

# Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts

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## Lesson 2 : The different types of alchemical works : Part 1 – The practical.

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One of the underlying presumptions of this course is that we are trying to get close to the truth of what alchemy is about. Today we find many belief systems that use ideas derived from alchemy to give them a supposed grounding in history. These belief systems or organisations thus promote their own agenda and present alchemy in a distorted way to us, so it is difficult to know what to believe. But does one need to believe in such an artificial system in order to appreciate alchemy? This course will show us ways we can read what the alchemists themselves said in their texts. We will find this fascinating enough without putting into their mouths the dreams and fantasies of modern writers.

We have shown in the previous lesson that there are a few obstacles to our reading of alchemical texts, but all these obstacles can be overcome if one is really searching for the truth, and trying to see what an alchemist was actually trying to communicate in his writings. Unless we are determined to seek the truth, then we will be seduced by some simplistic belief system which can be very comforting to the soul, but is at its root based on figments of imagination and empty speculation.

In this present lesson and the following we shall look at some different kinds of alchemical works. In order to read a work it is usually important to see its context, and particularly who it was addressing and what it was intended to communicate. Alchemical works are varied, there is no monolithic 'alchemy' to which all its practitioners and writers adhered. Instead alchemy was pursued by many different people in many different ways. When ideas were written down by alchemists into alchemical texts, these were usually idiosyncratic and often contradicted one another.

So let us just look here at some different types of alchemical writings especially concerned with practical experimentation.

**1. An individual alchemist's personal notebook.** We find a number of these in manuscripts in libraries and special collections of alchemical material. These were usually just notebooks, where an individual alchemist recorded some experiments, or copied sentences from books or manuscripts he had been reading that he wanted to preserve for further study.

Here is a short extract from such a notebook or diary. This was written in the 1680's in England by an unknown student of alchemy who personally knew many alchemists working in the

London area at that time.

*April 3rd 1689. Sir Joseph tells me that he has told me nothing but truth and the menstruum made with mercury sublimate and orpiment is best and in that you need not give above three drops at highest but that with mercury sublimate and antimony is every bit as good only you must give of this 12 drops. And he says you must first destill your butter and then rectifie your butter on fresh sublimate and then your gold must be prepared else the menstruum will not touch it and it is to be prepared with saltpeter and common sulphur and as I found by discourse adding from salt common as you may see the way exactly in Metamorphosis Planetarum, a little book and the whole key to that book you will find in five or six lines of verse in the latter end will show you all plain. He tells me he has a menstruum that will dissolve gold as warm water does ice and at the second rectification it will dissolve lead, the third tin, the fourth copper, the fifth iron, the sixth silver and the seventh gold. So that those rectifications are the nine egalls [eagles] mentioned by Philalethes. He tells me when he gives his aurum potabile unrectified then it turns the liquor white but when it is well rectified it then gives the liquor neither lap nor colour. I was telling him of it when Mr Boyle told me of a particular made with the blueish tincture of copper upon silver to make gold.*

This was not intended for publication or even to be read by anyone else, but was merely a diary in which our alchemical student wrote down what he had heard and seen on his visits to the alchemists he knew (and one in particular). So one has to read it with this in mind. It was not an argued piece intended to influence others, but a personal memorandum. Its context is England in the late 17th century during the explosion of interest in alchemy that appeared from the 1650's through to the end of the century.

Such diaries are unusual, but there are a thousand or more such manuscript notebooks that have survived the years, containing recipes, copies of pieces of texts, and descriptions of experiences, which were never intended to be published or seen by anyone other than the writer of the notebook. Such works are entirely straightforward as they have no agenda and are not trying to influence others.

Here is another example from a manuscript notebook from around the same period which also deals with antimony.

*First take finely powdered Hungarian antimony (which I consider the best) or in case such cannot be had other fused antimony, in weight 1 lb., drop it gradually into a red hot crucible, and let it fuse clear.*

*When this happens have ready a thin iron rod, well red hot, and stir it into the fused antimony and it will cause an ebullition and eat into the red hot iron as much as is needful in the space of half of a quarter of an hour, that generally 1 lb. of antimony takes as much as 14 to 18 and even 20 Loth or half ounces. When that is done throw a handful of well dried Sal Niter upon it, and as soon as the Niter is fused it must be poured into a casting cone, and you will find a solid Regulus, of about 18 to 20 or 24 Loth or half ounces in weight. This Regulus must be purified twice with Niter and Tartar and it will show a fine star, especially the Hungarian antimony.*

In this work the author, the writer of the *Metamorphosis Planetarum* mentioned in the diary above, seems to be writing here for an audience. These are not so much personal notes but material for teaching his processes to others, though, in fact, this does not seem to have actually been issued in a printed book.

This is just a short look at this particular type of alchemical work – the individual alchemist's manuscript notebook or diary. It is important to be aware that a large part of the alchemical manuscripts that have come down to us today are of this type, and few have been extensively studied.

**2. The practical treatise on alchemy.** Under this heading we find many printed books and a number of manuscripts which were never published. Generally the author is attempting to explain his insights into the alchemical work to others. Some of these were later issued as printed books but many remained in unpublished form as manuscripts. In the 16th and 17th centuries, a number of works circulated quite widely without actually being printed. People borrowed a manuscript of a work from a friend or colleague and made a copy of this for their own use. Many of these personal manuscript copies are found in libraries and special collections of alchemical material today.

Let us first consider a short extract from the massive volume by Isaac Holland *Opera Mineralia*, printed around 1600 but thought to have been written some time earlier, possibly even in the 15th century.

*[To make an elixir from the gold] My child, take pure mercury, put it into an oven-vessel, upon a furnace with moderate fire, for six weeks, until its moisture, if it has too much of it, be dried up; consequently, that it be between fixed and not fixed, and it be possible to rightly amalgamate with it. Then they took as much gold or silver, prepared by cementing, and amalgamated it with the mercurius, just enough to amalgamate and no more. Thereupon they put it into a glass vessel and put it into the furnace of the wise, or in tripods, and gave it moderate heat, just as if one were to keep lead in flux without getting hard for 9 days. After that, they took it out, and it was a dark powder.*

*Then they again gave it as much mercury as for the first amalgamation, and amalgamated it, so that it came alive again. They put in into the vessel as before, and again heated it for 9 days as previously. They repeated this four or five times, or as often as necessary to keep the amalgamate alive and no longer turning into a powder. Then the gold or silver has drunk sufficiently of the mercurius.*

*Now they took a large glass vessel that was very thick, and they put the amalgamate into it. They put a helm on with a big head, as big as a man's head, in addition to three or four spouts. To every spout they luted a big recipient, and heated moderately for 3 days. After this, they gave a stronger fire for 3 days. Then they made the vessel burning hot for 12 hours. Thus they sublimated all that could be sublimated, but they took care that the vessel was quite tight, because of the lac virginis, which goes over each time and drips in the recipients. They kept this lac virginis well stoppered till they put the stone into putrefaction.*

Here is another such piece from Sir Kenelm Digby's (1603-1665) *Chemical secrets*, printed in 1682.

*A real and true way to volatilize the salt of tartar, and corporate spirit of wine,  
as it was wrought by a noble person beyond sea,  
And by him communicated unto me.*

*He took but one pound of Tartar well calcined, and dissolved it in the air, free from the sun, then filtered, and congealed in a glass vessel, then he calcined it as the Dutchman does (in the next process) to keep it glowing hot for six or eight hours; then dissolved it again in the air, and filtered; congealed, and calcined as before. He repeated this ten times, then dissolved it in distilled vinegar (he used Spanish and French vinegar). The whole secret (as he says) consists in the well distilling of the vinegar, which must be done in B. M. [Balneum Maria or a water bath] but it must be so gentle, that you may receive the phlegm by itself; and as soon as you perceive that the drops come acid, change the recipient, putting on another, and then distil the spirit with a stronger fire, so that you may tell eight or nine between every drop: Continue distilling until it become like a syrup, then change the recipient again, and distil with a stronger fire until it begin to smell of the fire, and that it be almost dry. Rectify this last and strongest part by itself, and put it to the weaker part, (keeping the phlegm by itself for another use) and rectify it together so often until there remain not the least spot at the bottom of the glass after the distillations, which must be to dryness every time, and every time in a clean retort. This is not a strong spirit of vinegar, nor need it be, but this will do the work.*

These pieces are examples of straightforward practical recipes which can be quite easily followed today. There is no attempt in this group of works to conceal, hide or mystify the reader. Instead they seem almost too simple. Not surprisingly many of these recipes do not seem to produce the result they promise. This may be because writers like Digby, collected and recorded in his books, other people's recipes and alchemical process, and he may have erred in describing these at second or third hand. In general these texts are relatively easy to understand, the main obstacles being the language and the use of names for substances which are not identifiable without considerable research and background knowledge of languages.

**3. The coded or obscured practical treatise on alchemy.** This species of alchemical text is really quite common. These appear to be practical alchemical works but infuriatingly use terms which cloak, disguise or obscure the meaning. Sometimes this was done because the writer believed he should not reveal his secrets too openly, but with other writers one can get the impression that they are toying, teasing or playing with their readership for various motives.

Here is an example from a work the *Liber Secretissimus* (the most secret book) supposedly written by George Ripley, but likely written by some unknown alchemist in the 17th century.

*The Whole Work of the Composition of the Philosophical Stone and Grand Elixir,  
and of the First Solution of the Grosse Bodies.*

*Take our Artificial Antimony, but not the Natural Antimony as it comes out of the Earth, for that is too dry for our work, and hath little or no humidity, or fatness in it, but take I say, our Artificial Antimonial Compound, which is abundantly replenished with the Dew of Heaven and the fatness and unctuousity of the earth, wherein precious Oils and rich Mercuries are by Nature closely sealed up, and hidden from the eyes of all ignorant deriders of the great and wonderful mysteries of Almighty God, to the end that seeing they should not see, nor understand, what he hath enclosed in the most obvious, common, and contemptible beginnings of all Things in the whole World. This our Antimonial Compound is only to be revealed to the Children of Art, who firmly believe the constant truth thereof, and whom in all fraternal love and charity we say, that it is made of one Sulphur, and of two Mercuries, which otherwise by the wise Philosophers are called, the Sun, Moon, and Mercury, or as some of them will more plainly have it, Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury, which are the three several and distinct substances and bodies, although for the most part we term them but one Thing, because in the conclusion of our work they make but one Thing, that is our admirable Elixir, and they have all one original, and tend altogether but to one end.*

Like our earlier extracts of pieces from practical treatises on alchemy this begins by asking us to take a starting substance for the work, here antimony. But immediately, the reader's hopes that he will have some simple process to follow are dashed, when the writer tells us it is not common antimony but some special form that he is unwilling to reveal. He will hint and tease us about it, but not give us a name, or a method for making it.

Often they use paradoxical names, describing a substance by an adjective which contradicts the properties of that material, such as, the 'dry water', the 'incombustible sulphur', the 'fixed mercury'. Or they may prefix the name of a substance with the terms 'our', or 'the Philosophers', or 'Philosophical' as in the 'Philosophical Mercury', 'Our sulphur' and so on, to distinguish it from the ordinary material.

In an example from the well known work of Urbigerus, the *Circulatum minus* of 1690, he uses the term 'Diana's tears' to cloak a substance he does not wish to immediately reveal.

*III. Out of Diana's undetermined Tears, when Apollo has appeared, after the Separation of the three Elements, Determination, Digestion and glorious Resurrection, we can, without the Addition of any other created thing, prepare this our determined Elixir: Which is the first, noblest, and most secret way of the Philosophers.*

*IV. The Determination of our Diana's Tears consists only in their perfect and indissoluble Union with the fixt Vegetable Earth, philosophically prepared, purified, and spiritualized: for the love of which they are forced to leave their first universal undetermined Property, and be clothed with a determined particular one, which is required to this our Circulatum Minus.*

Here is an example of the use of terms like ‘Our sulphur’ etc, in an alchemical verse in the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. I have modernised the English.

*In this book I show to you in writing,  
As my brethren do each one,  
A similitude of every like thing,  
Of which we make our Stone.  
Our Stone is made of one simple thing,  
That in him has both soul and life,  
He is Two and One in kind,  
Married together as man and wife:  
Our Sulphur is our masculine,  
Our Mercury is our feminine,  
Our Earth is our Water clear;  
Our Sulphur also is our Fire,  
And as Earth is in our clear Water,  
So is Air in our Fire.*

We see a similar cloaking of alchemical terms in the ‘Chymicall treatise of Arnoldus de Villa Nova Villa’ from a translation in MS Ashmole 1415 in the Bodleian Library.

*Now will I in the name of God make manifest the practice and the very sense of the Philosophers how one shall perfect that Elixir, that is the augmentation of the true tincture and of Silver and Gold only out of the Mercury of the Sages, or the mineral Mercury and in all copper bodies which fall short of perfection, insomuch that they become perfect into a perfect Luna and gold above the natural, which is not that common Mercury, called by the Philosophers prima materia, waterish hot moist and cold, an element, a constant water, a Spirit, a body, a swimming smoke, a blessed water, a water of the wise, a vinegar of Philosophers, a dew of Heaven, virgin Milk, a corporeal Mercury, besides others innumerable names whereby he is called in the Books of the Philosophers; although these names sound variously, yet they signify but one thing, to wit the aforesaid Mercurium Philosophorum, for out of him, and in him and by him only are sought all the virtues of the whole art of Alchemy, and of the red and white tincture....*

This begins by making a promise in God’s name to reveal the practice of making the elixir, but immediately plunges the reader into a series of obscure names which do not allow the clear identification of the actual substance.

In the exercises are few short sections of practical texts. Initially we should try and identify into which class of practical work they fall. At this stage we are not really attempting an actual reading of the pieces. Do not struggle to understand all the detail of the text, instead you should try to see what sort of practical text it is. You will find it essential to your understanding of how to read this type of material, to be able to see how the piece is structured, what its purpose was as a text and how to contextualise it.

**For the exercises, please try and identify under which type of practical alchemical work the following texts should be placed. Is it a personal notebook, an open practical treatise or a coded practical work ?**

## EXERCISE 1

Take this lutinous clay out of Sol or Saturn, (for the working in either the preparation is the same) I say, take that which is most clammy or unctuous, and when you gather it, keep it from the air, as close as you can in a glass or earthen vessel, for it will (which I have admired) in an instant indurate and harden. But put it in a glass vessel, and in that digest it being well stopped in Balneum Marie or in a blind head which is better; but let three parts of the vessel be empty, and let the heat of your Balneum be such as you may easily hold your hand in it. Some Philosophers digested this a philosophical month, which is six weeks, but then their matter was not fresh; for if it be fresh, then fifteen or twenty days is sufficient.

After digestion alter the head, and distil, and you shall have the philosophers oil; which being come, pour it on the matter again, and this till you have so much vinegar as will swim four fingers over the matter; then let it stand twenty-four hours, and it will be tinged yellow; pour that gently off, and distil away your vinegar till it come to a gummy substance; then pour this vinegar on the matter again, and it will be tinged yellow. Distil and reiterate this until your vinegar be no more tinged yellow, then it has sucked out all the spirits out of the clay. Then from the yellow liquor distil away all the vinegar, and you shall have a gummy substance like Saccarum Saturn. Digest this two days, then distil away all the phlegm in Balneo, then let it cool, and put it in a retort, with a great receiver well luted to it as can be; put it into an ash furnace, and distil it again, and by degrees you shall have all your receiver become as white as milk, which is crude Mercury of Philosophers, or the Virgin Milk.

Continue distillation, and a blood red oil shall ascend, which is Sulphur of Philosophers incombustible and unctuous. Continue till no more will come over, with so violent a heat for twelve hours, that you do almost melt the glass; then let it cool, and take off that receiver, and stop it up very close.

Break the retort, and the feces will be as black as pitch, and hard, which grind small on a marble, then reverberate it in an earthen calcining pan, close covered for three days, (but make not the matter red-hot) and lay it two fingers thick in the pan. Then take it out, and either with your vinegar rectified from its feces, or with distilled rainwater, I have tried and found it being well reverberated, that it will take up the salt, hold the best and most proper vinegar. Digest it therefore with vinegar twenty hours, then filter and distil it in B.M. till it dry. Dissolve it again in that vinegar, but first rectify it. Let it settle, filter and distil, and reiterate until the salt be crystalline and white, then put it in a white glass body, pour thereon this red oil which is the Sulphur, and also the white water which is incorporated therewith. Lute on close and well a Blind Head, and digest in Balneo three days and it will be all one thing or pap. But then distil away all the humidity that will arise, and then put it in an egg-glass with a short neck, nip it up without heating the matter, let the egg be but a fourth part full.

From the 'Privy seal of secrets' in the 17th century *Aurifontina chymica*.

## EXERCISE 2

Dissolve sea salt in clean boiled or distilled water: filter the solution and evaporate, until a film appears on the surface: then let it crystallise over night, by pouring the liquor into large glazed dishes.

Dissolve these crystals of salt a second time, filter, and separate the faeces, evaporate the filtered solution to a pellicule as before, and let it shoot into crystals, which will be whiter and purer. Repeat this a third, or even a fourth time, until the salt crystals are perfectly pure, dissolve entirely, and leave no impurities in the filtering paper.

Keep this salt in a glass or glazed earthenware vessel, covered carefully that no dust nor humidity may spoil it.

Now take refined gold which has been purified either by antimony or has been reduced from the Quart: get it laminated at the flattening mill, or let it be beat into thin leaves, which amalgamate with as much purified mercury as it wants.

Suppose, one ounce gold purified and laminated or in leaves, add four ounces purified mercury, amalgamate it with great care and do not mind the trouble of grinding it well.

When it is well amalgamated, squeeze the amalgam through smooth chamois leather, in order to press out the superfluous mercury. The amalgamate which remains in the skin you must wash with common salt and vinegar first, and then with clean water, repeating this operation until the amalgam is as clean as a looking glass. Then dry it in the sun or in a gentle heat and it will become hard, so that it may be pulverised.

From *Coelum philosophorum*, Dresden, 1739.



## EXERCISE 3

Dear brethren, the Ancients have not had one way of preparing this mystery. For some, when they had separated the Columba Dianae [Dove of Diana] from the Chaos, they have allowed it to fly seven times, in order to separate it from all phlegm.

Then you have taken this, and a purified Phyton, poured into a crooked necked glass, so as the Phyton is eaten by the other, then drive it over again, so that only the earth remaining, which you throw away.

There have been some that also raised, and have increased their Columba Dianae to infinity, for if you distil it several times it becomes stronger. Then have you out of the red Earth, which is called Adamic Water, the soul, the life, the Fire of the Ancients; yes extracted the red fiery Lion, distilled off the phlegm, till it becomes a glittering blood which they name the Blood of the Purple Snail.

This is to be well preserved, then take Ophiris Sol in the form of leaves, and place into an Alingel [flask], pour on so much of the Columba Dianae, until the gold is dissolved. To this solution pour the Blood of the Dragon, and have brought Fire to Fire, for this is most hidden, and without this in the work, you could not in an eternity boil it out, so has this liquor become like blood. Then take the faeces, and strongly calcine, and with the phlegm extract the Salt, and purify it, till it becomes clear, and like a diamond, then rub it small and put it in an Alingel [flask], and pour on so much of the gory Pythonis that the Salt will dissolve. The glass must be hermetically sealed, and then placed in the fire, and allowed to go through all the colours till the quintessence has become firm, and then take it out of the fire, rub it small again, and sprinkle it with the fiery gory Phyton, and again hermetically seal the vessel, and allow it to go through the colours again, and then have you found the augmentation, which can be practiced to infinity.

Then take of this Mystery, when it has become fluid, and have a Ophiris Sol purified and melted with Puck Bismuth [Antimony] and allowed to fume in the fire.

This is the King, which is eaten by the Wolf, and again vomited forth. Place eight shekels weight of this purified Gold, and when it is flowing, throw in two shekels weight of the tincture, so that the Sol has become a clear tincture. Of this tincture add again eight half ounces (of Sol) and mix it together, place this mixture into a vessel, and pour on the fiery dragon, place it in the oven and allow it to go through all the colours, and continue this till the tincture again becomes fluid, then take this out of the fire, and add a part of this tincture to melted Sol, until all the fiery liquor is consumed. Then take this tincture out of the Fire, and add an equal part of melted Ophiris Sol and then of one more part is necessarily employed, and then another part is added thereto. And then the Columba Dianae is thereon active.

As for the Phyton, dear brethren it is not the common Phyton, but our Spiritus Pythonis, although with the common Phyton, our Spiritus Pythonis is infinitely multiplied. For our Spiritus Pythonis transmutes the common into its nature, as it also changes the nature of Sol and all metals. For it is the primum Ens Metallorum, that is, the Spring of the Ancients, the flower with golden leaves which is covered and preserved from the pulling and tearing of the poisonous dragon.

From Abraham Eleazar, *Uhraltet Chymisches Werke*, 1774.

## EXERCISE 4

### Of the Sublimation of the Mercury

In the name of God, procure yourself a pound of pure mercury issuing from the mine. Of the other portion, take of Roman Vitriol and of common calcined salt, pulverize and mix well. Put these two latest matters into a large glazed earthenware flask and set over a mild fire until the matter begins to melt and flow. Then take your mineral mercury, put it in a flask with a long neck and drop-by-drop, pour it over the vitriol and salt in fusion. Stir with a wooden spatula until the mercury is completely consumed and it leaves no trace. When it has completely disappeared, dry the matter over a gentle fire during the night. The next morning, you will take the well-dried matter and pulverize it finely on a stone. Place the pulverized matter in a sublimating flask called an Aludel, to sublime according to the Art. Place on it the head of the vessel, and close the joints with a philosophical luting, so that the mercury cannot escape. Place the Aludel in a furnace and seal it in so it cannot tilt over but stands straight. Then make a little fire for about four hours to drive away the humidity of the mercury and of the vitriol. After the evaporation of the humidity, increase the fire so that the pure white matter of the mercury separates itself from the impurities; do this for four hours; you will see if it suffices by introducing a wooden rod to the sublimating flask by way of the principle opening, you will lower it just to the matter and determine whether or not the white matter (Mercury Sublimate) of the Mercury is uppermost in the mixture. If it is, raise the baton, close the aperture of the head with a luting so that the mercury cannot escape, and increase the fire in such a way that the white matter of the mercury rises above the feces in the Aludel. Do this for four hours. Finally, heat with wood in a manner to obtain a blaze: it is necessary that the bottom of the flask and the residue becomes red. Continue thusly until there remains a little of the white substance of the Mercury adherent to the feces. The force and the violence of the fire will be spent during the separation.

Stop the fire, allow the furnace and the matter to cool overnight. The next morning, return the flask to the furnace, lift the luting with caution in order not to sully the mercury, open the apparatus. If you find a white matter, sublimed, pure, compact, heavy, then you have succeeded. But if the sublimate was spongy, light, porous, collect it and recommence the sublimation on the residue adding new pulverized common salt. Operate in the same flask over the furnace, in the same manner, with the same very high degree of fire. Then open the flask, see if the sublimate is white, compact, dense. Then collect it and put it carefully aside so that it may serve you when you have need to finish the work. But if again it has not occurred as it should, you will have to sublime it a third time until you obtain it pure, compact, white and heavy.

From Albertus Magnus *Compound of Compounds*, (late 13th or early 14th centuries.)

## EXERCISE 5

Another Fulmen to graduate Venus into Luna.

Take the foresaid fluxing powder of Sulphur, Tartar and Nitre, and grind with it four ounces of Mercury of Luna, and lay the same weight of thin plates of Venus S.S.S. ['Strata supra strata' or 'layer upon layer'] with your foresaid composition, kindle the mass, and the proceeding flames will graduate some part of the Venus into good and fix Luna with considerable profit, the operation being rightly performed. With the same Fulmen, Mars may be graduated into Sol, and forasmuch as it does not melt, it is better than Venus for this way of working. Needles are best for this purpose.

Another rapid Fulmen changing iron and steel into good gold.

Take of the abovesaid fluxing powder, 4 or 5 parts, mix with it 1 part or half an ounce of Aurum Fulminans precipitated from the Aqua Regia, not with the Salt of Tartar, but with Salt of Urine. With this Fulmen and steel needles make S.S.S. in a crucible. Let the needles not be above 1 ounce in weight, else the Fulmen will not be able to graduate them wholly into Sol. This process well managed affords a good increase of Sol. It is also no contemptible curiosity to see needles changed to Sol, their pristine form remaining. I took once 20 or 30 needles, which I put with their points up to the midst in the said Fulmen, their upper halves remaining untouched by it, and after Fulmination took out the needles, the lower part of which was pure Sol, the upper continuing Iron which I distributed amongst my friends and lovers of Art for a remembrance.

From Rudolph Glauber, *De Purgatorio philosophorum*, Amsterdam 1668.

## EXERCISE 6

So, in the Art, you can have no success if you do not in the first work purify the Serpent, born of the slime of the earth; it you do not whiten these foul and black faeces, to separate from thence the white sulphur, which is the Sal Ammoniac of the Wise, and their Chaste Diana, who washes herself in the bath; and all this mystery is but the extraction of the fixed salt of our compound, in which the whole energy of our Mercury consists.

The water which ascends by distillation carries up with it a part of this fiery salt, so that the affusion of the water on the body, reiterated many times, impregnates, fattens, and fertilizes our Mercury, and makes it fit to be fixed, which is the end of the second Work.

One cannot better explain this truth than by Hermes, in these words:

“When I saw that the water by degrees did become thicker and harder I did rejoice, for I certainly knew that I should find what I sought for.”

It is not without reason that the philosophers give this viscous Liquor the name of Pontick Water. Its exuberant ponticity is indeed the true character of its virtue, and the more you shall rectify it, and the more you shall work upon it, the more virtue will it acquire. It has been called the Water of Life, because it gives life to the metals; but it is properly called the great Lunaria, because of its brightness wherewith it shines.

From the *The Six Keys of Eudoxus*.

## EXERCISE 7

The second way of preparing the Water of Paradise.

My Child, if you would make it after this manner, you must take the half of your prepared Saturn which I ordered you to keep, upon which pour the half of your fixed and prepared Water of Paradise, take the half, put it into a stone pot, pour weak wine vinegar upon it, mix it well together, then take two pounds of calcined Tartar, which is well clarified by solution and coagulation, so that it leaves no more faeces behind it, Salt Armoniac one pound, which is likewise so clearly sublimed, that no faeces remain after its sublimation, pound both together to a powder, put them speedily into a pot, and stop it close immediately, or else it will run out. For so soon as the Tartar and Salt Armoniac come to the vinegar, they lift themselves up, and would immediately run out of the mouth of the pot.

Wherefore stop the pot presently, set the pot in a vessel of water, they will cool speedily, otherwise if the cold and hot matter should come together suddenly, they would contest together, rise up, and become so hot, that the pot would break for heat, if it were not set in cold water; therefore take heed, when you put the powders in, that you stop it immediately, and set it in cold water before you put the other powder to it, then they will unite.

Let them stand a day and a night in that vessel, then take them out, set them into a lukewarm bath two days and nights, let it cool of itself, take the stopple off from the pot, and set a head on, set the pot in sifted ashes upon a furnace, distill with a small fire, and continually greater till all the vinegar be over, then augment your fire notably, till you see quick Mercury drop out of the pipe, when it ceases to drop, then augment the fire by little and little and drive it so long as it drops; you may observe when it will leave dropping, if in the space of one or two Pater-nosters (Lord's prayer) one drop doth fall, then augment the fire till the pot glows at the bottom, for twelve hours and when the Mercury is over, then should the Salt Armoniac sublime up into the head, and the Tartar remain with the body of Saturn at the bottom of the pot, which take out, put into a linen bag, hang it in a moist cellar, the Tartar will dissolve, receive it in a glass, the body of Saturn remains in the bag, take it out and calcine it in a reverberating furnace three days and nights, with a great heat, as is taught elsewhere, then extract the salt out as is taught in the Mineral Book.

Johann Isaac Hollandus 'A Work of Saturn'. From *Of natural & supernatural things*. London, 1670.

## EXERCISE 8

I must relate that I recently saw some clear water at a friend's. It transformed filed gold - not dissolved in Aqua Regis - into a blood-red liquid through a good digestion. After it stood in digestion for one month, the water disappeared and the gold rose in the glass as if some fermented paste were rising, which was a pleasure to see. When it was given stronger fire afterwards, it settled down again, and the glass looked as if some gold leaf had laid in it. Nothing rose anymore. It was fixed and stable. My friend opened the glass and weighed it, it had increased in weight due to the menstruum. He poured some more of the water over it and set it back, closed, in digestion. The gold united again with it and was as red as blood and quite fireproof. When it was taken out, I took two grains and put them into a glass of warm wine. It dissolved very quickly and tinged the wine blood-red, which was amazing to see. The wine became somewhat sweet from it. I am of the opinion that if ever a right tincture was prepared from gold, this was it.

I can truthfully say that during my lifetime I have seen much regarding the preparation of potable gold, and have also experienced as much myself as any man of my age, but nothing more beautiful has come to my attention. One could not notice any suspicion of any corrosive in the menstruum, but it was quite pleasant in taste, almost like wine about to become somewhat "hard". Gold melts in it like butter near a fire or in the hot sun. Nor did it leave any white earth in the solution, as the solutions for the magistery generally do. It was a thick, red liquid and finally a powder, at first brown-red, then blood-red. But whether it could do anything in the transmutation of metals, I cannot say, for I have not tried it, nor have I seen it tried. My friend only gave me a little of it, which I afterwards used for the sick - to my great astonishment, because it was especially effective in extremely serious and dangerous sicknesses.

From Joannes Agricola *Treatise on Gold*. 17th Century.