

# Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts

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## Lesson 15 : The Treasure of Treasures

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It is uncertain that this work was actually written by Paracelsus, but it first appeared in print in 1574 in German. It was published much later in an English translation of 1659 in London by Giles Calvert along with another work the *Aurora* (which, though under the name of Paracelsus, is thought by some scholars to be the work of Gerhard Dorn). The text is, however, entirely Paracelsian in tone, extending the twofold Sulphur-Mercury theory to the threefold system, and also presenting alchemy as making medicines for curing disease as much as for transmuting metals. It also has a short section of Paracelsian invective against the establishment. It is thus a work of Paracelsian alchemy, which helped to establish Paracelsus' reputation as a practical alchemist, though it may not necessarily have been written by Paracelsus himself, but by one of his followers, such as Adam von Bodenstein.

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*Nature begets a mineral in the bowels of the earth. There are two kinds of it, which are found in many districts of Europe. The best which has been offered to me, which also has been found genuine in experimentation, is externally in the figure of the greater world, and is in the eastern part of the sphere of the Sun. The other, in the Southern Star, is now in its first efflorescence. The bowels of the earth thrust this forth through its surface. It is found red in its first coagulation, and in it lie hid all the flowers and colours of the minerals. Much has been written about it by the philosophers, for it is of a cold and moist nature, and agrees with the element of water.*

Our writer begins by describing a mineral found in many parts of Europe in two forms. In its first form, which is the best and is useful for performing the alchemical work, it is found more in the East. Externally it appears in the form of spheres like globes of earth. The other form of this mineral is found more in the southern parts of Europe. It seems more incompletely formed, almost like a plant in its first flowering. It can be found on the surface of the ground as if it has been thrust up from deep underground. It is red when it is first forming and in it lie all the colours of the minerals. Many philosophers have written about it because its associated with the element of water, being cold and moist.

*So far as relates to the knowledge of it and experiment with it, all the philosophers before me, though they have aimed at it with their missiles, have gone very wide of the mark. They believed that Mercury and Sulphur were the mother of all metals, never even dreaming of making mention meanwhile of a third; and yet when the water is separated from it by Spagyric Art the truth is plainly revealed, though it was unknown to Galen or to Avicenna. But if, for the sake of our excellent*

*physicians, we had to describe only the name, the composition; the dissolution, and coagulation, as in the beginning of the world Nature proceeds with all growing things, a whole year would scarcely suffice me, and, in order to explain these things, not even the skins of numerous cows would be adequate.*

All previous alchemical philosophers have failed to adequately identify and describe this substance. Instead they have been limited by their belief that metals were formed by the working together of Mercury and Sulphur and thus they neglected to seek this third material. When, by using the spagyric method, the water is separated from this mineral substance, then the truth about its power can readily be seen, though it was not known by Galen or even Avicenna. However, if our author had to describe the properties and the composition of this material, the ways in which it dissolves and coagulates, then he would need at least a whole year to do it justice, and he would need the parchment from the skins of many cows in order to exhaustively describe it.

*Now, I assert that in this mineral are found three principles, which are Mercury, Sulphur, and the Mineral Water which has served to naturally coagulate it. Spagyric science is able to extract this last from its proper juice when it is not altogether matured, in the middle of the autumn, just like a pear from a tree. The tree potentially contains the pear. If the Celestial Stars and Nature agree, the tree first of all puts forth shoots in the month of March; then it thrusts out buds, and when these open the flower appears, and so on in due order until in autumn the pear grows ripe. So is it with the minerals. These are born, in like manner, in the bowels of the earth. Let the Alchemists who are seeking the Treasure of Treasures carefully note this. I will show them the way, its beginning, its middle, and its end. In the following treatise I will describe the proper Water, the proper Sulphur, and the proper Balm thereof. By means of these three the resolution and composition are coagulated into one.*

This mineral actually is composed of three principles, namely Mercury, Sulphur and this mineral Water which has made the mineral coagulate and harden. By using the spagyric technique we can extract this mineral from its mineral water, during the autumn when it has not completely matured, and is still like an unripe fruit. Our author then adopts a parallel with what happens in Nature. A pear tree contains in potential, in essence, the pear. If the planets and stars are in agreement with the cycle of Nature, then in March the tree puts forth shoots, then later forms buds, and from this flowers form, until in the autumn the pear fruit begins to ripen. It is the same, he says, with the minerals within the earth, they grow like the pear. Our author will in this little treatise show us the beginning, the middle and the end of this work of growing metals. He will reveal to us the correct Water, Sulphur and Balm that are needed for this, for by using these three together they are resolved and composed together and coagulated into one substance.

Having provided this philosophical and theoretical basis our author now jumps into clear alchemical experimentation

*Concerning the Sulphur of Cinnabar.*

*Take mineral Cinnabar and prepare it in the following manner. Cook it with rain water in a stone vessel for three hours. Then purify it carefully, and dissolve it in Aqua Regis, which is composed of equal parts of vitriol, nitre, and sal ammoniac. Another formula is vitriol, saltpetre, alum, and common salt.*

We are to take mineral cinnabar. This is the bright red sulphide of mercury (one of its main ores). This has to be heated with rain water in a stone vessel, then purified. Water will not affect the cinnabar, except perhaps to dissolve out some of the impurities. Next we are to take aqua regia, that powerful acid mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acids, famous for its power to dissolve gold. This aqua regia can be made, as our author suggests, from mixing vitriol with nitre (saltpetre) and sal ammoniac, or from vitriol, saltpetre, alum and salt. The cinnabar is to be dissolved in this strong acid.

*Distil this in an alembic. Pour it on again, and separate carefully the pure from the impure thus. Let it putrefy for a month in horse-dung; then separate the elements in the following manner. If it puts forth its sign, commence the distillation by means of an alembic with a fire of the first degree. The water and the air will ascend; the fire and the earth will remain at the bottom. Afterwards join them again, and gradually treat with the ashes. So the water and the air will again ascend first, and afterwards the element of fire, which expert artists recognise. The earth will remain in the bottom of the vessel. This collect there. It is what many seek after and few find.*

This mixture of the acid and the cinnabar should next be distilled in an alembic. The volatile part (probably mostly unchanged acid) will collect in the receiver. We are to pour this on to the residue remaining behind in the flask and let the flask remain to putrefy at a low heat for a month. For this the alchemist would use a source of gentle heat (about body temperate) which can be done by placing the sealed flask in a decomposing mound of horse dung. (Just as a compost heap in our garden heats up when fermenting, so the alchemists used the rotting horse dung as a source of gentle heat.) If one sees a change, that is if there appears some sign (the details of which our author avoids telling us), then we are to begin to distil the material remaining in the flask by means of an alembic (a still with a side head which makes the distillate separate off into a receiving flask). To do this we use a fire of the first degree, that is, a moderate heat, perhaps like cooking or boiling water. The elements will separate. The water and air will ascend and be distilled off, while the fire and earthy parts of the alchemical work will remain behind in the alembic flask. We are to join these together again and repeat the distillation. Eventually the water and air will ascend as before, but also the fire. Those adept in alchemy will recognise this. Then we will be left with the earthy component (like an ash) in the bottom of the vessel. We are to collect this, as it is the substance sought by many and yet found by few.

*This dead earth in the reverberatory you will prepare according to the rules of Art, and afterwards add fire of the first degree for five days and nights. When these have elapsed you must apply the second degree for the same number of days and nights, and proceed according to Art with the material enclosed. At length you will find a volatile salt, like a thin alkali, containing in itself the Astrum of fire and earth. Mix this with the two elements that have been preserved, the water and the earth. Again place it on the ashes for eight days and eight nights, and you will find that which has been neglected by many Artists. Separate this according to your experience, and according to the rules of the Spagyric Art, and you will have a white earth, from which its colour has been extracted. Join the element of fire and salt to the alkalised earth. Digest in a pelican to extract the essence. Then a new earth will be deposited, which put aside.*

We must next place this dead ash or earth into a reverberatory furnace. This is a furnace with a

chamber within which a substance can be placed, usually to melt it or reduce it, by the indirect heat of the fire. This should be under a relative slow fire of the first grade for five days and nights, which is then raised to a second degree fire for a further five days and nights. After this time is passed we will find our substance transformed into a volatile salt, which will contain the Paracelsian 'astrum' of fire and earth. This 'astrum' is the cosmic or starry spiritual essence that is externalised in substance as fire and earth. It is the starry essence made into a substance. We must mix this with the water and earth that you have distilled off in the earlier part of the experiment, and leave this for eight days and nights. Then we will have a substance which has been neglected by many alchemists. Separate this spagyrically, as we have done before, and we will be left with a white earth which has been stripped of all its colour. We add fire and salt to this alkalised earth. The word 'alkali' used today usually means caustic soda or some other chemically basic (as opposed to acidic) substance, however, in earlier centuries 'alkali' was calcined ashes of a plant. Thus 'alkalised earth' here probably just refers to the calcined material. We add fire and salt and digest it in a pelican flask. This is the kind of flask which allows the distillate to fall down again on the substance in a kind of perpetual circulation. Eventually the material in the pelican will be changed and a new earth or substance formed, which we are to collect and store.

#### *Concerning the Red Lion.*

*Afterwards take the lion in the pelican which also is found at first, when you see its tincture, that is to say, the element of fire which stands above the water, the air, and the earth. Separate it from its deposit by trituration. Thus you will have the true aurum potable. Sweeten this with the alcohol of wine poured over it, and then distil in an alembic until you perceive no acidity to remain in the Aqua Regia.*

Next we have to take the substance, called the red lion, which appears in the pelican flask during the heating. This appears as a fiery tincture standing out of the water, air and earth in the flask. Take this and grind it into a fine powder (trituration). This can be done in a mortar and pestle or using a stone on a flat (usually marble) plate. This grinding should allow the 'red lion' to become separated from impurities. This is the true 'aurum potable' the drinkable gold that was so sought after by 17th century alchemists. This is mixed with alcohol distilled from wine and then the solution placed in an alembic and distilled until you find it has no acidity remaining of the aqua regia added in the beginning.

*This Oil of the Sun, enclosed in a retort hermetically sealed, you must place for elevation that it may be exalted and doubled in its degree. Then put the vessel, still closely shut, in a cool place. Thus it will not be dissolved, but coagulated. Place it again for elevation and coagulation, and repeat this three times. Thus will be produced the Tincture of the Sun, perfect in its degree. Keep this in its own place.*

What we now have is called the 'oil of the sun'. This we place in a sealed flask, which we heat and elevate. This means we allow it to distil and circulate in the flask. Usually alchemists used a flask, called a 'matrass' or 'bolt-head', with a round compact body and a very long neck for such elevations. This meant that while one was heating the body of the flask, the neck remained cool, and thus the vapour could condense and fall back down into the body of the flask again. Our author believed that the substance was altered through this elevation and its power was doubled. Then we

are to cease this and instead put the flask, still unopened, into a cool place. Here it will coagulate, or thicken. After some time, we place it back into the furnace and begin elevation again, and repeat this process three times in all. At the end we will have produced the tincture of the Sun. We must store this carefully on its own.

*Concerning the Green Lion.*

*Take the vitriol of Venus, carefully prepared according to the rules of Spagyric Art, and add thereto the elements of water and air which you have reserved. Resolve, and set to putrefy for a month according to instructions. When the putrefaction is finished, you will behold the sign of the elements. Separate, and you will soon see two colours, namely, white and red. The red is above the white. The red tincture of the vitriol is so powerful that it reddens all white bodies, and whitens all red ones, which is wonderful.*

Now we are to move on to working with the Green Lion. Take some vitriol of Venus. This commonly known as copper sulphate, but as it is here described as being prepared by means of the spagyric art, our author may be describing some other, unrelated substance. This whole practical text seems so very simple and elementary that we may after all be dealing with coded substances and not with the common ones. Anyway, we add to this vitriol the water and air that we had distilled off earlier in our process with the cinnabar. We let this dissolve and allow the solution to putrefy for a month 'according to instructions'. Perhaps this is a reference to the process of putrefaction earlier undertaken with the cinnabar being left in a flask a horse dung. Again, as with the cinnabar, we will see some change taking place. In this case it is the sign of the elements. This could mean that we observe the earth, air and water separating out from the material. We separate these – this means undertaking a distillation as before, and we will quickly see two colours appearing, white and red. The red appears as a layer above the white. It is so powerful that it reddens all white bodies and yet whitens all red ones.

*Work upon this tincture by means of a retort, and you will perceive a blackness issue forth. Treat it again by means of the retort, repeating the operation until it comes out whitish. Go on, and do not despair of the work. Rectify until you find the true, clear Green Lion, which you will recognise by its great weight. You will see that it is heavy and large. This is the Tincture, transparent gold. You will see marvellous signs of this Green Lion, such as could be bought by no treasures of the Roman Leo. Happy he who has learnt how to find it and use it for a tincture! This is the true and genuine Balsam, the Balsam of the Heavenly Stars, suffering no bodies to decay, nor allowing leprosy, gout, or dropsy to take root. It is given in a dose of one grain, if it has been fermented with Sulphur of Gold.*

We are to heat this tincture in a retort. Then it will turn black. Again repeat this heating in the retort and next the material will turn white. Do not despair but press on to a third heating in the retort and the material will turn transparent. This is the true Green Lion, which can be recognised by its great density. This is the tincture, the transparent gold of great weight. It is a marvellous material, and so special that even Pope Leo with all his treasures could not buy it. It is a curative tincture, a true and genuine balsam. The word 'balsam' is usually applied to an aromatic oil or resin extracted from plants, but in Paracelsian terms a balsam was preservative essence, of an oily penetrative nature, existing in all organic bodies. Here our author takes it even further and calls it the balsam of the

stars, full of Paracelsian astrum, that was so spiritual in essence that it stopped bodies from decaying, and did not allow body altering diseases to have sway over the human body. For medicinal us it is to be given as a dose of only one grain, if it has been fermented with the sulphur of gold. What this 'sulphur of gold' is, is unclear as it has not been mentioned before.

*Ah, Charles the German, where is your treasure? Where are your philosophers? Where your doctors? Where are your decoctors of woods, who at least purge and relax? Is your heaven reversed? Have your stars wandered out of their course, and are they straying in another orbit, away from the line of limitation, since your eyes are smitten with blindness, as by a carbuncle, and other things making a show of ornament, beauty, and pomp? If your artists only knew that their prince Galen - they call none like him - was sticking in hell, from whence he has sent letters to me, they would make the sign of the cross upon themselves with a fox's tail. In the same way your Avicenna sits in the vestibule of the infernal portal; and I have disputed with him about his aurum potable, his Tincture of the Philosophers, his Quintessence, and Philosophers' Stone, his Mithridatic, his Theriac, and all the rest. O, you hypocrites, who despise the truths taught you by a true physician, who is himself instructed by Nature, and is a son of God himself! Come, then, and listen, impostors who prevail only by the authority of your high positions! After my death, my disciples will burst forth and drag you to the light, and shall expose your dirty drugs, wherewith up to this time you have compassed the death of princes, and the most invincible magnates of the Christian world. Woe for your necks in the day of judgment! I know that the monarchy will be mine. Mine, too, will be the honour and glory. Not that I praise myself: Nature praises me. Of her I am born; her I follow. She knows me, and I know her. The light which is in her I have beheld in her; outside, too, I have proved the same in the figure of the microcosm, and found it in that universe.*

Now our author descends into a diatribe in fine Paracelsian style, initially it seems against Emperor Charles V. He was the Holy Roman Emperor reigning during most of Paracelsus' lifetime. Next he takes to task Avicenna who represents to Paracelsians the establishment of medicine. He adopts an inflated view of himself. It is not he who praises himself, but Nature who praises him.

*But I must proceed with my design in order to satisfy my disciples to the full extent of their wish. I willingly do this for them, if only skilled in the light of Nature and thoroughly practised in astral matters, they finally become adepts in philosophy, which enables them to know the nature of every kind of water.*

*Take, then, of this liquid of the minerals which I have described, four parts by weight; of the Earth of red Sol two parts; of Sulphur of Sol one part. Put these together into a pelican, congelate, and dissolve them three times. Thus you will have the Tincture of the Alchemists. We have not here described its weight: but this is given in the book on Transmutations.*

He returns to his alchemical work as he wants to explain the light of Nature and the working of astral matters to his disciples, so that they themselves can become alchemical adepts, and know all the nature and properties of every kind of water. We are to take four parts by weight of this mineral water (this transparent gold, or true Green Lion), add two parts of the earth or red sol (the tincture of the Sun prepared in the second stage of the work above) and one part of the sulphur of sol (no doubt the earthy material we put aside at the end of the first process). All three we place into a pelican flask and congeal and dissolve them three times. A similar process was described earlier in the section describing the Red Lion. Then we have the alchemical tincture itself. Details of this, ite

weight etc, are apparently given in Paracelsus' 'Book on Transmutations'.

*So, now, he who has one to a thousand ounces of the Astrum Solis shall also tinge his own body of Sol. If you have the Astrum of Mercury, in the same manner, you will tinge the whole body of common Mercury. If you have the Astrum of Venus you will, in like manner, tinge the whole body of Venus, and change it into the best metal. These facts have all been proved. The same must also be understood as to the Astra of the other planets, as Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Luna, and the rest. For tinctures are also prepared from these: concerning which we now make no mention in this place, because we have already dwelt at sufficient length upon them in the book on the Nature of Things and in the Archidoxes. So, too, the first entity of metals and terrestrial minerals have been made sufficiently clear for Alchemists to enable them to get the alchemists' tincture.*

Now if we have the Astrum Solis, the starry spiritual essence of the Sun or gold, we can tinge and transform bodies into gold, one part transmuting a thousand. Similarly if we can make the Astrum of Mercury or Venus we can transmute metals into Mercury, or the finest copper. Our author says that he has dealt with these tinctures in detail in his other writings especially his *Book on the Nature of Things* and his *Archidoxes*. He also says he has made it sufficiently clear how to make the 'first entity' of metals and minerals (perhaps here meaning the first matter or prima material from which all metals and minerals are thought to take their form) from which the alchemists prepare their tincture.

*This work, the Tincture of the Alchemists, need not be one of nine months; but quickly, and without any delay, you may go on by the Spaygric Art of the Alchemists, and, in the space of forty days, you can fix this alchemical substance, exalt it, putrefy it, ferment it, coagulate it into a stone, and produce the Alchemical Phoenix. But it should be noted well that the Sulphur of Cinnabar becomes the flying Eagle, whose wings fly away without wind, and carry the body of the phoenix to the nest of the parent, where it is nourished by the element of fire, and the young ones dig out its eyes: from whence there emerges a whiteness, divided in its sphere, into a sphere and life out of its own heart, by the balsam of its inward parts, according to the property of the cabalists.*

Making the alchemical tincture need not take a long time, such as nine months, but can be done quickly, indeed within forty days. We need to fix the substance, exalt or raise it up, then putrefy it, ferment and coagulate it into a stone. Then we have the alchemical phoenix, the transmuting substance that has arisen from the ashes of the fire. Our author then launches into an allegorical mode saying that the sulphur of cinnabar turns into a flying eagle, flying without wind, carrying the phoenix to its parents' nest, where it is nourished with fire, and has its eyes removed by the young birds. From the innermost sphere and inner life of this phoenix there comes a white substance, like a balsam of its innermost heart and vital organs. This is the transforming substance which is possessed by the cabalists (here perhaps meaning the alchemical philosophers).

This work thus shifts between seemingly straightforward descriptions of alchemical experiments with known substances and easily understood processes, and more allegorical and cloaked information. This is typical of an obscured practical treatise. The processes shown here are given more weight and gravitas by being associated with the great Paracelsus. Frustratingly for the reader, this 'treasure of treasures', the Philosophers' stone, remains obfuscated and hidden from view, and this work, though promising much, perhaps only disappointed and confused.

It may be that one of the intentions of the writer of this text was to provide seeming evidence that Paracelsus was actively involved in transmutatory alchemy, alongside his explorations of the medical properties of mineral substances. Certainly at the time this was published, the late 16th and 17th centuries, no one doubted that this was written by Paracelsus himself.