

Adam McLean's Study Course on reading alchemical texts



Lesson 24 : A rant and a summary in place of a conclusion.

This final lesson provides me with the opportunity of re-asserting the approach I have been taking to reading alchemical text in this course, in case this has become lost in the detail. This course, though seemingly simply structured, in fact has demanded a great deal of its participants. I have expected you to be able to re-orient your reading style, towards adopting the perspective I have been outlining, in merely a few dozen lessons. I have tried to demonstrate through the course lessons, the importance of seeing clearly what the alchemists actually said, but I am only too aware how difficult it is for people to sustain this view against the flood and pressure of modern interpretative writings.

Alchemy has been both positively and negatively served by twentieth century writers. Sure, it was rescued from oblivion by having the focus of some writers turned upon it, but this was often bought at too great a price. Such writers repackaged alchemy for twentieth century consumption, and essentially recreated it as a brand of esotericism and mystical speculation. At that time alchemy was denigrated and ignored by establishment thought and consequently was wide open to unrestrained speculation. A number of books were written during that period which pushed forward an entirely fictitious account of alchemy, and with the lack of access to source material it was impossible to counter these attitudes. Though I myself, back in the 1970's and 80's, was very much drawn to this emerging speculative approach, I felt that we should not just follow our abstractions and theories but try to keep true to what the alchemists themselves said in their writings. This was the impulse behind my publishing the series of *Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks* - a need to bring the original writings to modern readers. In those days there was almost nothing available, and most people had to rely on writers who were reinterpreting alchemy for their own purposes. Of course, I was very lucky to have access, here in Glasgow, to the best collection of original alchemical writings in the world, so I was able to read the actual books and ideas of the alchemists directly, without the mediation of twentieth century writers and their agendas.

Alchemical texts are often difficult and obscure. This made them an easy target for those authors who wanted to use them as "evidence" for their wild ideas, for who could argue against them. Readers of their books just did not have the access to the necessary source material in order to see how a modern writer was distorting the alchemists' ideas by selective quotation from their works, or even by complete invention. Not all these writers were guilty of deception. Many of them were as confused as their readership and merely quoted from and took their cue from other twentieth century writers. Secondary sources were often taken as authoritative, and their

preconceptions regurgitated and reworked.

Thus alchemy gradually became, through the 1970's, 80's and 90's, lumped with new age ideas, Kabbalah, Tantra, eastern religious philosophies, Tarot, neo-paganism, magic and so on. People came to see alchemy as part of the matrix of modern esotericism. In the late 90's, through the development of the internet, much more original material became easily available to people. My own alchemy web site provided access to hundreds of alchemical texts. One might have been excused for thinking that a new renaissance in alchemical studies was upon us and that, at last, people would be able to see alchemy as it was and not through the filter of speculative writers. This does not seem to have happened and instead the internet has merely provided a platform for those whose ideas are often so whacky and insubstantial that no print publisher would contemplate them. So anyone now making a search on the internet for information about alchemy, is more than likely to find themselves on a web site promoting an entirely bogus and idiosyncratic perspective on alchemy, and have no way of seeing that such a site was presenting a distorted picture.

Thus alchemy is continually being re-written and repackaged for our modern mind. It is my view that this has now departed so far from what the alchemists actually wrote about in their books, that the modern perspective is merely a kind of caricature, a Mickey Mouse cartoon of alchemy. Indeed the Japanese Manga cartoon television show *Full Metal Alchemist* depicts alchemists as magicians, and is in danger of fixating this idea in the minds of the present younger generation. I get dozens of emails every month from people wanting to know how to cast an 'alchemist's circle' to transform things.

After struggling for some years battling against the caricatures and distortions of alchemy in modern books, I decided to devise study courses that would hopefully allow people to access alchemy more through directly encountering the original material, than through the interpreted and distorted perspectives of writers who do not seem to have actually read much original alchemical material, but still feel able to expound their uninformed views. Much of modern writings about alchemy are rhetorical, rather than being based on the analysis of facts. I designed this present course in order to immerse the reader in the original material and constantly push them to read what is actually on the page and to resist the impulse to interpret through the modern mindset. Whether this has been a success will be difficult to judge. People naturally do write and say "I am enjoying your course", or "your course is very interesting", but only time will tell as to whether many will adopt the perspective I am advocating here. I seem to be always a rebel. Back in the 1970's and 80's when the established view was that alchemy was merely ancient superstitious nonsense and had no relevance, I rebelled against that and tried to make these ideas available and approachable. Now some thirty years on, the prevailing mindset seems totally turned one hundred and eighty degrees around, entirely given up to a woolly esotericism, and I find myself now rebelling against that.

Thus this present course is set against the prevailing view of alchemy in the world. Today one has to be willing to rebel and struggle against the flow of modern writings if one wants to get to the truth about alchemy. Modern books merely spin their agendas. If one goes with this flow, and gives oneself up to those often compelling and exciting perspectives, one will have perhaps an eventful journey, but it will lead one far away from what the alchemists were concerned with

and writing about. We cannot even rely on scholars, some of whom present their work as historical truth when often their books are obviously agenda driven and rhetorical, marshalling facts to support a preconceived and contrived thesis.

It is my view that we must turn our back on all this, and return to looking directly at the original writings of the alchemists. Only by directly encountering them, and reading them literally, and not through the tinted glasses of modern ideas, can we indeed come to understand the concerns and ideas of the original alchemists. I think we owe it to these alchemical writers to read their work in context and try to understand what they were attempting to say, in their own terms, rather than putting modern ideas into their mouths and taking their own voice away from them.

You will see how throughout the last two pages I have studiously avoided naming the culprits, those modern writers whom I see as having led us far from the truth about alchemy. This is partly not to give needless offence, as many of the subscribers to this study course will be entirely convinced followers of one or other of these modern authors, and will no doubt fail to see the point I am making. Perhaps I might be better writing a new course on 'How to read modern books about alchemy' !

Having expressed the frustration that partly led to the creation of this course, my rant being now over, I would just like to refresh us as to what we have seen through this course.

One of the main tasks I set myself was to bring people to a realisation about the different types of alchemical text and how one had to adopt different perspectives on these in order to read them clearly. The first part of the course surveyed these different types of alchemical text. I hope many of you will at least remember something of this approach when you look at alchemical texts in future. It could be good if something of this remained with you, as I think you will find it gives you a useful way for looking at alchemical writings. The second half of the course impelled us to look at particular alchemical works in detail, and make a full reading of them. The methods I have demonstrated require a lot of work, and it is so much easier to merely skim read a text and find what one wants to find there. The methodology I have outlined, of a forensic analysis of the text through rewriting it, will be found to be a very powerful tool you can use in order to understand what an alchemist was saying in his writings. Regrettably it takes a lot of work to do this, but precision has a price in terms of time. One easily gets a surface impression of a work in a quick reading. Penetrating that surface through to the depths of the text, requires a much more substantial investment of time.

I have enjoyed creating this course, but am only too aware of its limitations. Alchemy is so vast that it is difficult to attempt to provide some overview in a few hundred pages. I also intended this as an introductory course and thus assumed that some of my readership would not have read many alchemical works before. So this course expected a great deal of its students. If you have found it difficult and confusing, please persevere. Leave it for a few months then return and read through some of it again. Perhaps once you have internally digested it, then it may speak more clearly to you. Alchemy is not simple, it cannot be broken down into a series of easy steps. There is no alchemical ABC. Modern commentators rely on the obscurity of the subject and provide simplistic analyses, but these are always flawed. In order to encounter alchemical

ideas we have to be prepared to study the works of the alchemists in depth. The purpose of this study course has been to provide a methodology, series of ways, for you to explore alchemical texts for yourself.

Naturally, now this course is over, you can easily put it aside and return to modern speculative books. For many people these are more satisfying, as they seem to answer the difficult questions with easy answers. That is because such books are written to do this for their readership and thus these books ultimately fail to address the truth of alchemy. This study course, unhappily for the readership, does not provide such simple answers. Instead I am giving you some tools with which to work. These tools can allow you to forensically explore alchemical texts, but not without a deal of effort. So in this study course you have no simple answers, merely a path to hard work.

Now I have to abandon you and work on other alchemical projects. For some of you, no doubt, this course has provided you with more than enough alchemical texts for a lifetime. I will, doubtless have put many other people off studying alchemy in depth. Some will, I feel sure, be entirely convinced that I am merely a pedant, prodding over the minutiae, quibbling about the meaning of a few words, and so immersed in the detail that I am blind to the bigger picture - surely there must be a simpler approach! Some will rush to return to the safety of modern speculative writers. You know where you are with them, after all, and they do write more clearly and make things easier to understand. Hopefully there will be a few who have found this course more than the conventional “interesting”, and indeed might adopt some of the approaches I have presented in order to explore for themselves other alchemical texts. If there are sufficient people interested in further studies along these lines, then I would be willing to create a more advanced course on reading alchemical texts. If I have enthused you into making further investigations of alchemical texts, please email me at adam@alchemywebsite.com if you have any interest in such an advanced course.

Thank you for persevering through to the end of this course. I hope it will have left you a little bit more aware of the riches to be found in alchemical texts. I also hope that the approach I take to reading alchemical texts will have brought you a little closer to the alchemists own words. It is my view that we should let these writers from the past speak clearly in their own way, rather than foisting modern philosophical, psychological or esoteric ideas upon them.

So let us try and allow the alchemists to speak in their own terms to us. It is us who will gain from understanding what they had to say.