

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 14 : The *Terrestrial Heaven*

We will consider in this lesson a short piece by Wenceslas Lavinius entitled ‘A treatise on the Terrestrial Heaven’. This first appeared in Latin in 1602 as one of the works in the volume IV of the *Theatrum Chemicum*. Wenceslas Lavinius is said to be a Moravian. (Moravia is the south-Eastern part of what is now the Czech Republic.) The text was later translated and printed in the French compendium *Bibliothèque des philosophes chymiques*, Paris 1672-8, and was reprinted in the 18th century (1740’s) in Jean Maugin de Richenbourg’s new compendium.

The title of this work is rather evocative. It unites alchemically the above and the below. Other writers have perhaps drawn on a similar idea, for example the ‘Theatre of Terrestrial Astronomy’ ascribed to Edward Kelly, Gabriel de Castaigne’s *Paradis Terrestre* or the *Astronomia inferior* of Ritter. The philosophers’ stone is also sometimes said to be heaven brought to earth. So the title of this work promises much to the reader.

The Terrestrial Heaven

There is a sole corporeal spirit, which Nature created first, which is common and hidden and is the precious Balm of Life, which preserves that which is good and pure and destroys that which is impure and corrupt. This spirit is the end and beginning of all creatures. Triple in substance, it is composed of Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury, or pure water, which on high, coagulate, unite, join and water all the lower regions with a fat dry water.

Lavinus loses no time in presenting to us the precise nature of the alchemy with which he is working. He tells us of a single corporeal spirit, a spiritual principle existing in an outer bodily form, which, though common, is hidden from us. It is the precious balm of life, preserving and sustaining the good and pure and destroying and eliminating the impure. All life depends on the action of this spirit. It is triple in its nature, being composed of the three principles of Salt, Sulphur and Mercury, which in the heights of heaven are united together into a pure water which nourishes the lower terrestrial regions with a fat, dry water.

It is proper and seemly to have received the form and shape which it did, and which Art could not accomplish; by the aid and assistance of Nature it is rendered visible for our eyes. It hides and conceals in its belly an infinite force and virtue; for it is the one thing which is fully and completely the property of heaven and earth. It is hermaphroditic and nurtures all things, mingling with them indifferently, inasmuch as it contains within itself the seeds of the Ethereal Sphere.

It is right for this spiritual substance to have the form it was given, which could not be made by the alchemical art of Man. By the help of Nature it becomes visible to us. It hides within its belly a great force and strength for it is that one thing which belongs both to heaven and to earth. Here our author is no doubt echoing the ideas in the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes* :

II. That which is above is like that which is below, and that which is below is like that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of the One Thing.

III. And as all things have proceeded from One, by the meditation of One, so all things are

VI. It is the Father of all the works of wonder of the whole world. Its strength and power is complete if it be converted into earth.

VIII. It ascends from the earth to the heaven, and again descends to the earth.

IX. It gathers to itself the strength of things above, and of things below.

This strange spiritual substance has both male and female components within itself and thus it can mix with, nurture and sustain all things on earth. It contains within itself the seeds, the essence of the Ethereal Sphere. In the cosmology of the time this work was written, there were three worlds –

The Empyrean heaven - the world of God and the spirits

The Ethereal heaven or sphere

The Elemental sphere – or terrestrial world of the elements.

The Ethereal heaven mediated between the heights of spirit and the depths of materiality.

Because it is full of a subtle and powerful fire, and descends from Heaven, it has an effect over and imprints its force on the earthly bodies, and its belly, which is porous, is very hot, and the father of all things. This belly then replenishes itself with more of the vaporous fire, and without cease it receives its nourishment of radical humour which, in the vast body, clothes itself with the water of minerals, which it produces by the digestion of its burning fire.

Again we have resonances with the *Emerald Tablet*. The subtle energy or fire of this spiritual substance working in the Ethereal sphere, impresses its energies into earthly bodies. In this sense it is the father of all things. Its inner vapourous fire precipitates itself down onto the earth as a radical moisture which is the water of minerals in the earth. Here we have a word picture of how minerals are formed on earth, through this subtle spiritual fire in the Ethereal world digesting itself and producing on the earth below the root matter of the minerals.

This water, which can be coagulated, and which generates all things, becomes a pure earth, which, by a strong union, holds the virtues of the highest heavens enclosed within; and because in this same earth it is united and conjoined with heaven, I give it this beautiful name: The Terrestrial Heaven.

This root matter of the minerals, which initially is a water, condenses and coagulates further into an earthy material, but this still contains within it the essence of the highest heavens. For this reason these materials on the earth that bear within them something of the heavenly, can be called the Terrestrial Heaven.

In the same way that at the beginning the First Cause made use of separation to bring order and arrangement to the confused and chaotic mass, Art, which loves perfection, imitates Nature. Nature

removes substantial impurity, either by an earthy silt, which it converts to water, or by digestion. Art makes use of purification and digestion, either by Water or by Fire, and separates the filth and impurity, purifying and cleansing the spirit of all blemish. He who knows then the way to use water and fire knows the real path that leads him to the highest secrets of Nature.

In the same way that God in creating the world made a separation (between the waters above and the waters below – Genesis 1, v 6-7), the alchemical art, in a similar way, imitates Nature. Nature removes the impurities of substances either by washing it away as a silt or mud, or it can work by inwardly digesting those impurities. The art of alchemy makes similar use of both purification and digestion, either through the use of water or fire to separate out the dross, or to digest the impurities. Anyone who knows how to use water and fire in this way, knows the true path of alchemy and will find his way to the deepest secrets of Nature.

The Water, that grand substance, that first creature of God, which is replete with the spirit of fecundity, is the origin of all forms and seeds; and in vivifying by motion it animates all things, and produces all things by the light of Heaven and Earth. This Water is the nourishment of all things that live in the two realms: in the Earth, it is a vapour; in Heaven, it is more properly a fire, triple in its substance and first matter; because in a threefold manner and of a threefold nature all bodies proceed from and differentiate themselves from Nature.

This primal water that was at the beginning or creation contains in itself the seeds of all matter and living forms. This is worked on by the lights of heaven and earth to produce all things. This water is also the nourisher of all things in heaven and earth. In the earth sphere it appears as a vapour. In the heavenly world it appears as a fire, threefold in its substance. This triplicity in itself is reflected in the threefold nature of all earthly bodies. What is meant here possibly, is that the earthly substances bear within them the salt, sulphur and mercury. These three principles are a kind of reflection of the a higher triplicity that exists in the heavenly world.

It contains a Balm which has for its Father the Sun and for its Mother the Moon. Through the air it radiates to the lower plane, and it seeks the high levels and stately strongholds. The Earth is nourished in its fiery belly, and it is the cause of all perfection.

Again we have resonances of the sentiments of the Emerald Table.

IV. The Sun is its Father. The Moon is its Mother.

V. The Wind carried it in its belly. The Earth is its Nurse.

VI. It is the Father of all the works of wonder of the whole world. Its strength and power is complete if it be converted into earth.

This water contains a balm born from the Sun and Moon. It sends its power down through the air onto the Earth, resting on the highest points. It nourishes the Earth in its belly and is the cause of all perfection.

Great God, who gives life to all, has established two medicines for the Spirits and for the Bodies, that is to say, two things which cleanse and purify them of their impurities, and are the causes of disposing of corruption and rebirth to a new life.

God has made one healing medicine for spirits and another for bodies. These medicines cleanse and purify, eliminate corruption and produce a rebirth to a new life. Here perhaps our author intends Christ as the medicine for spirits and the philosophers' stone the medicine for the corporeal substances on earth.

The metals have two things in them, and the two things are the causes of restoration, and they partake of Heaven and Earth, in order that they might unite and join together the two extremes. This is why the two are descended from Heaven, and afterwards return to Heaven, in order to manifest their power over the Earth.

Metals on the earth bear two things inside them, an earthly part and a heavenly one. The heavenly essences of the metals has descended to earth, and returns again to Heaven, uniting the two opposites and thus showing power over the Earth. Again we seem to have a reference to the Emerald Tablet.

IX. It gathers to itself the strength of things above, and of things below.

As the Sun penetrates the clouds and illuminates the earth, in this manner the Spirit being prepared of this sort and separated from its clouds, illuminates all which is obscure.

In the same way as the rays of the Sun penetrate the dense matter of the clouds to illuminate the earth, so does the spirit prepared in this same way illuminate the obscure matter freed from its clouds. Here our author seems to intend the 'spirit' to mean the alchemical transmuting essence. This transmuting tincture shines like the sun through the dark clouds of matter.

Within this Spirit there are two forms to consider, in its moisture and in its poison. Its moisture is double, and conserves all bodies, with a bitter salt. Its poison is likewise double and consumes and destroys them.

Within this spirit (this transmuting tincture) are a moisture and a poison. Its moisture can conserve and nourishes all bodies. Its poison has the power to consume and destroy them.

Those are the faculties that are shut up in the veins and in the chaos, that have the same effects when you take it from the earth; but when it is prepared by the separation of the good from the bad its force must manifest itself and its power over the perfect and the imperfect.

These two powers, the nourishing moisture and destroying poison, are sealed up in the veins of the earth and in the chaos of the Creation. They have the same effects even when removed from the earth into the cosmos. When it is prepared by separating the good from the bad then its power over the perfect and the imperfect will show itself.

This short text is an exploration of some philosophical ideas about the spiritual nature of the philosophers' stone. It seems to use the framework of the well known Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus. This is a text of spiritual alchemy, beautifully condensed and crafted. It expresses a number of alchemical ideas without explicitly mentioning them. It is easy to quickly read over without appreciating its finer points. This is a work in which the ideas are tightly compressed. It concludes with an allegorical section, expressing these ideas in another form.

Riddle

*I live in the mountains and on the plain;
I was the father before there were sons;
I have engendered my mother,
And my mother has carried me in her womb and given birth to me without need of nourishment.*

*I am hermaphroditic and I have two natures;
I am victorious over all the strong,
And I am vanquished by the most feeble and small;
There is nothing so beautiful under heaven, nor anything with a form so perfect.*

*There proceeds from me an admirable bird,
Which from its bones, which are my bones, makes a small nest
Where, flying without wings, it revivifies itself in death.
By Art, surpassing even the abilities of Nature, it is at last transformed to a king, which surpasses
infinitely the other six.*

This is the true miracle of the Terrestrial Heaven by the Art of the Sages.

This allegorical riddle uses the device of weaving together the opposites, and leading these further into the paradoxical. Thus he lives in the mountains and on the plain, a uniting of opposites, pushed into paradox when he says he has given birth to his mother who carried him in her womb.

The first verse seems to be presenting the origins of the philosophers' stone. It is made from that which is on the mountains above and that which is in the plains below. It was a father before the sons were born, perhaps implying it contained in itself this essence at the beginning which only later was able to manifest as the sons. It gave birth to its own mother. Again perhaps the idea, seen in the text section, that this stone pre-existed in Heaven before it took on the matrix of matter.

The second verse alludes to the double nature of the stone. It can win against the strongest, but it is meek and easily overcome by the weak.

The third verse, presents the picture of the stone taking the form of a bird and making a nest of its own bones. Then, though it lacks wings it can still fly, and revives itself by dying. Here the reappearance of the opposites is pushed far into paradox. This bird is finally transformed into a king that surpasses the other six. Here we undoubtedly have an allusion to the seven planetary metals with its king, the solar gold. At the end of the work, the true miracle of the Terrestrial Heaven, is the making of gold by the art of the alchemical sages.