

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 1 : Obstacles to understanding alchemical texts

From the late 20th century onward alchemical texts became increasingly more easily available to people, firstly through publication in book form in the 1980's and then, with the development of the internet, many were transcribed and made available on web sites. Unfortunately, greater access to this mass of material, does not seem to have increased the understanding of alchemy. The problem seems to be, that most people do not know how to read such texts, and consequently they read more into these texts than they read out of them. Faced with difficult, seemingly intractable material, many people just read alchemical works through the filter of their own preconceptions. They find in these texts what they want to find, and use them to confirm their own already established ideas, and thus do not learn about alchemy itself from reading such texts. Alchemical texts can often be used as a 'tabula rasa', to use the old term from psychology, almost a blank tablet onto which anyone can project whatever they want.

Often people are drawn to rely on modern authors to make sense for them of these alchemical works. Unfortunately, though many of these modern authors seem to show little understanding of alchemy, they have a no lack of belief in their own abilities. Thus they write about alchemical texts as if they truly understand them. They write persuasively. They write in a way that appeals to our modern way of thought. Although their books can be seductive, that does not mean they throw much light on the real nature of alchemy. Many writers such as these, have almost no experience of reading real alchemical works. They have not spent thousands of hours in libraries looking at this material. So perhaps it is unwise to rely on modern writers for any understanding of alchemy. It might be a better strategy for us to learn how to read the original material for ourselves, and not rely on modern writers.

This study course will be an attempt to show how alchemical texts can be read. It will hopefully provide the students with tools which they can use to understand what the alchemists were trying to say in their texts. Sadly, so many of the interpretations of alchemical texts today are merely expressions of ideas in the mind of the modern interpreter, and do not reflect in any clear way the message the original writer of a text was trying to communicate.

This course will involve a great deal of reading and re-reading, but I hope it will stretch our preconceptions and allow us to find some ways to approach this difficult material.

There are a number of obstacles to our being able to read alchemical texts.

Let us begin by showing how **not to read** an alchemical text. We will look at the *Emerald*

Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus.

I. True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true.

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 born from this One Thing, by adaptation.

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.

VII. Separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, gently and with great sagacity.

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.

X. By this means, all the glory of the world shall be yours, and all obscurity shall flee from you. It is the strong strength of all strength. For it overcomes every subtle thing, and penetrates every solid thing.

XI. Thus was the world created. Hence shall wonderful adaptations be achieved, of which the means is here.

XII. Therefore I am called Hermes Trismegistus. For I hold three parts of the philosophy of the whole world.

XIII. That which I had to say concerning the operation of the Sun is completed.

This is the book of Thoth, passed on to the ancient Egyptians from Atlantis in a new translation direct from the ancient Chaldaic. It was a sacred prayer intoned by the priests in the ancient mystery temples. It lead the initiate through a process of twelve stages, through which he became a master of alchemy, and ultimately at the twelfth stage he became a 'Hermes' himself, a soul enlightened into the three mysteries of the world. This text is thus a ladder of initiation. It begins with the neophyte stage, in which he must recognize the truth from falsehood, by accepting the teaching of the ancients. He rises up to the next grade on the ladder when he is able to see the cosmos above, reflected in the world below. This involves various secret mystical exercises. I can reveal here that one of these was to practice contemplation, by gazing at the reflections of stars in a bowl of a specially prepared pure alchemical water distilled from dew. Once he has gained this degree of knowledge through contemplation, he moves on to another grade and higher level of perception. This is achieved though deep meditation on the oneness of the cosmos. At the end of the seventh step the adept has been able to achieve the ability to "separate earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross". He is now an Adeptus minor. He crosses the abyss at the next stage and goes on the night sea journey, uniting his consciousness with a deep understanding of the unconscious sea of all being that lives in us. Thus he "ascends from the earth to the heaven, and again descends to the earth". He is now an Adeptus Major, and has passed through the Tarot (the Rota experience) of the Hanged man in the abyss.....

Well, I hope you get my drift. Though this is parody, there is a lot worse to be found on the internet, and in some books. As an exercise, you should search for the 'Emerald Tablet' in Google

and see just how many strange interpretations you can find. You will find that if you gather a bunch of these together, and compare them side by side, then you will begin to realise how the individual writers of these interpretations have contrived their interpretation. In my parody I decided to work in ideas of the ancient mystery religions, the Golden Dawn type of magical initiation, a hint of tarot and so on. For those with the time and inclination, why not attempt exercise two and create your own parody of an interpretation.

Thus the first obstacle we have identified is **wrong context**, that is, explaining a text using terms and ideas entirely foreign to it, terms and ideas that would not have been available to, or understood by the original writer of the text. Tarot, Golden Dawn magic, etc, did not exist when this text was written, so are entirely irrelevant to it.

A second obstacle is **projection or reading into a text**. Here we start out with some clear idea of what we want to find in the text and chop and squash the text to fit our initial preconceptions, ignoring the sections that do not directly link to our interpretation. Both of these obstacles can be difficult to recognize in oneself. It can take much experience to be able to avoid these. We will return again and again in this course to these two obstacles.

Another obstacle in our way is the **antiquated language** of some texts. Obviously many alchemical texts were written in Latin, German and to a lesser extent in French and Italian, but it is also true that texts in the early English of the 15th and 16th centuries can be almost impenetrable. As an example consider this short section from an early English alchemical poem, *The Hermit's tale* in the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*

*In Pilgrimage one onely thing I found
Of worth in Lemnes nere to Vulcan's shopp,
A Christall founteine running under ground,
Between a Vally and a Mounteins topp.
Pleas'd with this sight, I bid a Hermite tell
The story of the place, who there did dwell.*

*Within this Vale a hallowe dusky Cave
There is (quoth he) of greate Antiquity,
Where plumes of Mars blew greene and red you have:
Torne from his crest for his Iniquity.
The Troope of Smiths, as he for Venus lay,
Supris'd and tooke him, yett he gett away.*

This is not too difficult English but one could easily misread words or misunderstand a phrase. This could read into modern English in this way :

On a pilgrimage in Lemnos I only found one thing of worth near to Vulcan's workshop, namely, a crystal fountain running underground, between a valley and a mountain top. Being pleased with this sight, I asked a hermit, who lived there, to tell the story of the place. He told me that within this valley there is a hollow dusky cave of great antiquity, where you will find plumes of Mars, blue green and red. These were torn from

his crest for his iniquity in lying with Venus. The troop of smiths surprised and took him, yet he got away.

So understanding the language can often be a problem. This can only be resolved through experience in reading this earlier form of English. I have devised a study course on the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* which provides such a line by line translation into modern English that is relatively easy to grasp. In general, from the mid 17th century onwards, the written English is sufficiently close to that of our modern times to be entirely comprehensible to us, at least in the outer form of the words, their spelling and meaning.

We can find here another obstacle, that of the **metaphorical meaning** used by the alchemical writer. For example in the above extract from *The Hermit's tale*, just consider the phrase "you will find plumes of Mars, blue green and red which were torn from his crest for his iniquity in lying with Venus". Does this really mean that there are actual coloured feathers (plumes) to be found in that cave, or is the writer using these descriptions metaphorically? These plumes could well be veins of iron and copper ores found in the cave, where Mars (iron) had lain with Venus (copper). One of the main ores of iron is haematite, red in colour, and copper ores are usually blue or greenish in colour.

In alchemy metaphor is used a great deal, indeed many alchemical texts must be read as an extended metaphor or allegory. One must remember, however, to read the metaphor through the mindset of the original writer, that is within the context of the work. If one tries to read modern metaphors into the language of a 16th or 17th century piece then one will be in error and entirely fail to understand the intention of the writer. We live today in a rich world of imagery and metaphor, so it is only too easy to read modern ideas backwards into alchemical material through seeing a phrase in the shape of a contemporary metaphor.

There are a few marvelous contemporary ideas which can easily be metaphorically mapped onto alchemical texts. The idea of the 'Black hole' can be easily attached to the alchemical idea of the Nigredo or black stage of the work. We might also consider the contemporary idea of zero-point energy, a consequence of the mathematics of quantum theory. This is a delightful idea that could be projected back onto an alchemical text to explain the energies needed for transmutation of elements. Our modern world provides us with many such ideas, but when trying to understand an alchemical text we must guard against a too enthusiastic use of parallels like these, say, derived from modern physics. We must read alchemical texts with the science of their own time, not that of our age.

The depth psychologists and the modern esotericists entirely disagree with such restrictions and quite happily muddle such things together. Many who take a psychological perspective seem to accept this because they believe in a mysterious 'collective unconscious' in which such ideas are somehow held in a kind of virtual state. They view this component of the human being as manifesting throughout history. Thus the alchemists in their writings experienced the invisible promptings of their 'unconscious' and for the depth psychologists this remains the same for us today. It is perhaps a seductive view, but it is just a belief system. The esotericists similarly read modern ideas into the past, but they use the device of a 'secret history' rather than a 'collective unconscious'. Thus esotericists believe that in earlier times there were adepts who transmitted

ideas through secret societies and initiations. These people in the past were wiser than we are today. Thus for them it is entirely possible that alchemists in the 17th century understood quantum theory. Both the esoteric and the depth psychology approach are a-historical, in particular, they apply ideas and imagery that only came to exist in a later period in order to interpret alchemy. They read alchemy through a filter of modern preconceptions, rather than letting the alchemical work speak directly to us in its own terms.

It could be an interesting exercise for us to search the internet looking for such fascinating interpretations of alchemical ideas. In order to get something out of this course please at least do this exercise and spend a few hours searching for sites expressing these ideas, copy these and make a little collection. When you look at these together, with all their contradictions, you should begin to get a sense of the futility of this approach, its emptiness and lack of engagement with the actual texts of the alchemists. To understand what alchemists were writing about, we must read them through the ideas of their own time.

In this first lesson we have identified a few obstacles to our being able to clearly read an alchemical text.

Wrong context

Projection or reading ideas into a text

Antiquated language

Reading through a misplaced metaphor

I will now give an example reading of a text from the 17th century. Originally written in Italian verse, then translated into French and translated from there into English prose. The text is here in italics with a reading immediately following each stanza. Please try and identify all the points where the reading I present leans away from what is actually in the text, and instead provides a misleading interpretation of what is said.

The light coming out of darkness

First Song

I. The dark Chaos had come out as a confused mass from the depth of the Nothing, on the first sound of the almighty Word, and one would have said that disorder made it, and that it could not be the work of a God, formless as it was. All things in it were in a deep rest, and the elements in it were confused, because the divine Spirit did not yet distinguish them.

The universe appeared out of nothing or emptiness, in the big bang initiated by God's word. It was a sea of disorder or quantum fluctuations. All the particles of matter, the electrons, protons and neutrons that eventually would come to make the different chemical elements were still in the quantum soup because God had not yet allowed them to form stable substances.

II. Who could now tell in which way the Heavens, the Earth and the Sea have been formed so light in themselves, and so vast, taking into account their wide spread? Who could explain how the Sun and the Moon have received the movement and the light, and how everything we see down here, has its form and its being? Who could eventually understand how every thing has received its own denomination, has been animated by its proper spirit, and while coming out of the impure and unordered mass of the Chaos, has been regulated by a law, a quantity and a measure?

Who can explain why the heavens, the earth and the sea were formed, of such a thin matter spread out over a vast region, and not in a denser form? How was it that the two lights in the sky, the Sun and Moon, were given their motion and their light? How did it come about that everything on the earth has its own particular form and being? How is it possible to understand how everything in the world has been given its own special form, been given life by its own spirit, and been ruled by one law, one size and weight, and yet has emerged out of this muddled chaos which was at the beginning of the world.

III. O you, children and imitators of the divine Hermes, to whom the science of your father showed the nature discovered, only you, only you know how this immortal hand has formed the Earth and the Heavens out of this formless mass of the Chaos; since your Great Work shows clearly that God has created all things in the same way that your Philosophical Elixir is made.

Only those adepts initiated into the hermetic mysteries can know how God formed the world out of chaos. God created the world using the same alchemical process that is used by the alchemists.

IV. But it does not belong to my weak pen to draw such a great picture; I am only a puny child of the Art, without any experience. It is not that your savant writings didn't make me perceive the real goal one should go for, nor that I don't know this Iliaster, which has in it all we need, as well as this admirable composite through which you could bring the virtue of the elements from power to act.

The "iliaster," promotes all creatures from the potential world of ideas into actuality, it is its "balsam" or "mummy." Hence there are as many "iliasters" as there are individuals. "Astrum" and "iliaster" work by means of "imaginatio," not only in and on man himself, but also on objects in the world outside him. Here we encounter again the psychical factor in alchemy: it is a simultaneous mental operation that engenders the "work." In both, a "gradation," "exaltation," and purification of unclean admixtures take place. Hence the need for "reverberatio" of man, whereby the impure will be consumed and the solid remain without rust. It is thus that the alchemist "projects" himself into matter with which he becomes identical and whose transformations he witnesses in himself, and it is here that the "demons," "trames," and especially water creatures such as "melusine" and nymphs and salamanders symbolise grades and stages in the transformation, both of humid matter outside and the blood-bound soul inside, man. Hence the "Fire of the Alchemists" which contains such materialisations of psychical concepts as the "Melusinic Ares," or the "Salamandrinische Essenz" is much more effective than the fire in the oven. Such symbols as that of the "depth of the sea," into which nobody dares to go in order to "save his King," denote the unconscious self of the alchemist - the "abyss" which, in contrast to early Christian belief, not only contains "evil," but also the "King" who needs "redemption," and will, at the end of the "work," emerge, "crowned with his diadem, radiant like the sun, luminous as

the carbuncle... stable in fire.” In a similar way, an apparently chemical notion such as the “Retorta Distillatio ex medio centri” means, the development and emergence of a psychic centre - the self.

V. It is not that I do not know your secret Mercury, which is no other than a living, universal and innate spirit, which, in the form of airy vapour, comes down ceaselessly from heaven to earth in order to fill its porous belly, which then is born in the middle of impure sulphurs, and while growing, changes nature from volatile to fixed, giving itself the form of a radical fluid.

He knows that alchemist’s secret mercury is a spirit which continually flows down like a vapour from the heavens to fill all the gaps or interstices between the atoms of matter. It is the ‘radical fluid’ the flow of electrons in matter. This is the true secret of the alchemists, their knowledge of the electrical forces that bind the atoms together.

VI. It is not that I do not know yet, that if our oval Vessel is not sealed by Winter, it will never be able to keep the precious vapour, and that our beautiful child will die at birth, if it is not promptly rescued by an industrious hand and by the eyes of a lynx, since otherwise it will not be able to feed on its first humour, to the example of man, who, after feeding on impure blood in the mother’s womb, lives on milk when he comes on earth.

Our oval vessel is our astral body, our aura which appears as an oval around us. If we do not keep this well sealed then our living energies will leak away. This is our inner child that we must protect and nourish.

Try and identify where in each different section the reading radically departs from the original text. Is there any part of the reading which seems to respect the original writer’s intentions ?

For those with the time and enthusiasm can I now suggest you undertake exercise four? Firstly perhaps you could attempt to make your own distorted reading of this text. Try and be a little bit more subtle than I was above. I had to heighten the interpretations in order to make the points. If you email them to me at alchemy@dial.pipex.com . I will post the more subtle and interesting of these onto a web page so that the other members of the study course can read them.

EXERCISE 1

Go onto Google (or some other web search engine) and look up 'Emerald Table of Hermes Trismegistus', or some variations of this 'Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus', 'Tabula smaragdina of Hermes Trismegistus', and so on.

Make a little collection of the interpretations which appeal to you.

Perhaps print them out onto paper so you can easily compare them side by side.

Try to find how the particular writer was interpreting the 'Emerald Table', by asking questions such as these:

What is the writer of this interpretation trying to achieve in making their commentary?

Is it possible to discover from the writers interpretation, what their philosophical, esoteric or religious background is ?

Are there ways in which you sense the author has actually misunderstood some of the statements of the 'Emerald Table'?

EXERCISE 2

Construct your own parody of an interpretation of the 'Emerald Table'.

Decide on some particular perspective, some slant you want to take, before you begin. For example take a kabbalistic perspective, and map the ten sephiroth onto the text. Or the 12 signs of the zodiac. Or see the text as a precursor to Christianity, and map phrases onto events in the life of Christ. There are lots of different ways one can creatively reconstruct and interpret this text.

EXERCISE 3

Spend some time searching the internet looking for fascinating and outlandish interpretations of alchemical ideas. Gather the most extreme and absurd of these together into a little collection, perhaps printing them out, and make the resolution to read these again whenever one finds oneself becoming seduced by some modern writer's interpretation of alchemy.

EXERCISE 4

Attempt to construct a contrived reading of *The light coming out of darkness* text.

If you feel you have been quite successful in your contrived parody and wish to email it me at alchemy@dial.pipex.com , I will place the more subtle and interesting of these on a web page so that the other members of the study course can read them.