

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 8 : Paracelsian alchemy.

Paracelsus is well known as a reformer of medicine. He travelled around Europe during the early 16th century, lectured to doctors and inspired many to move away from their traditional methods and strive towards a new way of healing. Part of his re-envisioning of medicine was the use of alchemical methods for preparing medications. After he died, this became known as 'iatrochemistry' which was the foundation of the drug based medical system we use today. In a sense Paracelsus is one of the key founders of modern medicine. He did not write extensively on alchemy and some of his alchemical writings, appearing many years after his death, were doubtless created by later followers. It is not important for our purpose to explore the minutiae of such texts, or try and discover what was actually written by the man Paracelsus. Let us just accept that there was a considerable body of Paracelsist writings on alchemy which influenced the alchemical tradition well into the late 17th century and onwards.

What is it that essentially characterises Paracelsian alchemy ? We can identify a few key ideas.

- ? The Three Principles – Salt, Sulphur and Mercury – that lie behind all things.
- ? The Doctrine of signatures – by which it is supposed that materials exhibit something in their outer form, a property or signature, which points to the healing qualities it contains. Thus plants, growing in cold, damp places might be expected to produce remedies for diseases which exhibit similar qualities.
- ? A close interpretation of the Macrocosm-Microcosm analogy.
- ? Paracelsus introduced a whole new unique vocabulary of special terms with which to explain his ideas. Examples being Astrum, Iliaster, Ens and such like terms. We will look at these later.
- ? The idea of spagyric preparations, of the separation of the components of a substance and reuniting them alchemically.
- ? Paracelsus was among the first to push forward antimony as a curative substance.

Severinus, Adam of Bodenstein, Gerhardt Dorn, Gohorry, Croll, Penotus, Dariot, Bostocke, Fludd, Duchesne, Francis Anthonie, and many hundreds of other writers carried on the Paracelsian philosophy initially fighting against the antagonism of the medical establishment of their time.

For the purposes of this course we are not going to make a deep study of Paracelsus, but rather to try to recognise the Paracelsian influence in an alchemical work. If we can clearly see that a work is Paracelsian then we will be able to read it in its proper context. In this case the work then can be seen as standing in an emerging tradition of such Paracelsist books and if one wants to understand it

thoroughly then we must read it against the background of this species of alchemical and medical literature.

Here is a straightforward example of a work deeply influenced by Paracelsus. It is by Oswald Croll from his preface to his key book on the doctrine of the signatures of things *De signaturis internis rerum*, printed in 1609.

Stars, according to Paracelsus, are the forms and matrices of all herbs and every star in heaven, is nothing other, but a herb prefigured in a spiritual and catholic manner, representing the like of every vegetable in the earth. So every herb is a terrene [earthly] star growing towards heaven; and every individual star, is a celestial herb in a spiritual form, differing in nothing from herbs growing in the earth, save only in the matter. Therefore stars by their excrements, and nostoch [a Paracelsian term for a slime], prenunciate [foretell] all future diseases. Likewise the celestial herbs tend downward toward the earth, and respect their proper herbs procreated by them. This foundation being known, also the constellations and composition of celestial and terrestrial herbs will be known, namely, this is the star of rosemary, wormwood, etc., and has the virtues of them. Also in terrene herbs it will be observed, that as many colours of flowers, so many virtues of herbs. Nothing is placed in the family of plants either unadvisedly or in vain, but in a rare manner, from their seasonable ordained causes, are produced in exact number, time, and place. And as in things mute, the gesture is there instead of speech, the motion of the body declare the affects of their sense. So also God has insited [placed within] every plant its discoverer [the signature], that the genuine virtues of herbs latently abscondited [concealed inside] by their external signatures, that is, by the similitude of their form and figure (as by indexes of their office, essence, and latent virtues) may by their aspect be known, discovered, and manifested: Yea, so as in the manner aforesaid, by their signatures they magically seem to speak to us.

Here we have a focus on the idea of the plants in the microcosm reflecting the influences of the stars in the macrocosm, which is a part of the Paracelsist idea that healing plants are somehow marked with a sign (a signature) of the disease they can treat.

Now we can read a short extract from one of the best known of Paracelsist works, the *Triumphal Chariot of Antimony* by Basil Valentine, written at the end of the 16th century.

But in order that the very foundation of this truth may more clearly be declared; take a venomous toad, dry him in the Sun, shut him up in a closed earthen pot, and by burning reduce him to ashes. Then having taken out the ashes, and reduced this to powder, apply that powder to a wound made by venom, and this poison attracts the other poison, and joins it with itself. Why so, I pray? Because by this burning, which is the calcination of the toad, its interior virtue is made manifest, and efficacious for operating; so that like can attract like, and especially venom, to itself. Therefore firmly persuade yourself, that this truth is infallible and immutable, which I have here proposed to you and others by example. If anyone afflicted with the pest [plague], do diligently observe this, he will find the truth of those things I have here above mentioned. The Astrum of Sol, from which (as from an operative and all vivifying Sun) all things in their kinds universally arise; therefore I determine that in the potency of Gold, more than in all other things, is an operating nature; that is, in its own Astrum, whence

both itself, and all metals and minerals, in the beginning, received their first nativity and propagation of generation. Touching which more may be said, when I shall manifest to you the Astrum of Sol, and commend the same most religiously to your conscience.

Here we are being told how to prepare a remedy for a wound made by the bite of a poisonous creature. This remedy is made from a poisonous toad. This is a typical Paracelsian idea. That the remedy for a medical condition must be similar to that which made the condition, to simplify, “like cures like”. This is derived from the doctrine of Signatures. In this passage we also find another Paracelsian expression the “Astrum” of Sol. Paracelsus invented a number of terms in order to express his new ideas about the nature of the world. An “astrum” is the spiritual power in the heavens which like a star shines down and gives form to a substance or entity on the earth. Paracelsus had a strong sense of the link between the upper Macrocosmic world and the earthly world below. Each substance on earth had an “astrum” or counterpart in the heavenly world. It is the star that forms that substance or being. We will give a short list of some of these unusual terms invented by Paracelsus as appendix to this lesson.

Let us look at another short extract from the *Triumphal Chariot*.

Now, that we may write of Antimony, and begin our discourse from the very foundation, whence Antimony acquires its empire, triumph and glory, by which it is exalted to perfect operation, we must before all things discover the certain original of its root: how it is generated in the earth, to the dominion of what stars it is subjected, and what elements have thoroughly digested it, and which they be, that have brought it to maturity. Antimony is nothing other than a fume, or (as I may otherwise call it) a mineral vapour, which is generated from above by the stars, and afterward by the elements reduced and digested to formal coagulation and maturity. Here it is to be noted, that Antimony has acquired its essence, virtue, power, operation and quality, from the same principle, root and essence, whence vulgar Mercury is produced; yet with more firm coagulation, so that it is brought to an harder essence, than has the living or running Mercury of the vulgar. The reason for this is, because it has assumed from the Three Principles, a little more of the substance of Salt, than common Mercury. For although of all the Three Principles, it has the least part of Salt, yet it has assumed more of the essence of Salt, than common Mercury, whence such a coagulation has happened to it.

Hardness in everything is from Salt, which vulgar Mercury has not. For it has a very small part of Salt, but in it, in a spiritual manner, is situated a certain more hot Spirit of Sulphur. Therefore it always flows, and cannot be brought to coagulation, unless by the help of other metallic spirits, which endued with very great virtues, are chiefly found in the matrix of Saturn, without which it cannot be fixed, unless by him, who possesses the Stone of Philosophers, by which its Three Principles may be brought to a concordant equality, and then it acquires such a body, as will melt, flow, and abide the hammer, like all other metals. Otherwise Mercury is and will be fluid Mercury, until its volatility be taken away in this way. Hence it is known, that all animals and all vegetables are too weak to fix Mercury into a malleable substance (as many have in vain endeavoured) because all these have not a metallic nature. Mercury, within and without, is nothing other than mere fire. Therefore it is not combustible by any fire, no fire can apprehend it so, as to alter its essence, but it

suddenly flies and resolves itself into a incombustible oil spiritually, or after its fixation it remains so invariable, as no strength or power of men is sufficient again to alter it. And whatsoever can now be made of gold may then also be made of it by art; because after coagulation it is altogether like gold: for it with gold has one and the same root, stock, or production originally.

Therefore Antimony is a mineral made of the vapour of the Earth changed into Water, which spiritual sidereal transmutation is the true Astrum of Antimony. This Water, first by the stars, afterward by the element of Fire which resides in the element of Air, is extracted from the elementary Earth, and by coagulation formally changed into a tangible essence. In this tangible Essence is found very much of Sulphur predominant, of Mercury not so much, and of Salt the least of all three. Yet it assumes so much Salt, as it thence acquires a hard and unmalleable mass. The principal quality of it is dry and hot, or rather burning. It has very little of cold and humidity in it, as there is in common Mercury. In corporeal Gold also is more heat than cold. These may suffice to be spoken of the matter, and three fundamental principles of Antimony, how by the Archeus in the element of Earth it is brought to perfection.

In this extract we have a Paracelsian exploration of the nature of Antimony. It is somewhat like Mercury in nature but differs from this in the balance of the three Principles within it. It has more of the Salt principle within it which gives it more hardness than flowing Mercury.

One of the problems with investigating the writings ascribed to Paracelsus is that few were actually written by him. The body of his writings were edited together by a number of his followers and although they no doubt capture the essence of his thought, few can be said to be directly written by Paracelsus himself. In the first half century after his death, say up to around 1600, Paracelsian ideas were unusual and controversial, but during the 17th century they became more accepted and commonplace. Alchemical writers took up his ideas and transformed and reshaped them, so that in time they became merely part of the language of alchemy. Then we cannot always see the clear Paracelsian influence which is obvious in the writings of the late 16th century Paracelsists. Of course, we cannot merely through reading this lesson and a few texts become expert enough in Paracelsian ideas to recognise them in all their manifestations, but it is important to be aware of this class of alchemical literature influenced by Paracelsus. He was a giant among alchemical philosophers and his work covers alchemical laboratory work, cosmological and spiritual ideas, medicine and the properties of substances, as well as alchemical theories about the nature of the world. So his influence is seen in all the varieties of alchemical literature. For those who want to pursue this further, it would be best to get a copy of the A.E. Waite's edition of 'Hermetic and Alchemical writings of Paracelsus', which is available in a low priced reprint and some of the texts are even available now on internet web sites.

Let us just look at a cosmological piece from Paracelsus.

The world is as God created it. In the beginning He made it into a body, which consists of four elements. He founded this primordial body on the trinity of mercury, sulphur, and salt, and these are the three substances of which the complete body consists. For they form everything that lies in the four elements, they bear in them all the forces and faculties of perishable things. In them there are day and night, warmth and coldness, stone and fruit, and everything else, still unformed. In a piece of wood there lies concealed the forms of animals,

the forms of plants of every description, the forms of all instruments; and he who can carve them out finds them. Accordingly, the first body, the Yliaster, was nothing but a clod, which contained all the chaos, all the waters, all minerals, all herbs, all stones, all gems. Only the supreme Master could release them and form them with tender solicitude, so that other things could be created from the rest.

Again we find the three Principles playing key role in Paracelsus' cosmology. We also have one of his new words "Yliaster". This is his term for the primordial matter, the original substance, out of which all things are ultimately formed. This Yliaster is there in at the beginning of the cosmos but is also hidden in all outer things.

Here is a short section from one of Paracelsus' writings which clearly shows his attitude towards alchemy. Through writings like this he inspired later alchemists to devote their alchemical work towards finding remedies, and to apply themselves more to medicine than attempting to make gold.

The physician should be versed in all branches of philosophy, physics, and alchemy as well, as thoroughly, as profoundly as possible, and he should not lack any knowledge in all these fields. What he is should stand on solid ground, founded in truthfulness and highest experience. For of all men, the physician is supreme in the study and knowledge of Nature and her light, and that is what enables him to be a helper of the sick.

What is a pearl to the sow, since all she can do is eat? I praise the art of alchemy because it reveals the mysteries of medicine and because it is helpful in all desperate illnesses. But what shall I praise in those who have no idea of the mysteries of Nature that are placed in their hands? I also praise the art of medicine; but how can I praise those who are physicians and not alchemists at the same time? If the art of medicine were found among those who are only alchemists, they would not understand it, and if it were found among those who are only physicians, they would not be able to make use of it, for they do not hold in their hands the key to the mysteries. Thus I can only praise him who knows how to induce Nature to be helpful, that is to say, is able to recognize what lies hidden in Nature. For never must knowledge and preparation, that is to say, medicine and alchemy, be separated from each other.

In the next piece Paracelsus extends the idea of the quinta essentia, raising it into a high principle working behind the things that make up the world. Paracelsus often seems to restructure alchemical ideas into large scale principles which he sees as working behind the outer appearances of things. Thus there is not one quinta essentia, but a different quinta essentia in different things. It is a kind of living imperishable spirit that can be extracted from a substance, that can cure and mend the more perishable spirit, the spiritus vitae, that is found in humans.

The quinta essentia is that which is extracted from a substance - from all plants and from everything which has life - then freed of all impurities and all perishable parts, refined into highest purity and separated from all elements... The inherency of a thing, its nature, power, virtue, and curative efficacy without any foreign admixture, that is the quinta essentia. It is a spirit like the life spirit, but with this difference that the spiritus vitae, the life spirit, is imperishable, while the spirit of man is perishable... The quinta essentia being the life spirit of things, it can be extracted only from the perceptible, that is to say material, parts, but not from the imperceptible, animated parts of things... It is endowed with extraordinary powers

and perfections, and in it is found a great purity, through which it effects an alteration or cleansing in the body, which is an incomparable marvel... Thus the quinta essentia can cleanse a man's life... Therefore each disease requires its own quinta essentia, although some forms of the quinta essentia are said to be useful in all diseases.

Paracelsus' own writings covered a wide range – from practical recipes and details of experiments, through an elaborate theory of matter, cosmology and a deeply spiritual view of the world. So his writings span the whole range of categories of texts we have been examining. These different types of writings were taken up by later alchemists and explored further.

EXERCISE 1

Here are some examples for you to analyse from Rudolf Glauber's *Pharmacopeia Spagyrica*, published in 1654 in German.

Another metallic medicament prepared by the help of Nitre, out of a vein of lead containing silver, and most profitable in all the sicknesses or distempers of the brain.

Take a vein of lead that is rich in silver, which has neither copper nor iron mixed with it, but the richer it is in silver, so much the better and more beneficial is it for this work. Separate from the vein all the sulphureity or brimstony stench by Nitre, according to the Spagyrical art, that so the most pure, most subtle, and most highly volatile and fluid mercurial part may remain. Wash off the Nitre as carefully as you can, and separate it, so that a bright snow coloured heavy powder may remain. This most exceeding fluid and volatile powder is the Mercury of Saturn. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, even up to 12 grains thereof, being administered in convenient vehicles, do exceeding quickly yield help in all grievous affects of the brain, in the plague, pains of children that are troubled with worms. It quenches all internal heat, and withholds the gross vapours from ascending up into the brain. It opens all the obstructions of the liver, exhilarates the melancholy, restores the lunatic, foolish and phantastic mental disposition, especially if their bodies be first prepared by my Antimonial Panacaea. Nay more, this cephalic medicament will operate yet better, if after the first preparation by Nitre it be again washed, and made more subtle, yea and plainly fixed, that so it may exercise its virtues and power with the greater efficacy. Last of all, it is yet rendered most efficacious, if this Mercury of Saturn be in the last operation driven over in a retort and so converted into a sweet milk, demonstrating the truth of that philosophical saying, "The Fire and Azoth do wash the Laton". Nitre is the true Azoth of the philosophers, and besides it, is no other to be found. It is the scope [aim or purpose] of the wise men, the universal bath of metals. This sweet milk may be coagulated, and fixed into a transparent and fluid Stone, which again coagulates and fixes common purged Mercury.

EXERCISE 2

The incomparable Paracelsus, the Monarch of Philosophers and Physicians, supposed, that these four minerals, viz. Sulphur, Mercury, Antimony, and Vitriol, did prop up the whole medicinal Art, like so many capital pillars, and that by them ought all things be prepared, as were necessarily requisite for any kind of cure. And indeed the thing itself (or the effect) sufficiently proves the truth of this opinion, and so do those four minerals themselves too, if they be but dissected, purged, and prepared according to Art, else they are of no worth, but do more hurt than good, because if they be not duly prepared, they are not deprived of their venomosity [poison], and are not turned into wholesome medicines. But as for such as are set to sale in our days in the apothecaries shops, they are verily but of small moment. For the Antimony which (being turned into glass) they sell, has never as yet admitted of any separation of the good from the evil.

And as for Mercury, they turn him into a sublimate, abounding with venom, and likewise into a red precipitate, both of which are sufficiently hazardous both in external and internal medicinal uses; For the vulgar Mercury never desists from his malice, unless it be exalted by a safer and better preparation. It is sufficient (to say) that being prepared after the aforesaid usual ways, it ought to be wholly shunned, and so it will not create any danger.

As for common Sulphur, although it be exalted into flores [flowers of sulphur] and those exceeding subtle too, such as are at this day in use, yet it shows it no wonderful matters; for there is not as yet made any separation of the pure part from the impure, or rendered subtle or fit, to operate upon the body of Man; for as it was taken in, so it passes out with the excrements: For the acidity of the stomach cannot dissolve it; so far is it from yielding to the stomach any efficacy, for a strong Aqua Fortis cannot dissolve it.

As for Vitriol, it yields the workmen an austere or sour oil, and a sharp spirit, little availing to medicinal uses, this only excepted, namely, the mixing of it with cooling syrups and conserves, gives them a grateful sourness; which Spirit of Salt well rectified, would perform much better. Hence it comes to pass, that these four Minerals, according as they are at this day used, and sold by the apothecaries, cannot be accounted for the four Pillars of the whole body of Medicine, and possess that title, which Paracelsus exalts them by, unless they are prepared after another manner than they have hitherto been.

As for Sulphur, I bring it to the highest purity by a due washing, and do by suitable and proper salts turn the same, together with Gold, into a clear-water, that so our Nature may assume it to it self, as is to be seen in my Aurum Potabile.

I draw from Antimony its purer part, and I implant it in exceedingly well prepared Gold, that it may make the Gold efficacious, witness my purging Gold.

EXERCISE 3

Paracelsus and Helmont called this Salt, Alcahest, being that, of which the former wrote little, but the latter very many things; and yet both kept the same secret to themselves only, insomuch as Helmont discovered it not, even to his own son; and other men, his intimates, requiring it of him, he put off, saying, “It is an Ens very difficult to acquire”: and thus he freed himself from the importunate entreaties of many. And how little others could get out of him, is manifest by the following saying, which is thought to be his, “The liquor Alcahest is made of blood and urine”. It is credible that he might make such an Alcahest of those subjects. But the reason why that kind of Alcahest may be prepared of blood and urine, as well as of Oil of Vitriol and Spirit of Urine, is this: There is a great affinity and similitude between the Macrocosm and Microcosm or Man. Insomuch as whatsoever may be had in the Macrocosm, may also be found in the lesser world Man. For as in the great World an Universal Acidity, namely, Vitriol, commonly is generated in subterranean fibres, beds or veins, and is there kept in perpetual digestion by the Central Fire of the Earth, and at length ripened into mineral and metallic bodies; so also, in the body of every man, the blood of the veins (as an Universal Microcosmic Acidity) is generated, and by long digestion of the central Fire of the Heart augmented, meliorated, and at length transmuted into flesh, skin, and bones. Therefore, in the blood of men or animals you may find an acidity, like to that which is found in the Great World.

APPENDIX 1

List of just a few of the special terms devised by Paracelsus, that can be found in alchemical texts.

Archaeus - The formative power in Nature which brings together the elements and forms them into a particular substance or entity. This gives life and integrity to a substance or entity. It is the universal force of life that enforms substances and entities.

Arcanum – A hidden spiritual power in things that has the ability to transform and transmute, especially in the sense of restoring health. Thus Paracelsus would ask us to extract an arcanum out of, say, salt. Arcana are different from mere physical medicines. They are the transformative power itself and not its agent. In his *Archidoxes*, Paracelsus, says there are four arcana – prima materia, the Philosophers' Stone, the Mercury of life and the Tincture.

Astrum - The spiritual power in the heavens which like a star shines down and gives form to a substance or entity on the earth.

Cacoastrum - That which works against the astrum. The cacoastrum works to disrupt the formative influences of the heavenly stars upon earthly substances.

Ens - The spiritual force, that gives being to a substance or entity. It is the spark of life in things, and is ultimately spiritual.

Evestrum - The shadowy spirit of things, often seen as negative and disruptive. It is dark and polluting. It is the dark, destructive forces dwelling in matter which tries to bring down and incapacitate the working of the positive spirit in things.

Ilech - The uniting of the heavenly stars with the starry influences found in things on the earth. The Ilech thus contains the spiritual starry essence of a thing as well as its earthly essence.

Iliaster or **Yliaster** (also **Yliadum**) - The primordial matter, the original substance, out of which all things are ultimately formed. The four elements developed out of the Iliaster. If the alchemist can penetrate to the level of the Iliaster he will be able to manipulate and transform the four elements in a substance. The Iliaster is thus a hidden force in material things.

Mumia - The self healing substance inherent in the human body. If one can create a Mumia artificially from some substance, then this has the power of restoring and revivifying the human body.

APPENDIX 2

A listing of some of the better known authors who were especially influenced by Paracelsist ideas and who wrote about and transmitted these ideas. Paracelsus died in 1541.

Jacques Gohorry (1520-1576)
Adam of Bodenstein (1528-1577)
Gerhard Dorn (-1580)
Michael Toxites (1515-1581)
John Hester (-1593)
Leonard Thurneisser (1530-1596)
Richard Bostocke (died in late 16th century)
Claude Dariot (1533-1594)
Peter Severinus (1542-1602)
Joseph Duchesne, latinised as Quersitanus (1544-1609)
Oswald Croll (1560-1609)
Bernard George Penotus (c.1530-c.1620)
Robert Fludd (1574-1637)
David de Planis Campy (1589-1644)
Jean Baptiste van Helmont (1579-1644)
Theodor Turquet de Mayerne (1573-1655)
Pierre-Jean Fabre (1588-1658)
William Davidson (1593-1669)
Nicholas le Fevre (1615-1699)
Rudolph Glauber (1604-1668)

There are many more such authors and from the middle of the 17th century onward the influence of Paracelsus was so pervasive that few alchemical writers were not influenced by his ideas.