

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 23 : A sample reading for you to undertake.

For this penultimate lesson I want you to attempt to make a reading of a rather charming little work which incorporates many of the different types of alchemical text. It would be best if you pasted the text into a word processor and then, as I have shown you in previous lessons, make a paragraph by paragraph transcription of the text into a readable form. This text is not too difficult in its language, but you will find it instructive to rewrite the work into other words. This will help you appreciate its structure much more than merely reading it through a couple of times.

This piece by Solinus Saltzthal was originally published in German as *Discurs von der Grossmächtigen Philosophischen Universal-Artzney,... genant Lapis Philosophorum Trismegistus*, 1654, and a few years later was translated into Latin as *Discursus de philosophico fonte salino*, and included in the final volume of the *Theatrum Chemicum* compendium of 1661. In English the title reads 'Discourse on the Fountain of Philosophical Salt'. The translation below was made some years ago by my colleague Patricia Tahlil.

I happened one day to be taking a rest from my work. I was not thinking about alchemy at all. So I began to put my laboratory in order, picking up the glass instruments, pots, and other vessels that were lying here and there. I also repaired some furnaces. Finally, when I had spent the whole day on these tasks, I was tired, and sat down on one of the chairs at the table. Sleep came over me very swiftly.

I had scarcely closed my eyes when someone opened the door. I saw a strange little man. He greeted me warmly. He said that he was a student of alchemy and wanted me to teach him. He said that he had come to meet me because he had heard about my work. I began a conversation with him and asked him how he liked my instruments. Then he asked me which operations I used them for. I told him that I was looking for the stone. He smiled and said that he thought I must be using such remarkable instruments to deceive careless people. He said I would see that I had really been deceiving myself instead. I have never let embarrassment get in the way of my learning something. Besides, I could see that what he said was true, and I was well aware of my shortcomings.

I asked him whether he had an easier way, and whether I needed more instruments of various kinds.

He said, "I see that you don't consider it a disgrace to learn something and to admit your ignorance. Many people I have visited do feel disgraced. But you want to profit from what I have to say. So I will show you things that very few people out of many thousands have ever seen".

When he had said that he started to leave, and I followed him. He looked back, saw me following him, and said: "Now I know that you have a great desire to learn, since you are determined to follow me".

Then he took my hand and led me out past the city gate. There, put into shore, was a small boat called Reason. We got in and set out over the water with the help of two oars. Soon we could no longer see the city, which was called Ignorance. We had just passed by the towers of a city called Arrogance when we caught sight of a high mountain. He told me it was the Salt Mountain, and that its salt water gave moisture to a kingdom located in that region, a kingdom called Earth. The water made it so fertile that animals, plants, and metals grew there in a most remarkable way. And if that mountain were not there, the entire fabulous kingdom would perish in an instant. But as long as the mountain lasted, the kingdom would be so abundantly fertile that it would never lack for anything it needed. To promote this great fertility, gold grew there in such abundance that there was always work for the miners.

When I had heard this, I answered: "If this water nurtures all things with its power and consequently causes even gold to grow, it should rightly be called the moist radical, or philosophic mercury".

He said: "I see that you have spoken intelligently. You have observed that this water of the wise is quicksilver, the same thing that makes metals become alive and begin to grow. So that you can learn more about this matter, we will direct the course of our boat to it".

I obeyed his words and took up the oars with a sorrowful heart. With words and labour I tried to move the boat forward, and in a short time we had made good progress. Finally, after great effort, I put to shore at the Salt Mountain. Then I anchored the boat called Reason so firmly that the waves could never move it from that spot.

We began to climb the mountain, which was dripping with moisture, and after twenty paces caught sight of some hermitages. Here members of the Rosicrucian Order were living on the fruit of the mountain. The old man listened to what they were saying, and then led me up to the mountain.

I saw a sumptuous fountain springing out of a statue of Venus. Its water was salty. There was a stone basin to receive it, and in the middle of the basin stood the statue, atop a white swan. The water was sent down through various small pipes into that stone coffer. Some of it overflowed the rims and ran off. Along the four sides of this fountain stood four animals - a green lion, a white unicorn, a basilisk, and a dragon. On their backs they bore four white marble columns, and these were joined at the top by arches in the form of a cross. Mercury was sitting above the crossing, and on his head a winged Fortune was standing on one foot. As for the nature of the water, it stayed salty for a while, and was shimmering in colour, though really transparent, clear, and crystalline. Then, because my servant wanted to have something to remember this moment forever, I told him to climb to the rim of the fountain and draw up some water. But he leaned over too far and fell into the water, and before I could get hold of him, he vanished under the water. Part of him was transmuted into water and part went up into the air like smoke.

When the old man saw that, he handed me a telescope so that I could watch where the vapour went. I saw it filter down to a certain traveller walking along the road. He took it in with the air he was breathing.

Then the old man said: "Behold, now the water of the fountain is prepared. Its water has been

transmuted into animal substance. The water from your servant has brought that about. Now it is like female seed, ready to receive forms from animal sperm, if only they can come together".

As I walked around the fountain and looked at it closely, I saw a pipe coming down from the mountain, a pipe that was connected to the fountain and had a stopper that was easy to open. I asked the old man what it was for, and he told me that the fountain flowed away from that place. Moistened the earth, and united to it all kinds of animal seed. Then all kinds of birds, worms, and animals grew from the union. But when the stopper closed, the fountain could not flow out.

After this explanation, the old man went on to say: "Behold how powerful this fountain is. It joins itself with animal seed and grows along with it. Do you see how it frees all animal bodies through its own ardent love, which is charged with magnetic force? It makes whatever is fixed similar to itself; but whatever is volatile, namely, masculine seed, it leaves free to soar. When the seed comes back, now grown heavy, it fixes it, so that the fountain can carry on the solution and coagulation without pause. Therefore, if you can purge dissolved water, recombine it with fixed water, and then fix it, you will have a much more excellent compound than you had before. Using this water, you will soon manage to get a deeper understanding of all animals. You will then come up with the true philosophic medicine derived from all animals".

Then I asked the old man the name of this water. He said it was called universal doubled mercury, also microcosmic mercury. Then he said: "The water of the fountain was once universal at all three mountains, but now because of your servant it has become microcosmic. So an inscription has been placed over the fountain: 'Make mercury through mercury through mercurial water'. The smoke that rose up from the fountain your servant fell in is called sublimated mercury. It was bound and constricted by means of fixed water, and now by the same means it can be bound over again".

Next I asked him the location of the fountain, and whether there was any other like it.

The old man replied as follows: "There is no other fountain like it among all animal things. Only this one can bind itself with the volatile, sublimated mercury derived from all animal things, and only this one can put on their form. The place where it is found is called Pansoma" ['pan' universal, 'soma' - body].

Then the old man ordered me to fill a phial with that water. When I had filled it, I tried hard to glimpse my servant in it, but he had dissolved in the mysterious, greenish water. Afterward we left the first fountain and moved on to the second, which was sumptuously decorated with a statue of Venus just like the other one. Its four sections were connected by four elm trees forming a cross from above. Alongside were vines with clusters of grapes on which another Mercury was displayed. As before, Fortune stood above it. The properties of this water are the same as the water of the first fountain before it was changed by my servant. Then I asked the old man another question about this fountain - if its water were sprinkled over the earth, would it cause it to grow?

He said it would not: "This fountain cannot unite with any sublimated mercury unless it has been fermented with the fixed salt water of its kingdom and transmuted".

Then the old man took a knife and cut off a cluster of grapes and threw it into the water, where it vanished at once. A fine vapour rose from it. At that moment the old man handed me a phial in which to catch the vapour. When I had caught it, he poured in a little of the salt water from the fountain. In the middle of the phial a volatile vapour, once again fixed, took form. A stone also

took form, which he called the vegetable stone of the philosophers. He said that in this way all the best essences could be extracted from vegetable things, if they were dissolved in this water and again coagulated.

When I asked him to open the small pipe leading from the fountain, he complied at once. With the pipe open, all the earth around it was moistened with dew, and in an instant everything sprouted, since that water had been joined with all vegetable seeds. Then he looked about for a bit of silver, and when he had thrown it into the fountain it grew up again in the form of a tree.

"Behold", he said, "how this fountain itself becomes vegetable through the vegetable fermentation of grapes. So it has also drawn out a metal into vegetable form".

From this I inferred: "Therefore an animal fountain will draw out things from the other kingdoms into animal form".

But he replied: "You are asking too much of me; be content with what I have already said".

And so he closed the pipe and the fountain ceased to flow. I took the phial filled with water, which was of two colours, white and green, and went with the old man to the third fountain. It was magnificently decorated with a statue of Venus and four columns. One of the columns was made of gold, the second of silver, the third of copper, and the fourth of tin. They came together in an arch at the top, and a sheet of lead was paced over it. On top of this sat Mercury with Fortune, arranged as before.

When we drew near this fountain, the old man addressed me in these words: "Behold, at the other two fountains you saw marvellous things that you had never seen before. This fountain contains the explanation of the two previous ones. Here is the foundation of all hermetic knowledge. You will take it in as if it were formal instruction. Therefore, pay close attention to what will be dealt with here".

Then I repeatedly asked him to begin the instruction right away and to let the fountain flow free, so that I could see exactly how the mechanism worked. The old man told me it was impossible to do that. It would require an order to make the fountain metallic. And it would have to be done by means of salt water that was already metallic. This proves the truth of the words written around the fountain: 'Make Mercury through mercury through mercurial water'.

I asked him how, in that case, I could obtain metallic mercury.

But he said: "Do you see what material the fountain is made of?" It was made of grey stone with many veins in it. "Don't you see how many fragments the inhabitants of this mountain have chipped off? Surely they must have done so for a reason".

Saying this, he gave me a hammer, and I pounded off a piece that weighed the same as half the water in the fountain. I threw it into the water and it vanished there, while the water stayed clear and beautiful. But it lost its brilliant gleam. As I noticed this, I saw waves like surf suddenly stirring in the fountain. But they gradually diminished, and most of them grew very slight until they turned to black ice and the fountain dried up completely.

The old man saw it and said: "Now the union of universal mercury and mineral mercury is complete. Now the transmutation of universal mercury to mineral mercury will take place, and the manifestation of mineral mercury by means of the universal - a task that took only three minutes".

We let the operation rest in that state for half an hour, in order to make sure of it. By then the fountain began to flow again and was as white as snow.

At that point the old man said: "Behold, now I have the doubled mercury in my possession. Now I own it - white lily, powder of adamant, chief central poison of the dragon, spirit of arsenic, green lion, incombustible spirit of the moon, life and death of all metals, moist radical, universal dissolving nutriment, true menstruum of the philosophers, which without doing any damage or harm reduces metal to first matter. This is the true water for sprinkling, in which the living seeds of metals inhere, and from which other metals can be produced. Through this water their potency remains in solution in this water. In all kinds of aqua fortis and other such unknown philosophic waters, they lose and relinquish this potency. In this exalted water is the true vitriol of the wise, of which Rupescissa said: 'Vitriol or salt is the proper seed to generate all metals, including both the remote and the proximate seed'. I will show you its power as clearly as in a mirror: for this water from the fountain radically, silently, and wondrously dissolves all metals, white and black, by its own innate power and magnetic force. In an instant it liquefies metals by its own internal fire. It opens their pores and enters them like feminine seed, attracting the masculine sperm to itself as if it were attracting the soul of the metal. It leaves the lifeless body behind like refuse that cannot endure the fire. Certainly it is a very marvellous thing that this water strips metals of their dignity. It is the dry path of the philosophers, by which metals are reduced to their first matter. It is considered very swift, but compendious. Since we want to proceed on the humid path, in which common water is added to this water to make it liquid, we must first make the metals very bright. This operation takes a great deal of time and effort, but it is beautiful to look at. This is the principal operation of philosophic mercury consisting in the radical solution of metals. They are dissolved away from their seeds silently, by a force of burning love. From this principal operation of the water, all the rest follow, beginning with coagulation and generation. This saying of the philosophers applies: 'The corruption of one thing is the generation of another'. Thirdly, it is called philosophic medicine. These three secondary powers contain countless others within them, all of which arise from the first radical solution. Up to this point, you have perceived the qualities of philosophic mercury as the feminine seed of metals. What follows is everything about the correct use of the philosophic stone".

After he had told me this, the old man showed me that I would need to take earth, the matrix of gold, and put it in the water. I asked him where I could get it. He replied that the same substrate that contains mercury also contains the metallic earth of gold. He gave me a hammer, and I chipped off the same amount as before. When it fell into the water, he asked me to give him enough gold to weigh the same as one sixty-fourth of the water. I handed him four Hungarian ducats, which he filed down and planted in the earth of the fountain. Then the water, white from the earth, gradually begins to change colour to red and finally dried up completely.

The old man continued: "Now the union of gold earth and philosophic mercury is complete, and the principium of the stone has been made. Now follow the radical dissolution of gold, the manifestation of the seed of gold, and the radical conjunction of the principia".

This task was finished in half an hour. But the water had taken on a purple colour, and when I realized that it was bland and tasteless I cried out in terror and asked what had become of our Mercury. The old man ordered me to pour in some common water and begin the process of extraction. When this was done, the water changed colour and became salty - but not corrosive - rather than tasteless. The old man ordered me to dry and clarify it, since no more water could be

extracted. When this was done, there was some unstable white gold in the dregs, and I saw that it had been robbed of its soul. When it dried at the edge of the fountain, a rainbow appeared in simple form with all its colours, and from it the golden water of the Cabalists proceeded but soon vanished once more. While the fountain was drying up and leaving behind the red dust shot through with redness as intense and vibrant as that of the sun. I took out this dust and put it in a phial.

Then I asked the old man what I should do with it, and got this answer: "If you extract this dust with fine, burning water and concentrate it, you will have true potable gold and a philosophers' stone that is not yet altogether fixed and is useful in the cure of all illnesses. But if you coagulate it for a long time and fix it in fire, you will possess a permanent, fixed philosophers' stone with which to cure metals. Taken by itself, this dust is called the first matter of the stone, because all three principia of generation are subtly brought together in it. Here also the seed of gold, meaning its feminine seed, and earth of gold are joined in correct proportion. Therefore, if you can enkindle the natural fire hidden in the seed of gold using external fire, and cause it to look for nourishment which it converts into itself, you will have something to rejoice about. Only make sure that you have been properly instructed, since metal seeds draw in the same amount of saline water as you need for fixation. If you add too much of that water to them, they will dissolve before they can be fixed".

Then I asked him what was the name of this, and he said he called it mercury of the philosophers.

When we had thoroughly looked over the three fountains, we began to climb back down the mountain toward level ground. But the old man led me into a mountain cave where there lay a magnificent statue armed with a two-edged sword.

I asked him why the statue was there, and got this response: "There is on this mountain a spring that belongs to the three fountains. This statue, indeed Nature herself, guards the spring and keeps the three fountains from ever going dry. The spring originated in these fountains. Nevertheless, it was connected with them for this purpose also: for the spring water to fill the fountains, called Pansomata, as it went up the mountain; to take animal, vegetable, and mineral operations from them, afterward to pour itself over the seeds. It grew along with the seeds and left its form on their dead bodies. Then it became spring water once again, again went up from the spring to the fountains, and again took on a new form in them. When it went back to the spring, it lost this form. And so it was in constant circulation as it went up and down the mountain. In the spring was first matter - formless, omniform, and of single form. But when it settled in the fountains it became second matter, known as doubled mercury of the philosophers".

I took a fair portion of this water and kept it. Then I went back with the old man to the Rosicrucian hermits. They showed me a small furnace, a pot, and a glass vessel which they used to cook the three salts, dissolve things in them, and reconstitute them to make excellent medicines.

The old man spoke to me as follows: "Now you have seen all of Nature, all in all. Now you have proved that God has given to every single body a masculine seed to preserve it and also a feminine seed. The feminine seed takes its origin, preservation, and nourishment from this plenteous fountain. You have seen and understood how all things return to their first matter - feminine seed to its spring, and masculine seed to another body - and are then led back after their separation. And you have seen how they come together again in constant circulation.

Behold, you now have a true compendium for investigating nature. You now have a laboratory in which all three things can operate by themselves, and in which animal, vegetable, and metal objects can dissolve. Now you can work in such a way that you will please Nature and win honour for yourself".

Once we begin our reading of this text, we should immediately see that it takes the form of an alchemical allegory. This is indicated by the device of our narrator falling asleep and then entering an allegorical space. We should try to uncover the structure of this allegory. Obviously there is a focus on the threefold, as with the three fountains. It will help us if we make a chart or flow diagram of the events surrounding the visits to each fountain, noting any symbolism, transformations of colour changes. We saw how useful it was to draw such diagrams in our lesson on allegories. It is perhaps instructive to remember that the author of this allegory was not merely improvising a story, but had some philosophical ideas which he was translating into the events of the story. In a sense we have to reverse-engineer the allegory so we can come to see what these ideas are. Here we must avoid pushing a modern interpretation upon these. We can easily rush to project our modern ideas onto an allegory like this. It is important to stand back within ourselves and instead trust in the writer, and let him speak directly to us through his text, without us mirroring it in a load of modern esoterics.

After the visit to the fountain another phase of alchemical activity seems to be undertaken. We should try and analyse this in detail. How does this relate to the earlier visits to the fountains? Note the colour changes and how they reflect alchemical stages. The final paragraph is very important. It seems to suggest that this allegory contains a blueprint that will enable the narrator now to be able to work his alchemy.

I chose this piece, partly because it is rather entertaining, and I did not want to close our course on too solemn and heavy a note. Although this is a fine story, we will, as we develop our reading of the piece, realise that it has woven into it a philosophical basis for alchemical work.

Our final lesson will to some extent summarise what we have learned so far, but will also focus on the many problems our modern mindset creates to interfere with us truly reading what the alchemist were actually saying through their writings. Alchemy remains one of the most misunderstood of subjects and though this study course cannot immediately answer all these questions, hopefully it can help us untangle some confusions. Now, after studying the twenty three lessons to date, we should be able to read some alchemical texts with a little more understanding, and be able to avoid merely pushing our own misconceptions onto a text - or at least recognise when we are doing this!