

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 20 : The devices of allegory, obscurity and paradox.

Alchemical writers often used the device of allegory. That is, in attempting to describe some aspect of alchemy, a theoretical idea or an actual laboratory process, they shifted from a straight description to one which was indirect. They tried to mirror the idea or process using a coherent and extended metaphor.

Here is an example from a short work by Rudolf Glauber *Of the three most noble stones generated by three secret fires* written about 1667, a few years before he died.

A little before I became bed-ridden, I had undertaken to steal from the ever watchful Dragon, that Golden Fleece which he has in his keeping, and because this fierce Dragon will part with nothing before he be half slain, or at least, laid to sleep, therefore I was busied in this work, and had made a mixture of Sulphur, Nitre and Tartar, and also another of Saltpetre, Antimony and Tartar, each apart in an earthen pot, in order to fire them for detonation. And although I had ordered, that one pot should first be detonated, and then the other, that the smoke might not be too great, yet this was not done, but they were fired both together, which caused such a great, black and stinking smoke to ascend the chimney, that when the neighbours saw it, they thought the house had been on fire, and cried out, "Fire", knocked at my door, to come in to quench it, when there was none, notwithstanding this was not done in my dwelling house, but in a house remote from all others, so that it could have done no hurt to anyone else, if it had been burnt down. But they not being satisfied got ladders and looked down the chimney, and seeing no fire there, they then said, it was witchcraft. Out of this history, one may see what a dangerous toil the common alchemy is.

This work to kill the Dragon, and to spoil him of his Golden Fleece, is one of the pleasantest that ever I did in Alchemy, except the secret Fire. For when the Sulphur, Saltpetre, Antimony and Tartar, are detonated together, and sublimed with Sal Armoniac, the Golden Fleece rises in a curious golden colour, and tinges the head, and receiver with all sorts of colours, like unto the rainbow, or a peacocks tail, and also one sees the footsteps of the scaly dragon most gloriously in the head. Which Neusement has excellently described, in a few verses, and has omitted almost nothing which belongs to this work.

*Behold this scaly Dragon swelled with ire [anger],
His crest does brandish, with a dreadful brow;
Never closes his eyes, nor ears, nor yet retires
From dismal noise, and to show his horrid teeth:
From his broad throat flames issue out*

*Black fumes infect the air about.
Behold the rings, which his encircled tail
Casts on the earth, whilst he does form his coil;
With his broad breast he crept upon its face
Sweeping the ground, always in the same trace.*

Here in few words the philosopher describes the whole work, how to spoil the Dragon of his Golden Fleece. But only to those who easily understand these verses, whose eyes God has opened, and are already pretty well skilled in this art. But to the inexpert all remains dark. Reading only will not do it, but you must put your hand to the work, if you will attain to any thing. I have, for several years together, read, sought, and laboured in vain, before I found the right way of obtaining this Golden Fleece.

Thus we see here that Glauber begins telling us about a practical alchemical experiment involving the heating together of Sulphur, Nitre, Tartar and other substances. He makes a joke of the simple straightforward way of separating the golden fleece from the dragon telling us that it led to the embarrassment of his house appearing to go on fire. Then he shifts to an allegorical mode, and quotes a verse from the French alchemical writer Jacques Nuysement who lived at about the same time as Glauber.

We have already in Lesson Nine of this course looked in some detail at the dense structure of alchemical allegories. Perhaps you could reread this now. There we were looking at entire alchemical works which were in the form of an allegory. Some of these continue for a hundred pages or more with many interwoven allegorical themes. We have seen that such extended allegories should be read as coherent works, through our trying to find the underlying structure of ideas. Most of these extended allegories are underpinned, founded upon, a tightly woven structure. There are, however, many other alchemical texts which use the device of allegory just in a short section, or they dip in and out of allegory and straightforward description. We should try and become familiar with this device, in order to read such texts in a meaningful way. These we see, differ from the large scale allegories and should be read in a different way.

The operative means (which are also called the keys of the work) are four. The first is Solution or Liquefaction; the second is Ablution; the third Reduction; the fourth Fixation.

By Liquefaction bodies return into their first form, things concocted are made raw again and the combination between the positive and negative is effected, from whence the Crow is generated. Lastly the Stone is divided into four confused elements, which happens by the retrogradation [turning back or inwards] of the luminaries.

The Ablution teaches how to make the crow white, and to create the Jupiter of Saturn, which is done by the conversion of the body into spirit.

The office of Reduction is to restore the soul to the exanimated [lifeless or dead] stone, and to nourish it with dew and spiritual milk, until it shall attain unto perfect strength.

In both these latter operations the Dragon rages against himself, and by devouring his tail, does wholly exhaust himself, and at length is turned into the Stone. Lastly, the operation of the Fixation fixes both the White and the Red Sulphurs upon their fixed body, by the mediation of the spiritual tincture; it decocts [cooks] the leaven or ferment by degrees, ripens things unripe, and sweetens the bitter. At the end, by penetrating and tincturing the flowing Elixir it generates, perfects, and lastly, raises it up to the height of sublimity.

This is a short piece taken from the *Hermetic Arcanum* of Jean d’Espagnet first printed in French in 1623. This work of some 13,000 words, constantly shifts from straightforward description into allegory. It is a classic work of this type and so densely composed that it is extremely difficult to tease out the different strands of description and allegory. You can read the entire text on the web page <http://www.alchemywebsite.com/harcantum.html> - it is, however, one of the most opaque of alchemical writings and one must not expect to be able to understand it immediately. If when reading this text you attend to whether he is in simple descriptive or allegorical mode, you will find you can make a reading of the text, though the meaning will still be unclear. If you read this without being aware of the shifting between allegory and description, then you will be constantly frustrated in your attempts to understand what is being said. Perhaps you should treat this as an exercise and look at a short section rather than plunging into the entire work.

Let us look at a short extract from the *Cabala Chymica*, 1606.

I asked: “Is this blossom also called the Primum Ens, of which Theophrastus described so many wonders?”

He answered: “Yes, but it is thus improperly named and thought of, for the marcasites, cobalts, etc. are not the Prima Entia, nor is that which Theophrastus taught should be distilled from them Per Sublimationem Destillationem, for these are rather the beginning of the seed, which may thus be called the Ultimum Ens Spirituale Metallorum Vel Mineralium. The Primum Ens itself, however, lies hidden; it is the heavenly aetherial Fire, which both contains its Subjectum and is united with it. You must separate these from one another through something besides Sublimation, since through Sublimation you may only obtain the flower or blossom of the metals and minerals, and thereby only pluck it from its stem and take it away from the weeds (that is, from the mountain) and from other impure things. Rather, you must first extract the Primum Ens from those things in which it rests more lightly and is much more easily obtained than from its metal. For in these it is still soft, delicate, gentle, extended, volatile and pure, whereas in a metal it is compressed, hard, coarse and fixed. Similarly (as I have already mentioned) you can attain the taste and lovely scent of roses and lavender through distilling their blossoms as though through a shorter path, and your sense of smell will tell you that this is the best way to obtain it. And you can obtain this from their seeds only with difficulty, since these are compact and compressed and the Ultima Materia Rosarium, it is to be understood in the same way with metals. Thus in this spiritual and Ultimo Ente Metallorum (which is in the process of turning itself into a seed) there is contained great power, which can easily be produced by means of the preparation (although only with difficulty from a metal). Note this well. Thus, when the blossom has completed its time, it closes, shrinks, grows smaller, turns into a body, and a metal grows from it (after the seed has been previously provisioned spiritually by heaven). With this Nature has finished her course, for she cannot take this seed higher, and in this way the metals and minerals are engendered, as you can see in the mountain on your left.”

Here our alchemist is being instructed by a wise man figure. Our alchemist asks about the Primum Ens (the first being of matter). His instructor begins clearly enough, saying that this is not a thing that can be extracted from common substances by a sublimation or distillation, for these are not the seed, or the ultimate spiritual essence of metals or minerals. This spiritual essence, Primum Ens, or heavenly ethereal fire must be separated from its subject or the body in which it dwells. This must be done using something other than sublimation. So far we are being given a quite straightforward account of things. He goes on to say that in some substances this essence is still soft and gentle, volatile and pure, whereas in metals it is hardened and fixed. In the spiritual and final being of the metals there is contained a great power, which can be produced and prepared quite easily by alchemy. Again we are still having things explained clearly, and though we might not be entirely certain of the details, the ideas are still sharp and focussed, and we feel close to understanding what is being communicated. Then we are plunged into allegory. "...When the blossom has completed its time, it closes, shrinks, grows smaller, turns into a body, and a metal grows from it..." We are left now unsure about what is actually being communicated. The seeming clarity dissolves into a metaphorical statement. This particular text is, like many other alchemical works, full of this shifting, in a almost seamless way, from precise description into allegory and obscure metaphor.

Allegory and obscurity is often taken a stage further by the use of paradoxical statements. An example of this is seen in 'The Adventures of an Unknown Philosopher' by Jean Albert Belin *Les aventures du philosophe inconnu, en la recherche et en l'invention de la pierre philosophale*, Paris, 1646.

Hold it then for a certain maxim that to make the Stone, you must not depart from the mineral kingdom, and that in it you shall meet with your principles: the design of the secret is to advance the metallic nature to its perfection, you then must take that same nature: to make a tree they do not take a dog: to bring up a plant to its perfection, they don't amuse themselves with watering and cultivating stones, they cultivate the plant. If you would carry up the mineral nature to its highest degree of perfection, work then upon the same nature; there you will find the common principle of every creature but already determined to that kind to which you desire to bring it, and therefore only proper for your design. I intend not nevertheless, to assure you that all which is of the metallic kind is proper to afford you this principle. It is the error of many who take gold, silver and other common metals, dissolving them with strong waters, thinking to draw from their entrails this rich seed which has engendered them. They are not in the wrong to think it is there, but they are very much in the wrong to think to pull it thence, by reason of the inseparable union of the mineral principles in the formed metal; seeing that then they are determined; and beside in their production a thousand superfluities are mixed with their principles, which cannot be cast out without incredible pains. I see well that a strong water does dissolve, would you know how? It is by cutting and eating away the metals; these dissolutions are no other than pieces of the metals, and not the seed separated from the parts. But it is ridiculous to take (for example) a piece of a man, an arm or a leg and cast it into the matrix of a woman to beget a man: it is to do the same thing...

...Leave then the metals also which are in the metallic nature, and boldly betake yourself to the minerals...

But among them all seek in one, which is the only necessary. Should I speak more clearly? In that you will find the keys of the grand secret, there is the cabinet I hid them in. It is the mine of my wise

sons; the metallic seed is there all vigorous; it has not had time to weaken itself, and contract those indelible stains. There the matter is, but truly it is not the Matter. Take well refined steel and open its entrails, and you will there find this second matter of the philosophers so long time, so much sought for, but without well refined steel and well wrought by the hands of a good artist, never think to obtain your end. This mineral is the hidden fountain, if you open it with your steel you would find a water. Do I not yet say enough of it?

This water is the mercury of the wise philosophers, this water is the menstruum of the world, this water is all spirit. What do I say?

It is body and matter but it also is a soul, it is a sulphur, and not a burning sulphur; it is the bath of the elements, it is in this they are united and married by a secret of Nature, and after determined to the mineral kind. It is the water which wets, and does not wet; the water of life and the water of death, it kills and revives both together, it is hot and it is cold; it is dry and moist; it is a water that serves each one and they see it not, it is a light water which weighs very heavy; it is a black water, whiter than snow; it is muddy, but it is clear and crystalline, it is stinking, and for all that it refreshes with its sweet smell; truly it is without colour, yet it also is white, black, yellow, red, green and diversified as a border of flowers.

It is the water of our sea, the philosophers sail on it prosperously, but the bellows blowers and alchemists are shipwrecked there. Why do they blow upon the sea? The winds are to be feared there. It is a vile water, but it is precious since it is the mother of our gods; the seven planets one unto it their nativity.

Belin begins this section of his text with a straightforward idea that in order to perfect the nature of metals one must begin with the metallic nature itself. He explains further that many err in alchemy by subjecting metals to acids in order to try and extract the seed of the metallic nature. They only destroy this with such corrosives. This is certainly clear and open. In order to find this metallic seed we should leave the metals behind and look instead to the minerals. The secret he tells us is to be found in the mine (the ore) which has not had time to become weakened. We are to take steel and open up this mineral, and there you will find this second matter of the philosophers. This mineral, though he does not identify it, is clearly the source of the second matter. We need only cut it open with sharp steel. He then says that this mineral is a hidden fountain and when we cut it open we will find a water. He teases us, saying, has he not now told us enough. We now feel the text shifting totally into allegorical mode as we are taken on a wild ride of imagery. It is the water that wets and does not wet. It is the water of life and the water of death, hot and cold, dry and moist. Belin uses the device of paradoxical statement, applying contradictory qualities simultaneously to this water. It is muddy and yet clear, sweet smelling and yet stinking. It is both vile and precious in the same instant. This is very much a contrived device, to disorient the reader. The alchemical author leads us on with seeming clear statements then ambushes us in a tangle of paradox and allegory. In a strange way this confusion both infuriates and delights. Unless one enjoys and appreciates this literary device one will quickly tire of alchemical literature.

Just how are we to read such obscurity and paradox? We begin to make sense of it when we realise that this sort of writing is not unique to a particular text. Many alchemical texts show similar expressions. Thus we have to accept that this was a sort of literary device that alchemists used. It developed in the literature and as alchemists studied, learned from and copied the work of previous writers, this form of expression evolved and became an important part of some writers output. Using paradox is playful game that the human mind delights in. Consider Lewis Carroll's *Through the*

Looking Glass or the visual paradoxes that the surrealists created. These modern paradoxes entertain and delight us and if we want to appreciate alchemical texts we must also, in a sense, suspend our need for linear description and just enjoy the inventiveness in the alchemists' use of paradox and allegory.

To illustrate a alchemical writer going through the process of learning from the work of previous writers and struggling with the paradoxes, let us now look at a short extract from a 17th century work by Lambye *A Revelation of the Secret Spirit*, 1623. Here we see Lambye trying to explain to himself and his readers the works of earlier alchemical writers (in particular the pseudo-Lully and the pseudo-Aristotle).

And Raymund in the chapter before alleged, speaking of Salt under the name of Nature, says...

"Salt is nothing else but a pure dry water; nothing more transparent, nothing more shining, nothing more lightsome than Salt and its nature."

If I would tell my opinion upon all these sentences worthy to be written in letters of gold, I should enlarge myself too much. But this I cannot let pass with silence, for confirmation of so many excellent sentences above spoken in the second chapter, concerning the light. And here is seen this author to confirm the same, saying: "Nothing is more transparent, & etc."

Now let us follow, "Nothing is nearer unto metals than Salt and its nature."

How is it possible to be silent with this sentence worthy to be engraved on plates of gold, and not written on paper? Oh how open a field is here to discourse! But let us follow,

"Nothing more excellent, created by nature, than Salt and its nature. Nothing more simple than Salt and its nature. Nothing more stinking than Salt and its nature. Nothing more odoriferous than Salt and its nature."

Seeing those two passages do appear to be disagreeing, it behoves to understand them as these others above, if sweet and sour; to wit, before and after the preparation.

"Nothing better in nature created by God than Salt and its nature. Nothing is in the world that contains so divers colours in it, as Salt and his Nature. Nothing heavier and weightier than Salt and his nature. Salt is of a nature, animal, vegetable and Mineral and has in its nature the actives and passives."

And here is verified the speech of Aristotle, saying, "It is a Stone and no Stone, and it is mineral, animal and vegetable, which is found in every place, in every time, and beside every man, & etc. Our Oil, Our Water, Our Sulphur, Our Mercury, is no other thing in his virtue than Salt. There are three Stones of White Things, which three are found in Salt. Salt is a Virtue mixed with all the Elements. There is nothing that so strongly contains in it the four Elements as Salt."

This begins with a statement which makes entire sense "Salt is nothing else but a pure dry water". Salt appears when one evaporates water, so one could reasonably and sensibly describe it as a 'dry water' - a paradoxical expression perhaps, but one easily grasped. Lambye then continues deeper into the texts he is investigating, and comes upon more deeply rooted paradoxes "It is a Stone and no Stone, and it is mineral, animal and vegetable, which is found in every place, in every time". Here our alchemical writer, Lambye, is taking delight in explaining such seeming paradoxes. He does not find these perplexing, but instead tries to lead us to the truths behind these allegorical and

paradoxical expressions.

Earlier we mentioned Jean d'Espagnet's *Hermetic Arcanum* also written in 1623. In the opening section he shows clearly that he understands the use of allegory and paradox in the writings of previous alchemists.

Philosophers do usually express themselves more pithily in types and enigmatical figures (as by a mute kind of speech) then by words; for example, Senior's Table, the allegorical pictures of Rosarius, the schemes of Abraham Judeaus in Flamel: of the later sort, the rare emblems of the most learned Michael Maier, wherein the mysteries of the Ancients are so fully opened, that as new perspectives they can present antiquated truth, and remote from our age as near unto our eyes, and perfectly to be seen by us...

As for the matter of their hidden Stone, philosophers have written diversely, so that very many disagreeing in words, do nevertheless very well consent in the thing; nor do their different speech, argue the science ambiguous or false, since the same thing may be expressed with many tongues, divers expressions, and a different character, and also one and many things may be spoken after a divers manner.

Let the studious reader have a care of the manifold significations of words, for by deceitful windings, and doubtful, yea contrary speeches, (as is seen) Philosophers vent their mysteries, with a desire of keeping in and hiding, not of sophisticating or destroying the truth: And therefore their writings abound with ambiguous and equivocal words; yet about none do they more contend, than in hiding their golden branch...

D'Espagnet must have studied this allegorical and paradoxical expression in great depth as he is able to create some very beautiful and well crafted examples of this form. Thus later in his book we find this section.

Keep up and couple the Eagle and Lion well cleansed in their transparent cloister, the entry door being shut and watched, lest their breath go out, or the air without do privily get in. The Eagle shall snap up and devour the Lion in the copulation; afterwards being affected with a long sleep, and a dropsy occasioned by a full stomach, she shall be changed by a wonderful metamorphosis into a coal-black Crow, which shall begin to fly with wings stretched out, and by its flight shall whisk down water from the clouds, until being often moistened, be put off his wings of his own accord, and falling down again it be changed into a most white Swan. Those that are ignorant of the causes of things, may wonder with astonishment, when they consider that the world is nothing but a continual metamorphosis, they may marvel that the seeds of things perfectly digested should end in greatest whiteness. Let the philosopher imitate Nature in his work.

This is a beautifully expressed allegory of the alchemical transformation through the usual sequence of colour changes in the flask. D'Espagnet has learned well from previous writers to the extent that he is able to create wonderful allegorical descriptions in his own words.

Thus we see that allegory and paradox in alchemical writings were in a sense a learned device, and one that evolved and became ever more complex and often more beautifully expressed. If we merely come across a text full of paradox and obscurity, then we will be frustrated at our inability to understand this. But if we come to see that this was an evolving literary device in alchemy, then we

realise that this is used in the alchemical text to serve a purpose.

An example of this is seen in the relatively late work *Chymischer Monden-Schein* ('Chemical Moonshine') by Johann Friedrich Fleischer, published in 17309. This writer has again learned from earlier authors and weaves quotations from earlier writings into his allegorical exploration of alchemy. He is comfortable with using paradoxical statements such as describing the alchemical substance as "a stone and yet no stone", a water "that does not wet the hands", it is "sought by many, but found by few, may be found everywhere"

I desire that the seeker be deficient in nothing, and to keep my promise, guide the way with some passages from the above-mentioned authors. The true subject is so very easy to explain without disguise, and also what is the natural preparation. I don't want to start any boasting, but candidly show and make clear to all the sorrowful and hopeless ones the singular consolation and illumination.

In Chapter 2 of 'Waterstone of the Wise' the materia is described thus: It is the same thing that in the beginning was produced by three together, but is only one thing, likewise was engendered and made out of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th; Also it is found everywhere in ones and twos, they name it 'Magnesiam Catholicam', Sperm of the World, the seed of the whole world, out of which all things have their origin; likewise it be of a singularly wondrous birth and form, has an unknowable and unfathomable character and nature, thus neither hot nor dry, like the fire, nor cold and moist, like the water, nor cold and dry, like the earth, but a perfect proportion of all elements.

It be also of an indestructible body, that may be touched by no element, which reconciles all of its attributes as an indestructible Quintessence in everything, even as the heavens over the four elements and four qualities; likewise it be in outward bodily appearance, figure, shape and form, a stone and yet no stone, rather it compares more to a kind of gum or water.

They call it also a water of the great sea, and water of life, yea the purest and most blessed water. It is, however, no water of the clouds or of a common spring-fount, but rather a thick, sticky and salty one, also after sundry examinations, a dry one, that does not wet the hands, or a dirty water that springs from the salty fatness of the earth. Likewise [it is] a twofold Mercurium and Azoth, which is fed and nourished by the lowest and highest vapors of the celestial and terrestrial spheres, mist and sweat, which also burns in no fire, because it itself has in it a spark of universal fire of the Light of nature. In addition [it is] a celestial spirit that dissolves all things, with which it was blessed and animated by God from the beginning, which Avicenna calls the Soul of the World, and of which he says: Even as the soul exists and moves in all the limbs of the human body so this spirit also moves and exists in all elemental creatures. It is an inseparable union of body and soul, the purest and noblest essence, in which all secrets are concealed, full of wondrous power and virtue. It possesses also a divine strength, power and virtue. It is that Spirit of the Lord, that fills up the fissures of the Earth, and moved upon the face of the waters in the Beginning. It is also called the spirit of truth, hidden to the world, and without the call of the Holy Ghost, or instruction from those that know it, may be neither grasped nor obtained (attained); that is in everything, in every realm according to its degree, but which is only in certain bodies found in perfection.

In sum, such a spiritual substance, that is neither celestial nor infernal, but rather a pleasant clear pure substance, the fixed middle between the lowest and the highest, also the most elect, and most precious under the heavens; It will not be known by those who have no understanding of it, or first begin with considerations of value, for it is the meanest of all, and most unesteemed, yea, as a rejected thing; which however is sought by many, but found by few, may be found everywhere,

collected and taken, seen by everyone, but its separation known by few.

It is interesting to see how these paradoxical and allegorical terms become a key part of alchemical writings. They were used coherently over a period of hundreds of years and were part of the linguistic and stylistic fabric of alchemical literature. Some alchemical writers used these terms in an almost playful way to tease their readers, while others took them very seriously as a kind of code of the ancients. Some took this to extremes almost breaking the form by piling metaphor upon paradox, upon allegory.

Gold, Sol, Sun, Brass of Philosophers, the body of Magnesia, a pure body, clean, ferment of Elixir, Masculine, Argent vive fixed, Sulphur incombustible, red fixed Sulphur, the ruby stone, kybrik, a man, green vitriol, burnt brass, red earth.

The water that is distilled from these things, is named by the philosophers, the tail of the Dragon, a pure wind, air, life, lightning, the house, the afternoon light, virgins' milk, sal ammoniac, sal nitre, the wind of the belly, white fume, red water of sulphur, tartar, saffron, water, the white compound, stinking water, the filthiness of the dead blood, argent vive.

A cucurbit with his alembic, the vessel of the Philosophers, a high man with a salet [helmet], the belly of a man in the midst, but in the end it is called the foot, or the feet on which the earth is calcined, roasted, congealed, distilled, or made still and quiet.

The shadow of the Sun, a dead body, a crown overcoming a cloud, the bark of the sea, black Magnesia, a Dragon which eats his tail, the dregs of the belly, earth found on the dunghill putrefied, or in horse dung, or in soft fire, Sulphur, Mercury, secondly in number, and one in essence, name, in name, a stone, body, spirit and soul.

It is called earth, fire, air, all things, because it contains in itself four Elements. It is called a man or beast, that has soul, life, body, and spirit, and yet some philosophers do not think the matter to have a soul.

But as it is a stone, it is called the water of Sulphur, the Water of the world, the spittle of Luna, the shadow of the Sun, a den, Sol, Eliphas, white Jayre, eyes of fishes, Beya, Sulphur, vine sharp, water, mile, vinegar of life, tears, joining water, urine, the light of lights, a marvellous Father, Father of minerals, a fruitful tree, a living spirit, a fugitive servant, centre of the earth, venom, most strong vinegar, white gum, everlasting water, a woman, a feminine, a thing of vile price, Azot, menstruous, Brazil, in nature Azot, water, the first matter, the beginning of the world, and mark this, that Argent vive, Mercury, Azot, the full moon, Hypostasis, white lead, or red, do all of them signify but one thing, our stone, our brass, our water, Iron, Silver, Lime, whiteness, Jupiter, Vermilion white, after divers times and degrees of operation.

And note, that the philosophers' washing is to bring again the whole soul into his body, wherefore you may not understand thereby, the common white washing is convenient to be done with vinegar, and salt, and such like.

Also note, that when blackness does appear, then it is called dispensation of the man and woman between them, and that the body has gotten a spirit, which is the tears of the virtues of the soul upon the body, and the body doth revive the action of the soul and spirit, and is made an Eagle and the

mean of natures. And note, that white earth, white Sulphur, white fume, Auripigmentum Magnesia, and Ethell, do signify all one thing.

Also the Stone is called Chaos, a Dragon, a Serpent, a Toad, the green Lion, the quintessence, our stone Lunar, Chameleon, most vile black, blacker than black, Virgins' milk, radical humidity, unctuous moisture, liquor, seminal, Sal ammoniac, our Sulphur, Naptha, a soul, a Basilisk, Adder, Secundine, Blood, Sperm, Mettaline, hair, urine, poison, water of wise men, mineral water, Antimony, stinking menstrues, Lead of Philosophers, Sal, Mercury, our Gold, Luna, a bird, our ghost, dun Salt, Alum of Spain, attrament, dew of heavenly grace, the stinking spirit, Borax, Mercury corporal, wine, dry water, water metalline, an Egg, old water, permanent, Hermes bird, the lesser world, Camphor, water of life, Auripigment, a body cynaper, and almost with other infinite names of pleasure.

William Gratacolle, reciting the names of the Philosophers' Stone included in *Five treatises of the Philosophers' Stone*, 1652, seems almost to collapse language itself into a sea of chaos. At a first reading by someone unfamiliar with alchemy this would appear to be total nonsense, but when we place it in the context of the development of the tradition of the use of allegory and paradox in alchemy, we will see that it makes complete sense.

Thus we see that allegory, obscurity and paradox served a purpose within an alchemical text. This was a constructed device that evolved over the centuries of alchemical writings, which allowed the alchemist to depart from linear description. If an alchemist was writing a recipe or an account of a process or laboratory experiment, then he might well use linear description in a notebook, or even in a text he wanted to be read publicly. We have noted this in our earlier lessons on practical alchemical texts. Many alchemists, however, wanted instead to move away from this straightforward, 'one thing after another' description, and introduce ideas of spiritual or philosophical principles in their work. They created a linguistic form in which to do this, a language based on allegory, on paralleling their alchemical practices (or their intellectual concept of such processes - for not all alchemists did actual laboratory work) with other ideas, say, from classical mythology, Biblical imagery, or the use of animals to represent principles, and so on. Some of this allegorisation is entirely straightforward, but some writers chose allegory to shock or disturb the reader from, what the writer considered to be, limited thinking. Paradoxical statements served this purpose very well. They forced the reader to a halt - to ponder the strange image of a dry water, a virgin's milk, an incombustible sulphur. Some alchemists obviously intended this device would enlighten their readers, lead them to look deeper to find the truth of the matter. Later, as this became an established tradition in the literature, many alchemical writers appear merely to have used this as a sort of formula. Once we see the purpose of this allegory and paradox, the way it works within a text, then we will be able to read the book or manuscript in the way it was intended.

EXERCISES.

Take a look at sections from d’Espagnet’s *Hermetic Arcanum*.

<http://www.alchemywebsite.com/harcanum.html>

and observe how this master shifts seamlessly from description into allegory and back into descriptive mode again.

By examining alchemical texts on the alchemy web site

<http://www.alchemywebsite.com/texts.html>

or in other resources you may have available, draw up a list of paradoxical statements used in these alchemical texts. You will find that many of these were used across different texts and were not merely the invention of a particular alchemical writer, but instead were part of a tradition of paradox in alchemical literature, that many writers drew upon, elaborated and wove into their own writings.