughly persuade myself, that it was an impossible thing, that, out of one matter, and by one and the same labour, one colour should orderly succeed another, and become visible to the sight, by the bare help of an external fire, as for example, first of all in the putrefaction, the Crows' head, then the Peacocks' Tail, then the Dragons' Blood, Lac Virginis, Coagulatium or cheese-like curdling, and at last the fixed Salamander. But forasmuch as it appears to me, by the reading of your writings, that you have orderly met with the sight of all those colours in your labours, in such manner as the philosophers have described the same, I do firmly believe, and give credit unto your sayings, as unto a man that makes conscience of his ways, supposing, that you would not write such things unless you had wrought them with your own hands, and could even yet perform them at any time. I only beg your help in showing me the true matter, and the key thereof, that I may so order the business, as to cause the visibly appearing of one colour after another, in one glass, and by the bare help of one only fire. If you do but thus much for me, you may be confident that I shall be the most contented man alive. Nor do I doubt, but that as touching the remainder, as multiplication, projection, and such like, I shall find out those operations well enough afterwards, by mine own studious search, if I can but once hit the entrance of the right, true and kingly way.

B. *Hold a little, and do not assume so much unto yourself, and think that the things which are so easily said, are with as much facility done. Have you not read in Bernhard Trevisan, that a certain friend of his had that great secret as well as himself, only he knew not how to multiply it, nor would Bernhard reveal the same unto him, as having the selfsame books, out of which the said Bernhard got the knowledge of multiplication, himself. But be it as you desire, and seeing you request no more from my hands at this time, but only the matter and some key, I will satisfy your request, as far forth, as the time and occasion will at present permit.....*

...

A. *Meanwhile, I earnestly expect from you a demonstration of the possibility and truth of this thing.*

B. *Come then, in God's name, a little nearer me, and heed well the things which shall be shown unto you. We will here take half an ounce of common gold, and put it into this Aqua Fortis, made of Vitriol and Saltpetre, whereto we will add the same weight as the gold is of, or a little more, of our Sal Ammoniac, without which, the Aqua Fortis alone, and by itself, is not able to dissolve the gold.*

A. *Pray, Sir, why do you say, Our Sal Ammoniac? Are there several and different kinds of it? For my part, when I dissolve gold, I put into the Aqua Fortis, that common Sal Ammoniac, which is every where to be had in the merchants' warehouses, and it is very fit to dissolve gold into a yellow water.*

B. *You speak very well after your own way. And I confess, that every Sal Ammoniac mixed with Aqua Fortis is very good to dissolve gold, nor is this any new way, for it is in very much use amongst all the Chemists, who are wont in this way to dissolve their gold, but yet that which is thus dissolved, still remains gold, and does easily admit of being again precipitated out of the Aqua Fortis, and of being reduced by fusion into the former body, it had before its solution. But if so be, that the solution shall be made by the help of our Sal Ammoniac, then is the case vastly altered, and your attempting its reduction again will be in vain. For if Sol be but dissolved barely once with our Sal Ammoniac, it admits not any more of melting, nor does it of itself return again into a malleable metallic body, but gets a reddish scarlet kind of colour in the trial (or crucible) and remains an infusible powder. And*

if you add some Borax thereto, and set it in the fire then to melt, it will pass into a red glass, which is a sign of its being plainly destroyed, and of its being transmuted into another body. And therefore I dare aver, that there is seated in our Sal Ammoniac, a power of inverting, and transmuting gold, and of making it fit for the philosophical putrefaction, which thing is impossible to be done by any other salts whatever they be, and what name soever they are called by.

A. Certainly, this is a Divine miraculous thing, to subject gold, so mightily constant in the fire, to putrefaction, and to reduce it by putrefaction, into a nothing. For I have read too and again, amongst the philosophers' writings, that it is an easier thing to make gold by Art, than to destroy gold made by Nature. And therefore this salt must needs be a very wonderful one, which is able to effect these and other, the like almost incredible things.

B. Well may you term it a wonderful salt, for so it is, the like of which, no man will find in the whole world. Though to such as know it, it is so vile and mean a thing, insomuch that scarce anyone would think it likely, that such things could be done thereby, as are wont to be, should it be but named by its own proper title. Does not, I pray, that philosopher, Cosmopolita or Sendivogius, confess that he has oftentimes declared the art and secret of the whole philosophic work, word for word, sometimes to one, sometimes to another, and yet they would not at all believe him, by reason of the meanness, or vileness of the work. And does not he make frequent mention of his own, and not the common Sal Ammoniac? But that you may yet give more belief and credit to our salt, I would have you read the Turba of the Philosophers, wherein you will find all those things which they have published concerning their salt....

Here we find in Glauber's dialogue a rather different meeting of the two characters than we saw in the Tesson dialogue. This is not a simple question and answer device, but through the encounter of these two characters, we see exposed the struggles and difficulties one experiences in pursuing alchemy. Glauber perhaps is here giving us an insight into his own struggle. He is using these two characters in the dialogue to deeply question the nature of alchemy. His character 'A' is not some compliant disciple but rather one who interrogates and will not allow character 'B' to escape with platitudes and simple rhetoric.

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Sendivogius in his major writing, *The New Chemical Light*, first published around about 1608, uses various devices. Philosophical argument through text, then the use of allegories and sections in the form of dialogues. The dialogues in his work are more a kind of drama or theatre. Here dialogue merges with allegory.

One day, with his mind full of this besetting idea, and being wrought almost to an ecstasy [our alchemist] entered a certain verdant grove, in which there was abundance not only of trees, herbs, and fruits, but also of animals, birds, minerals, and metals. Of water there was indeed a great scarcity. It was carried to the place by means of aqueducts, and among these was a conduit flowing with water extracted from the rays of the moon - but this water was reserved for the use of the Nymph of the grove. In the grove there were two young men tending oxen and rams, and from them he learned that the grove belonged to the Nymph Venus. The Alchemist was gratified enough, but all

his thoughts were absorbed by the subject of Sulphur, and when he remembered the words of the sages, who say that the substance is vile and common, and its treatment easy, when he recollected the vast amount of time, labour, and money which he had vainly spent upon it, he lifted up his voice and in the bitterness of his heart, cursed Sulphur. Now Sulphur was in that grove, though the Alchemist did not know it. But suddenly he heard a voice which said: "My friend why do you curse Sulphur?" He looked up in bewilderment nobody was to be seen. "My friend, why are you so sad?" continued the voice.

Alchemist: *Master, I seek the Philosopher's Stone as one that hungers after bread.*

Voice: *And why thus do you curse Sulphur?*

Alchemist: *My Lord, the Sages call it the substance of the Stone, yet I have spent all my time and labour in vain upon it, and am well nigh reduced to despair.*

Voice: *It is true that Sulphur is the true and chief substance of the Stone. Yet you curse it unjustly. For it lies heavily chained in a dark prison and cannot do as it would. Its hands and feet have been bound, and the doors of the dungeon closed upon it, at the bidding of its mother, Nature, who was angry with it for too readily obeying the summons of every alchemist. It is now confined in such a perfect labyrinth of a prison, that it can be set free only by those sages to whom Nature herself has entrusted the secret.*

Alchemist: *Ah! miserable that I am, this is why he was unable to come to me! How very hard and unkind of the mother! When is he to be set at large again?*

Voice: *That can only be by means of hard and persevering labour.*

Alchemist: *Who are his gaolers?*

Voice: *They are of his own kindred, but grievous tyrants.*

Alchemist: *And who are you?*

Voice: *I am the judge and the chief jailer [gaoler], and my name is Saturn.*

Alchemist: *Then Sulphur is detained in your prison?*

Voice: *Yes; but I am not his keeper.*

Alchemist: *What does he do in prison?*

Voice: *Whatever his jailers [gaolers] command.*

Alchemist: *And what can he do?*

Voice: *He can perform a thousand things, and is the heart of all. He can perfect metals and minerals, impart understanding to animals, produce flowers in herbs and trees, corrupt and perfect air; in short, he produces all the odours and paints all the colours in the world.*

Alchemist: *Of what substance does he make the flowers?*

Voice: *His guards furnish him with vessels and matter. Sulphur digests it, and according to the diversity of the digestion, and the weight of the matter, he produces choice flowers, having their special odours.*

Alchemist: *Master, is he old?*

Voice: *Know, friend, that Sulphur is the virtue of the world, and though Nature's second-born, yet the oldest of all things. To those who know him, however, he is as obedient as a little child. He is most easily recognised by the vital spirit in animals, the colour in metals, the odour in plants. Without his help his mother can do nothing.*

Alchemist: *Is he the sole heir, or has he any brothers?*

Voice: *He has some brothers who are quite unworthy of him, and a sister that he loves, and who is to him as a mother.*

Alchemist: *Is he always the same?*

Voice: As to his nature, it is always the same. But in person his heart only is pure. His garments are spotted.

Alchemist: Master, was he ever quite free?

Voice: Yes; in the days of the great Masters and Sages whom Nature loved, and to whom she gave the keys of the prison.

Alchemist: Who were these wise adepts?

Voice: There have been very many, and among them Hermes, who was one and the same with the mother of Sulphur. After him there were kings, princes, a long line of sages, including Aristotle and Avicenna. All these delivered Sulphur from his bonds.

Alchemist: What does he give to them for delivering him?

Voice: When he is set free, he binds his jailers [gaolers], and gives their three kingdoms to his deliverer. He also gives to him a magic mirror, in which the three parts of the wisdom of the whole world may be seen and known at a glance. And this mirror clearly exhibits the creation of the world, the influences of the celestial virtues on earthly things, and the way in which Nature composes substances by the regulation of heat. With its aid, men may at once understand the motion of the Sun and Moon, and that universal movement by which Nature herself is governed - also the various degrees of heat, cold, moisture, and dryness, and the virtues of herbs and of all other things. By its means the physician may at once, without consulting an herbarium, tell the exact composition of any given plant or medicinal herb. But nowadays men are content to trust to the authority of great writers, and no longer attempt to use their own eyes. They quote Aristotle and Galen, as if there was not much more to be learned from the great Book of Nature which is spread open before them. Know that all things on the earth and under the earth are engendered and produced by the three principles, but sometimes by two, unto which the third, nevertheless, adheres. He who knows these three principles, and their proportions as conjoined by Nature, can tell easily by their greater or less coction [cooking], the degrees of heat in each subject, and whether they have been well, badly, or passably cooked. For those who know the three principles know also all vegetables by sight, taste, and odour, for these senses determine the three principles, and the degree of their decoction.

Alchemist: Master, they say that Sulphur is a medicine.

Voice: Nay, you might rather call him a physician, and to him who delivers him out of prison, he gives his blood as a medicine.

Alchemist: How long can a man ward off death by means of this Universal Medicine?

Voice: Until the time originally appointed. But many sages who did not take it with proper caution, have died before that time.

Alchemist: Do you call it a poison then?

Voice: Have you not observed that a great flame swallows up a small one? Men who had received the Art by the teachings of others, thought that the more powerful the dose they took of Our Medicine the more beneficial would be the effect. They did not consider that one grain of it has strength to penetrate many thousand pounds of metals.

Alchemist: How then should they have used it?

Voice: They ought to have taken only so much as would have strengthened and nourished, without overwhelming, their natural heat.

Alchemist: Master, I know how to make that medicine.

Voice: Blessed are you if you do! For the blood of Sulphur is that inward virtue and dryness which congeals quicksilver into gold and imparts health and perfection to all bodies. But the blood of Sulphur is obtained only by those who can deliver him from prison, and therefore he is so closely imprisoned that he can hardly breathe, lest he should come to the palace of the King.

Alchemist: *Is he so closely imprisoned in all metals?*

Voice: *In some his imprisonment is less strict than in others.*

Alchemist: *Why, Lord, is he imprisoned in the metals so tyrannously?*

Voice: *Because if he once came unto his royal palace, he would no longer fear his guards. He could look from the windows with freedom, and appear before the whole world, for he would be in his own kingdom, though not in that state of highest power whereto he desires to arrive.*

Alchemist: *What is his food?*

Voice: *His food is air, in a digested state, when he is free; but in prison he is compelled to consume it in a crude state.*

Alchemist: *Master, cannot those quarrels between him and his gaolers be composed?*

Voice: *Yes, by a wise and cunning craftsman.*

Alchemist: *Why does he not offer them terms of peace?*

Voice: *He cannot do so by himself: his indignation gets the better of his discretion.*

Alchemist: *Why does he not do so through some commissary?*

Voice: *He who could put an end to their strife would be a wise man, and worthy of undying honour. For if they were friends, they would help, instead of hindering each other, and bring forth immortal things.*

Alchemist: *I will gladly undertake the duty of reconciling them. For I am a very learned man, and they could not resist my practical skill. I am a great sage, and my alchemistic treatment would quickly bring about the desired end. But tell me, is this the true Sulphur of the sages ?*

Voice: *He is Sulphur. You ought to know whether he is the Sulphur of the sages.*

Alchemist: *If I find his prison, shall I be able to deliver him?*

Voice: *Yes, if you are wise enough to do so. It is easier to deliver him than to find his prison.*

Alchemist: *When I do find him, shall I be able to make him into the Philosophers' Stone ?*

Voice: *I am no prophet. But if you follow his mother's advice, and dissolve the Sulphur you will have the Stone.*

Alchemist: *In what substance is this Sulphur to be found ?*

Voice: *In all substances. All things in the world - metals, herbs, trees, animals, stones, are its ore.*

Alchemist: *But out of what substances do the sages procure it?*

Voice: *My friend, you press me somewhat too closely. But I may say that though it is everywhere, yet it has certain palaces where the sages can most conveniently find it. And they worship it when it swims in its sea and sports with Vulcan (god of fire), though there it is disguised in a most poor garb. Now is it in a dark prison, hidden from sight. But it is one only subject, and if you cannot find it at home you will scarcely do so in the forest. Yet, to give you some heart in your research, I will solemnly assure you that it is most perfect in gold and silver - most easily obtained in quicksilver...*

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Here is another wonderful example of a dialogue from the *Le triomphe hermetique* (The Hermetic Triumph), 1689. In this the author personifies gold, mercury and the philosophers' stone, and presents us with a dialogue which is full of humour as well as alchemical philosophy.

To give you a more perfect understanding of this agreeable discourse, I will recite to you the dispute which arose between the Stone of the Philosophers, Gold, and Mercury, so that those who have a long time applied themselves to the search of our Art and who know how we ought to deal with metals and minerals, may be thereby sufficiently informed how to arrive directly at the end which

they propose to themselves. It is nevertheless necessary, that we should apply ourselves to know exteriorly, and interiorly, the essence and the properties of all things which are on the Earth, and that we penetrate into the profundity of the operations, which Nature is capable of.

Gold and Mercury went one day, with an armed hand, to give battle unto, and subdue the Stone. Gold animated with fury, begun to speak thus:

Gold: *How have you the boldness to raise yourself above me, and my brother Mercury, and to pretend a preference before us - you who are only a worm swollen with poison? Do you not know that I am the most precious, the most durable, and the chief of all the metals? Do you not know that monarchs, princes, and nations, do alike make all their riches to consist in me, and in my brother Mercury, and that you are on the contrary, the dangerous enemy of men, and of metals. So that the most able physicians cease not publish and extol the singular virtues which I possess to give and preserve health to all the world?*

The Stone: *[To these words full of anger the Stone answered without being moved]: My dear Gold, why are you not rather angry with God, and why do you not ask him, for what reasons he has not created in you what is found in me?*

Gold: *It is God himself who has given me the honour, the reputation, and the glittering brightness, which renders me so estimable, it is for that reason that I am so searched for by every one. One of my greatest perfections is to be a metal unchangeable in the fire, and our of the fire. So all the world loves me, and runs after me. But you, you are only a fugitive, and a cheat, that abuses all men. This is seen in that you fly away and escape out of the hands of those who work with you.*

The Stone: *It is true, my dear Gold, it is God who has given you the honour, the durability, and the beauty, which makes you precious. It is for that reason that you are obliged to return eternal thanks to the divine bounty, and not to despise others as you do. For I can tell you, that you are not that Gold, of which the writings of the philosophers make mention, but the Gold is hidden in my bosom. It is true, I own it. I flow in the fire and abide not there, nevertheless you very well know, that God and Nature have given me this quality, and that this must be so, for as much as my fluidity turns to the advantage of the artist, who knows the way how to extract it. Know, nevertheless, that my soul remains constant in me, and that she is more stable, and more fixed than you are, altogether Gold as you are, and more than are your brother, and all your companions are. Neither water, nor fire, be they what they will, can destroy her, nor consume her, though they should act upon her during as long time as the world shall last.*

It is not then my fault if am sought for by artists, who know not how they ought to work with me, nor in what way I ought to be prepared. They often mix me with foreign things, which are entirely contrary to me. They add to me water, powders, and such other like things, which destroy my nature, and the properties which are essential to me, so that there is hardly found one in a hundred who works with me. They apply themselves to search out the truth of the Art in you, and in your brother Mercury. It is for that reason that they all err, and it is therein that their works are false. They are themselves a good example of it. For it is unprofitably that they employ their gold, and that they endeavour to destroy it. There remains nothing to them from all that, but extreme poverty, to which they see themselves as last reduced.

It is you, Gold, who art the first cause of this ill fortune. You very well know, that without me it is impossible to make any gold, or any silver, which shall be perfect, and that it is I alone who have this wonderful advantage. Why therefore do you permit almost all the whole world to lay the foundation of their operations upon you, and upon Mercury? If you had yet any remainder of

honesty, you would hinder men from abandoning themselves to a most certain loss. But as (instead thereof) you do quite the contrary, I may with truth maintain, that it is you only who are a cheat.

Gold: *I will convince you by the authority of the philosophers, that the truth of the Art may be accomplished with me. Read Hermes, he says thus: "The Sun is its Father, and the Moon its Mother". Now I am the only one which they compare to the Sun.*

Aristotle, Avicenna, Pliny, Serapion, Hippocrates, Dioscorides, Masue, Rasis, Averroes, Geber, Raymund Lully, Albertus Magnus, Arnold of Villa Nova, Thomas Aquinas, and a great number of other philosophers, whom I pass in silence, that I may not belong, do all write clearly and distinctly, that the metals and the physical tincture, are not made but of Sulphur and of Mercury, that this Sulphur ought to be red, incombustible, steadfastly resisting the fire, and that the Mercury ought to be clear or bright, and well purified. In this manner they speak without any reserve. They name me openly by my proper name and say, that in Gold, (that is to say in me) there is found the red digested, fixed, and incombustible Sulphur, which is true, and very evident. For there is nobody who does not know well, that I am a metal, the most durable and unalterable, that I am endowed with a perfect Sulphur, and entirely fixed, over which the fire has no power.

Mercury was of the same opinion with Gold, he approved of this discourse maintained that all which his brother said was true, and that the work might be perfected after the manner which the philosophers herein above-cited have written. He added also, that every one (sufficiently) knew how great a (mutual) friendship there was between Gold and him, preferably before all the other metals; that there was nobody who could not easily judge thereof by the testimony of this own eyes, that the goldsmiths, and other such like artificers knew very well, that when they would gild any work, they could not do without gild and work, they could not do without a mixture of gold and mercury, and that they make a conjunction of them in a very small time, without difficulty, and with very little labour. What ought not to be hoped for with more time, more labour, and more application?

The Stone [At this discourse, the Stone began to laugh, and told them]: *In truth you deserve both the one and the other of you, that they should jeer you, and your demonstration. But it is you Gold that I still the more admire at, seeing that you are so much conceited of yourself, for having the advantage which you have to be good for some certain things. Can you be persuaded that the ancient philosophers did write as they have done, in a sense which should be understood in a common way? And do you believe that one ought plainly to interpret their words according to the letter?*

Gold : *I am certain, that the philosophers, and the artists, whom I cited, have not written a lie. They are all of the same sentiment concerning the virtue which I possess. It is very true that there are found some who would search in things quite distant, for the power and the properties which are in me. They have worked on certain herbs, on animals, on blood, on urines, on hair, on sperm, and on things of this nature. These have without doubt strayed from the true way, and have sometimes written falsehoods. But it is not so of those masters whom I have named. We have certain proofs, that they effectually possessed this great Art. It is for that reason that we ought to give credit to their writings.*

The Stone: *I do not make any doubt at all of those philosophers having had an entire knowledge of the Art; excepting, nevertheless, some of those whom you have alleged. For there are among them, though a very few, some who knew it not, and have only written what they have heard people say of it. But when they, the true philosophers, plainly name Gold and Mercury, as the principles of the Art, they only make use of these terms thereby to hide the knowledge from the ignorant, and from those*

who are unworthy of this science. For they very well know that such vulgar wits, mind only the names of things, the receipts, and the processes which they find written, without examining whether there be any solid foundation in what they put into practice. But the wise men, and those who read good books with application and exactness, consider all things with prudence, examine how consonant and how agreeing one thing is with another; and by these means they penetrate into the foundation of the Art, so that by reasoning, and by meditation, they discover at length what the matter of the philosophers is, among whom there is not any one to be found who would show it, of make it known openly, and by its proper name.

They declare themselves plainly about it, when they tell you, that they never reveal less of the secret of their art, than when they speak openly, an in the common way of delivery. But they affirm, on the contrary, that when they use similitudes, figures, and parables, it is in truth in those places of their writings that they disclose their Art. For the philosophers after having discoursed of gold and mercury, fail not of declaring afterward and assuring us, that their gold is not the common Sol (or gold) and the their Mercury is not the common mercury. See here the reason.

Gold is a perfect metal, which by reason of its perfection, which Nature has given it, cannot be carried further by Art to a more perfect degree. So that in any way whatsoever one may work with gold, whatever artifice one makes use of, though one should extract its colour and its tincture a hundred times, the artist will never make more gold, and shall never tinge a greater quantity of metal, than there was of colour and tincture in the gold from whence it shall have been extracted. For this reason it is that the philosophers say, that we ought to seek perfection in the imperfect things, and that we shall find it there. You may read in the Rosary what I have told you here. Raymund Lully, whom you have cited to me, is of the same sentiment. He assures that, that which ought to be made better, ought not to be perfect, because in what is perfect, there is nothing to be changed, and one shall sooner destroy its nature, than add anything to its perfection....

To conclude our look at dialogues, I include this one in verse from Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. In the last lesson we looked at how to read alchemical verse. For this lesson, perhaps you should try to transcribe this into more modern English, then create a prose summary as I have demonstrated in the previous lesson. You should not find the language too difficult.

*A Dialogue betwixt the Father and the Sonne,
Concerning the two Principles of the Blessed Stone.*

Father:

*My Sonne if that Sulphur be absent away,
Our worke is reprov'd whatever they say,
And it is our Water & Fire as tru as your Creed
Which constraineth a Body till it be dead:
Of him shalt thou never have your desire,
Till he be blew as Lead through his owne Fire,
I do liken our Sulphur to the magnet Stone,
That still draweth to her Naturally,*

*So with our Sulphur the firey Woman Mercury,
When she would from he husband flye.*

Son:

*Father I pray you for Charity,
Where shall I this Sulphur finde?
For I never did him se with Eye;
Nor never knew him in his kinde.*

Father:

*In our Water my Sonne keepe it in your minde,
Where he will appeare so white as any snow,*

Son:

*Grammercy Father ye be full kinde,
For through your teaching full well I know.
Now teach me the Red stone when it is in minde,
How it is made by Natures Law.*

Father:

*The White and Red be both of one kinde,
Now hast thou my Son all thy desire,
Whose tincture by growing thou shalt it so finde,
Through vertue of the Sun and regiment of Fire
His riches there he dost increase,
Farre passing all that I can name,
If they in Fire shall come in presse:
Gune is their glory but he the same,
For the vertues of the Planets seaven
Shall have, and also from the Pole of heven,
Since the World began noe Gemme is found
Equall him till in vertues all,
The Saphir, nor the Diamond,
The Ruby rich behind shall fall,
So shall the Turkie and Carbuncle:
If they in fire togeather shall fight,
All One except shall loose their might,
The fire on him hath power none,
His Elements be so coequall,
An Incombustible Oyle is this our Stone
In power farr passing others all.*

Son:

*In what Element Father is our Sulphur bright?
Is it in all, or is it in one?*

Father:

*In all Sonne he must need be of right,
For Seperacion of Elements we make none:
And yett in them we can it not see,
For sensuall matter he is none,
But equallitie only intellectuall,
Without which our Stone never fixt be shall.
Qualitie Sonne alsoe groweth in the fire;
Betwixt the White Stone and the Read,
For Colours many to you shall appeare,
Untill the tyme the Woman be dead:
The which things if ye shall not see,
Red shall your Stone at noe time bee;
For where the Woman is in Presence,
There is much moysture and Accidence:
Watry humors that in her bee
Will drowne and devoure our qualitiye,
Remember and thinke of Noahs flood,
For too much Water was never good:
And yet as qualitie is hid in quantitie,
So must in Water our Earth be:
Riches in him thou shalt much finde,
After alteracions all due to his kinde;
When Oyle in him is coagulate,
Then is our Stone body made liquefact:
When Sulphur Water and Oyle be one,
Indued with riches then is our Stone.
I cannot thee tell a richer thing;
Then is our Stone when he is fire dureing,
Our Fire maketh he so strong.*

Son:

*Father how to make our Stone,
Fayne would I knowe that have we done;*

Father:

*My Sonne with lent and easie heate,
The Elements togeather will kindly meate:
Haste not to fast while they be rawe,
Keep well the Fier, beware of the lowe.
Shutt well the Vessell least out passe the Spirit,
So shall you all things the better keepe;
For if the Spiritts doe passe you from,
Remedy to gett them againe have you none:
And how marveillous it is the Elements to meete
Keepe this as your principall secrete,*

*At you begining give God the prayse;
And keepe your Matter in heate forty dayes,
But so that all things be made cleare,
Or else you are never the neare:
And within this tyme itt wil be Black;
And oft chainge colour till it be White,
There you may cease and further proceede,
By mendinge the heate to your measure indeed;
And there withall now will I end,
And to God onely thee Commend.*

Here are a few aids to help you with the more difficult words.

“blew” - blue.

“he is fire during” - He endures the fire.

“Grammercy Father” - Thank you, Father.

“turkie” - turquoise.

“farr passing” - surpassing.

“gune” - probably here means ‘gone’ - their outward splendour is gone in the heat of the fire but their essence remains.

“accidence” - the indwelling property or attribute of a thing.

“lent and easie heate” - gentle, mild and easy heat.