

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 10 : Texts of spiritual alchemy.

Today the word ‘spiritual’ has come to mean many things – anything that is not material in origin, something that is philosophical, or aspirational, or inspiring in some way like a work of art. The word has become expanded so far from its original meaning that almost anything could be placed under its now extremely large umbrella. For the purposes of this course we should interpret the word ‘spiritual’ more in the way it was understood in earlier centuries. Thus we should read ‘spiritual’ more in the sense of ‘religious’, or dealing with matters of God and the Spirit. It would be an instructive exercise at this point for you to put ‘spiritual alchemy’ into a Google search. There you will find many pages with absolutely no cohesion between the different ideas that people label as spiritual alchemy.

A number of works which we recognise as alchemical explored a spiritual or religious aspect of alchemy. In the main period we are considering 13th - 18th century Europe, religion almost invariably meant a Christian perspective. We have already identified a group of alchemical texts which take an alchemical view of cosmology. These often have a spiritual association as they usually place cosmological speculations within the prevailing Christian cosmology of that age. One of the earliest alchemical writings in the German language is the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* (The book of the Holy Trinity) written around 1410. This work drawn parallels between the alchemical process and the life and Passion of Christ. Unfortunately it has not yet been translated into English so I cannot use it as a textual example here.

Without providing an absolute definition of the term, we can identify some aspects that we might label ‘spiritual alchemy’ in alchemical works.

■ A search for a religious dimension to alchemy.

As an example let us look at a work by Blaise de Vigenere *A treatise on Fire and Salt*, 1618. Much of this book, certainly the first book ‘On Fire’, is written in a elevated style, where he reaches out for a spiritual view of alchemy. Here he is speaking about the lighting of a torch or candle.

Nothing should better represent to us the four worlds, namely, the white which is supercelestial, the blue celestial, the match fired, the Elementary, and the burning darkness, Hell, which abundantly shows us the body. Redness, the vital spirits, resident in the blood; the blue, the soul; the white, the intellect, and the divine character imprinted in the soul: and as the blue light doth quickly change into yellow, quickly into white, the soul also can do the same according as it shall incline itself to good or to evil...

So the fire in this respect is fourfold. Black in the lower part of its wick, where the flame that is fastened to it, is blue. Red in the top of the wick, and the flame white. This which relates also, to the four Elements: black, material, to the Earth; Blue more spiritual to the air; Red to fire; and white to water. For heaven is composed of fire and water, which is above the heavens...

...By reason whereof we must adhere and let ourselves be salted with this white fire, and be illuminated with this fair white light that never varies, following that which is said in the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy "You which adhere to the Lord, your God, you are all living also, as at this day." But if our blue light the soul, adhere to the black, and to the red, which are our sensualities and concupiscences [desires], the strange fire will force itself into us, and will devour and consume us. This knowledge of the Elements, and of their colours, does not insist only in composed bodies, here below, but thereby we may mount as by Jacob's Ladder, the height of this celestial world, where the Elements are also, yet of another sort, more simple and depured: and from thence to pass beyond into the intelligible world, where they are in their true essence; for all consists in the four Elements.

Will we dive more deeply into the secrets of this Cabal? This Composition and Regiment of the Elements, is no other thing then the sacrosanct, four-lettered ineffable Jehovah: which comprehends all that which is, was, and shall be: where the little and final ? notes the body and matter, or other the like, where the Fire cleaves or fastens unto: The vau or cloud ? copulative which assembles the two ? the intelligible and the sensible, are the spirits that join the Soul with the Body: the red inflammation of the coal or wick, with the azure flame, do signify the soul: and the Jod is the white unchangeable and permanent flame of the intellect, where all at length comes to terminate, which whiteness is the seat of the true spiritual hidden light, which is not seen nor known, but by itself: for indeed our nature to take it in itself, is but a dark substance; right resembling the Moon, which hath no light but what it receives from the Sun, which she is apt to receive, as our soul is that of the intellectual light...

■ The spiritual or moral development of the individual.

The *Waterstone of the Wise*, written by Johann Siebmacher and first printed in 1619, is another text which has a substantial spiritual component, here in association with a moral aspect. Seeking the philosophers' stone ennobles the seeker, gives them wisdom and insight into the spiritual. Though this is a commonplace sentiment today, it was not often expressed in alchemical literature.

Concerning the end of this great Art, and the excellence, virtue, efficacy, and unspeakable utility of the marvellous Philosophers' Stone, much has been written, yet has no one been able to tell out its thought-surpassing glory or to adequately set forth its fame. All sages have regarded it as the chief felicity that this earth can afford, without which no one can attain perfection in this world. For Morienus says: "He who has this Stone has all, and needs no other help." For it includes all temporal felicity, bodily health, and solid good fortune...

Moreover, the Sages own that through its means they invented the seven liberal arts, and sought and obtained sustenance for themselves. God gave them this gift that they might not

be hindered in their researches by poverty, or driven to flatter the rich for the sake of gain, and thus become contemptible, and as a jest or by-word in His sight. The Stone enabled them to discern the great mysteries of the Divine wonders, and the inexhaustible riches of the Divine Glory. By it their hearts were roused and stirred up to a more intimate knowledge of God. For they sought not to obtain great wealth, or the honour and pleasures of this world, but all their delight was to search out and contemplate the marvellous secrets of Nature.

They regarded the works of God with very different eyes, and in a very different manner than most men in our own times, who, alas, look on them like cows or calves, and pursue the study of our noble Art for the sake of wealth, and temporal advantage and pleasure. But they will never find what they seek. For God gives not this gift to the wicked, who despise His word, but to the godly who strive to live honestly and quietly in this wicked and impure world, and to lend a helping hand to the needy brethren; or, in the words of the poet:

“God gives this Art to the sincere and good, nor can the world purchase it with all its gold. The vulgar know nothing of this Mystery, for if any man be impious, he seeks the Stone in vain. He who holds it in silence dwells where he would, and fears neither accidents, nor thieves, nor any evil. For this reason this sacred gift is granted to few: it is in the hands of God, and He gives it to whomsoever He will.”

...The practice of this Art enables us to understand, not merely the marvels of Nature, but the nature of God Himself, in all its unspeakable glory. It shadows forth, in a wonderful manner, how man is the image of the most Holy Trinity, the essence of the Holy Trinity, and the Oneness of Substances in that Trinity, as well as the difference of Persons; the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, His Nativity, Passion, Death, and Resurrection; His Exaltation and the Eternal Happiness won by Him for us men; also our purification from original sin, in the absence of which purification all good actions of men would be vain and void - and, in brief, all the articles of the Christian faith, and the reason why man must pass through much tribulation and anguish, and fall a prey to death, before he can rise again to a new life.

■ Writings which have a devotional quality, being like prayers or petitions to the Divine. Here is an example from Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi historia*, 1617 (the survey of both the Macrocosm and Microcosm).

Almighty Creator of all things who from thy great kindness to man in particular hast been most graciously pleased to form him with such excellent and sublime powers, as to make him the ultimate end of the whole Creation of our World; whose extent of his reasoning faculties make him of the same nature as thy Holy Angels; in his sensitive powers partaking of the animal part of thy creatures; and in his natural, similar to thy vegetable kingdom; his body partaking of inanimate nature.

He is a provident, sagacious, acute animal endowed with memory, reason and reflection, thus so aspiring a disposition of mind as to approach nearly to a celestial form, and be a worthy object of Angelic contemplation, when soul and body are made up of eternal and mortal composition, so as to answer the purpose of his origin in both his natures, that he may

look up to heavenly objects to adore thee, O! eternal Elohim, while he directs and governs things on Earth, and is at the same time the object of care and attention from thy superior ministers and servants, the Angels, that are always ready to receive and obey thy will; that while he fills the earth below, he may mix with the Elements in the swiftness of his nature, dive into the depths of the sea by the powers of his comprehension, and lay open the Mysteries of the World so clearly to his capacity, that no darkness of the air can conceal them from him, or solidity of the earth can put a stop to his operations; and no depth of water can prevent his penetrating to the bottom...

Nor will I cease, mortal man as I am, to cry out with every power of my mind, by every subtle and spiritual exertion of my reason and understanding, by the lucid substance and ethereal spark of my vital frame, by the Air I breath, by the Fire, the Water, and the Earth this mortal body is composed of; by my internal and external man; by all I comprehend, ascertain and perceive, I cry to thee and proclaim aloud, that thou only art J.H.V.H., thou art the God, who made the Heavens and the Earth; and most graciously and benevolently formed the World and Man, after Thine own image and likeness.

Therefore, let thy Holy Name be blessed and praised now and for evermore, by all creatures, made happy by the introduction of Thy Light, and particularly by me.

■ In the early 17th century there emerged through Valentin Weigel and especially Jacob Boehme a type of elevated mystical spiritual writing that in part drew on alchemical ideas. This continued to influence writers through into the 18th century. Here is an example from Dionysius Freher writing at the beginning of the 18th century. Freher continued to explore the mystical ideas of Boehme. Here he places the work of alchemy firmly in a spiritual context. No laboratory experiments for Freher, instead he looked for the transmuting substance in the blood of Christ.

In these words also lieth plainly, the possibility for obtaining the perfection in the Philosophical Work; which is rightly and firmly grounded hereupon by Behmen. For if God gave us, out of his infinite love, that which is the greatest and the highest, how could he have withheld from us, that which is much lesser and lower? If Man, in this divine power, bestowed upon him by free grace, can verily rule and triumph again over sin, death, devil, and hell, whom he made himself subject unto by his lust, why should he not also be enabled thereby, to rule and triumph again over the curse in the Earth, he brought into it by the same lust, when this latter is but a natural consequence of that former; nay an inconsiderable one in comparison to that? Truly it is inseparable therefrom, if that former be really attained unto, and provided that all the qualities that are requisite thereto, be verily found in the Artist or philosopher.

All these qualities are, as in their principal sum and substance, concentrated in this, that the Artist first must have the curse in himself transmuted into the Heavenly Blessing, through the holy tincturing blood of Jesus Christ. Which Behmen sometimes also thus expresses, "He must first be, and have really that same in himself, which he will make or introduce into metals without himself". And this he frequently presses home to every one, warning earnestly and calling Heaven and Earth to witnesses, that none shall presume to meddle with the curse

in the Earth, before he be really delivered, as to his inward Man, from that curse in himself; or else he may expect to earn nothing else but curse instead of blessing. Before this his own internal deliverance, he may have indeed so many fine notions of this work in his brain; but the real process cannot be manifest in him, and so not understood by him, in that experimental fullness and exactness which is required.

The same he offers also to the serious consideration of such a one, under these and the like philosophical terms - He is to know that his Mercury is kindled in the fiery Mars, and burns in the eternal Saturn, in the terrible impression of darkness; his Venus is captivated, his water dried up, his Jupiter is become a fool, his Sun is darkened, and his Moon turned into a black night. And now there is no other remedy but to take Venus (the eternal love of God) and to introduce that into his poisoned Mercury and Mars, that they may be tinctured thereby, and then his Sun will shine again and Jupiter rejoice, etc. Which he further illustrates, by plain intelligible words, all representing most excellently his own way, practice and experience.

In a strange way the spiritual alchemy presented in these works is relatively easy for us to read today. It is perhaps close to the type of speculative esoteric material that emerged in the 20th century. But although it may be easy to read the text, it is often difficult to understand the ideas contained there, as these writers were penetrating into deep matters. For example, what exactly is meant by the phrase “the Artist first must have the curse in himself transmuted into the Heavenly Blessing, through the holy tincturing blood of Jesus Christ”? At first reading this might seem to be merely the simple Christian message of becoming cleansed of what is seen as sin within us, but we may be missing out on some more profound mystical and spiritual idea based on the writer’s inner experiences. Because of this we often feel that we have to read and reread such material as we are not entirely penetrating the meaning. This type of material, probably like all spiritual works, often requires frequent visits.

One of the great difficulties with reading this more spiritual material is that we may feel we easily understand it, because we have read a lot of this kind of material in recently published books. We draw on our reading of the 20th century authors, the theosophists, anthroposophists, the esotericists, the depth psychologists. All of these gather ideas from diverse traditions and throw them into an eclectic melting pot, and view this through their particular filter of preconceptions – contrived philosophy, eastern ideas, archetypes, supposed links between totally unrelated traditions, reading Christian ideas against a non-Christian background, references to secret traditions, or mysterious means of transmitting information. All this is a delight to the modern mind, but a great obstacle towards us penetrating to what these original spiritual alchemical writers were actually saying in their text. To truly read these works, one must be prepared to try and step into the intellectual and cultural world these writers inhabited, and not to drag their writings into our present age.

There are two exercises attached to this lesson. In order to become aware of how much you read into this type of text, you should attempt two readings of each of these sample texts. Firstly, try and read it through all the esoteric, psychological, new age and other such modern preconceptions. Do this perhaps in an exaggerated way, as you did in the first lesson of this course. Then attempt to read it more true to the era and context of the original writer.

EXAMPLE 1

From the *Corpus Hermeticum*, book 16.

Hermes :

And as much Matter as there was laid up by him, the Father made it all into a Body, and swelling it, made it round like a Sphere, endued it with Quality, being itself immortal, and having Eternal Materiality.

The Father being full of Ideas, sowed Qualities in the Sphere, and shut them up, as in a Circle, deliberating to beautify with every Quality, that which should afterwards be made.

Then clothing the Universal Body with Immortality, lest the Matter, if it would depart from this composition, should be dissolved into its own disorder.

For when the Matter was incorporeal, O Son, it was disordered, and it hath here the same confusion daily revolved about other little things, endued with Qualities, in point of Augmentation, and Diminution, which men call Death, being indeed a disorder happening about earthly living wights.

For the Bodies of Heavenly things have one order, which they have received from the Father at the Beginning, and is by the instauration of each of them, kept indissolveable.

But the instauration of earthly Bodies, is their consistence; and their dissolution restores them into indissoluble, that is, Immortal.

And so there is made a privation of Sense, but not a destruction of Bodies.

Now the third living wight is Man, made after the Image of the World; and having by the Will of the Father, a Mind above other earthly wights.

And he hath not only a sympathy with the second God, but also an understanding of the first.

For the second God, he apprehends as a Body but the first, he understands as Incorporeal, and the Mind of the Good.

Tat:

And does this living wight not perish?

Hermes:

Speak advisedly, O Son, and learn what God is, what the World, what an Immortal Wight, and what a dissolvable One is.

And understand that the World is of God and in God; but Man of the World and in the World.

The Beginning, and End, and Consistence of all, is God.

[A 'wight' is a name for a creature and often for a supernatural or spiritual being.]

EXAMPLE 2

From 'the natural Chymical Symbol or short Confession' of Henry Khunrath, written in the year 1597. This translation is from a manuscript in the Ashmole collection in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Who searches after natural Chymical philosophy, that is, Nature's book of the great world written by the divine wisdom of God himself, being a true lover and friendly desirer to get the Catholic [universal], natural, artificial Universal Stone, truly called great, being the universal Stone of the wise men. First of all he must get the true universal Mercury of the wise. He that does not fully and perfectly know this, neither can govern it the natural, Chymical way, nor use it accordingly, doubtless such a one has lost his labour and charge, in seeking the benefit of Art and Nature by alchemy.

It is the true philosophical doctrine of the philosophers Mercury, that Three is One general Chaos, Three in essence, namely Body, Soul, and Spirit; and these three essences are had in one substance or thing and near at hand.

And neither is their substance changed one into the other, nor is the essence dissolved in the substance, or divided in the subject.

There is one essence of the Body, another of the Spirit, another of the Soul. But the Body, Soul, and Spirit are one thing, wherein all the three are together equally necessarily present at the same time.

Like as the Body, even such is the Spirit, and such is the Soul.

For the Body is not made by the art of Man, nor is the Spirit made by the art of Man, neither is the Soul made by the art of Man.

The Body is incomprehensible of us, not in respect of its bigness, but in respect of the property, for it is in its way, notwithstanding, of an Animal, Mineral or Vegetable quality, according to the first Catholic matter of the Great World, that is universal; the Spirit is immense to us because it is of Shamaim, that is of Fiery Spirit, (of spiritual fiery water) of the general principle of the world, of us incomprehensible a heaven.

The Soul is immense to us, as it were a little comprehensible spark of the immense soul of the large fabric of the Great World. The Body [that is Nature] is universal, the Spirit is universal, the Soul is universal and there are not three several or distinct universals, but they are one universal indivisible, visible and comprehensible to sense.

Now like as there are not three made by Man's art, neither divided and distinct, immeasurable by us, yet they are by Man's art one, not made and immensurable of us (in virtues not incorporeal substance). In like manner the Body is powerful, the Spirit is powerful, and the Soul is powerful, and yet there are not three divided or distinct powerfuls, but they are one powerful and conjunct united Nature. (Namely in the State of Energias, which otherwise is the power omnipotent of Elohim.) Even so the Body is Mercury, the Spirit is Mercury, the Soul is Mercury, and yet they are not three Mercuries but one Mercury. Also the Body is the Lord of the art of alchemy, and Spirit is the Lord of the art of Alchemy, and the Soul is the Lord of the art of Alchemy. And yet there are not three Lords of the art of Alchemy, but one Triune of Body, Spirit and Soul substantial Azoth. One Triune Azoth, that is the Catholic Mercury of the Wise, Lord of the Art of Alchemy.