

THE IDEA OF UNITY

Alchemy

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THE IDEA OF UNITY



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a. Alchemy

Alchemy grew out of the visions and experience of the Gnostics to some extent, but its origins can be traced back to the ancient pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus (460 – 370BC) who postulated the theory that matter was made of discreet spherical parcels called 'atoms'. The Gnostics were concerned with extracting the spirit from the body through knowledge (gnosis). The early alchemists were concerned with extracting the spirit from metals through the transmutation of a base metal to appear like a precious metal with a coloured tincture. They also purified silver and gold of their natural contaminants.¹

Alchemy was a worldwide ancient belief system with practitioners in Hellenistic Egypt, India, Near East, East Asia and Europe. It is debateable whether alchemical ideas migrated to these distant locations or was generated spontaneously and independently. Alchemy was likely discovered independently because it had much to do with the development of metallurgy and processing metals. Copper and tin combined to form bronze in 3500 BC; the extraction of iron from its ore in 1200 BC and the smelting and purification of silver and gold were commonplace. Ideas like the circumcision rituals of the Middle East and Australian Aborigines became conscious independently with no obvious contact between cultures.

There is no doubt that ancient alchemy was steeped in spirituality, as its language refers to the extraction of a purified spirit from base material (prima materia) and the transformation of the primordial man (anthropos) to a self-aware and unified spiritual man through the process. The basis for the process is the projection of unconscious contents onto matter, much the same as the ancients projected their Gods onto the planets. The transformation from lower to higher and higher to lower form has several methods that are highly symbolic in nature.

Western alchemy began in Hellenistic Egypt at Alexandria; the city founded by Alexander the Great close the mouth of the Nile. Mary the Prophetess was the first known western alchemist and lived between the first and third centuries AD, during the time the Christian ministry established itself amongst the people. Although none of her writings were found, she is credited with the invention of the first alchemical apparatus and short aphorisms such as "Join the male and the female, and you will find what is sought", and the famous Axiom of Maria "One become two,

¹ GRIMES, Shannon L., Zosimus of Panopolis: Alchemy, Nature and Religion in Late Antiquity, 2006, PHD Dissertation Syracuse University, page 121

two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth". She also created the Tribikos, which has three arms and used for substance purification through distillation; the Kertakis, a hermetically sealed vessel for heating substances and collecting vapours, and the a double boiler called the Bain-marie (Mary's bath), which gives a gentle heat used for cooking and keeping food warm.

The next major Alchemist and Gnostic philosopher was Zosimos of Panopolis in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD in Panopolis, present day Akhimim. C. G. Jung studied his works and visions² for their psychological and symbolic content from which he concluded that Zosimos created a method to transform one's personality through projection onto metals and other substances. He noted that the goal of the procedure was akin to the idea of individuation, which is a natural flow of one's life and a similar idea to the Tao in the East. One of the most outstanding conclusions he came to from his study of Alchemy, is the link between ancient Platonic Cosmology, modern day psychology and the physical sciences. He believed the alchemical processes are coming back to consciousness after being driven underground by the establishment of the Christian ministry.

The visions of Zosimos show a parallel between the purification of metals and the purification of the soul therefore both material and psychological. Unlike popular opinion, the alchemists were not concerned with the transformation of one metal to another, but the purification and colouring of metals with tinctures to reflect the psychological changes they were experiencing. The Hellenistic-Egyptian alchemists related the base metal itself to the body and associated instincts and the characteristics of the metal to the spirit. This included its colour and how different tinctures and volatile elements such as mercury, sulphur and arsenic affected it. Zosimos believed that he could change a metal and hence the body into spirit by changing the colour with a tincture.³

This transmutation occurred with changes of colour of the base metals in the following sequence: black (melanosis), white (leukosis), yellow (xanthosis) and finishing with red/violet (iosis), which was a synonym for the Philosophers Stone and the goal of the process, although this varied between alchemists. Zosimos felt that it was a natural process over time and could not be rushed or circumvented. He also equated the sun, moon and other planets with metals and how they transformed to approximate the heavenly bodies, thus relating it to early Egyptian and Greek

² See Jung's comprehensive study on alchemy in his collected works: Psychology and Alchemy, Alchemical Studies and Mysterium Coniunctionis.

³ GRIMES, Shannon L., Zosimus of Panopolis: Alchemy, Nature and Religion in Late Antiquity, 2006, PHD Dissertation Syracuse University, page 27-32

mythology. This relationship is described in his visions where he finds himself in front of a sacrificer and altar and is dismembered with a sword, the pieces of flesh burned and cooked upon the fire and transformed into spirit. The precursor to the idea was part of the mythology of ancient Egypt and Greece with the dismemberment of Osiris and Dionysus.

Zosimos sees a multitude of people cooking in boiling water and an elderly barber tells him that the boiling water is the entrance and exit to transformation, which enables the spirit to escape from the body. A brazen priest holding a leaden tablet both sacrifices, and is sacrificed. Zosimos finds himself outside the place of punishments and meets a barber clad in a royal purple robe who walks in and is consumed by fire. Zosimos struggles with himself about going into the place of punishments and sees a white old man called Agathodaimon who looks at him and becomes his guide. He is led to the altar and the place of punishments and Agathodaimon transforms into a pillar of fire. Zosimos realises that the lead (body) is to be rejected.

The priest tells Zosimos that he who changes the body to blood, makes the eyes clairvoyant, and raises the dead. He sees a white man with a sword approaching from the east accompanied by another man named the Meridian of the Sun. The first man tells the other man to “cut off his head, immolate his body, cut it to pieces, boil the pieces according to the method and deliver them to the place of punishment”. Zosimos equates this vision with the “liquids in the arts of the metals” and the man with the sword tells him that the descent of the seven steps causes the waters to gush forth from all of his moist places.

The visions continue with Zosimos seeing an altar in the shape of a bowl with a fiery spirit tending the fire for the men being boiled and burnt alive. The spirit explains that the process is called embalming and those who seek to obtain the art should enter here and shed the grossness of the body to become spirit. Zosimos is instructed to build a circular temple from a single stone with a spring inside of pure water sparkling like the sun. He is to take a sword and immolate the dragon guarding the entrance, strip its skin, separate the limbs and make a step out of its flesh and bones, and is told what he seeks he will find in the temple. The brazen priest is now the silver man and can soon become the golden man.

Zosimos recognises and understands from the last vision that the opposites of speaking/hearing, giving/receiving and poor/rich are beautiful. Zosimos asks the brazen priest how nature teaches giving and receiving and the priest explains that metal gives and plants receive; stars give and flowers receive; heavens give and earth receives and

thunderclaps give forth darting fire. All things weave together and undo again, all things mingle, combine, unite, separate, moisten and dry, flourish and fade, in the bowl of the altar. He also explains how all things 'come to pass' with the method in fixed measure and exact weight into the four elements. The weaving together and undoing of all things brings an increase and decrease and through the harmonies of separating and combining and use of the method, brings forth nature. "For nature applied to nature transforms nature. Such is the order of natural law throughout the whole cosmos, and thus all things hang together".⁴

Zosimos was aware of the opposites of matter and psyche and what he called "Cosmic Sympathy" as their unity. The unity is the method or process, which unites the opposites in understanding, and as Zosimos suggests, his visions were as important as the physical work of treating metals. Jung wrote a comprehensive study on these visions so I do not need to look at the symbolic content much further other than to add a few comments and relate the method to everyday life. Jung equates the miraculous water (aqua permanens) extracted from the lapis⁵ (stone of understanding, incorruptibility and stability) with the anima mundi (feminine soul) imprisoned in matter, which is set free by dividing and cooking the body into four elements. We can equate the waters gushing forth from all the moist places as coming from the eyes, mouth, nose, penis, female urethra, skin and on occasion, rectum. The eyes are where we let out pent up emotions and anguish through crying. Similarly, illness lets go of bodily contents through vomiting, mucous, sweating out a fever, diarrhoea and so on. It is therefore, letting go of what is inside and presumably why they regarded the body as gross. I would suggest however, that Zosimos's vision concerns "gushing forth" of emotion, particularly, anguish when trying to overcome the body's needs.⁶ Water as Jung suggests, has a feminine quality, which most men repress for the sake of adaptation and strength in the world.

The four elements in these visions refer to Plato's earth, air, fire and water, and in Jungian terms can be associated with the four orienting functions of sensation, thinking, intuition and feeling. The cooking process separates the elements and differentiates them before union through the relating principle of the soul. The elements or functions relate to each

⁴ The visions of Zosimos are taken from the comprehensive work done by Jung in his book *Alchemical Studies*, Vol 13, Princeton University Press, 1976, page 59

⁵ The same idea occurs in the Torah –Numbers 20.8 when Moses extracts water from a rock with his rod "Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their cattle drink."

⁶ Obviously it is impossible to overcome all the body's needs as the satisfaction of our thirst and hunger is a necessity for life.

other in specific ways. For example water puts out fire and erodes earth, fire consumes earth and heats water and so on. Zosimos lived a few centuries after the opposites of an upper God and lower devil were differentiated in the life of Jesus. With the inspiration of the Christian message, spiritually oriented men were trying to overcome the natural man and associated instincts for the idea of a purified and untainted man. This is why the alchemists believed that the human body was gross rather than simply natural, as our bodies have the same functions as other mammals.

The symbolic decapitation of the head is particularly important as this separation gives an individual the opportunity to look at his or her body and its instinctive functions from an unattached objective viewpoint. From this viewpoint we can see the symbolic qualities of bodily functions and find the spirit in them. For example, sexual intercourse transforms from the overpowering penetration of the feminine as in nature, to the union of equal partners where the man gives his attention, seed and strength to the woman.⁷ More importantly, it connects the man to his inner feminine soul through the symbolic act. If a man dreams of having intercourse with a woman, it is more likely to be a union with his inner female character (soul). It is important to know the difference between these inner characters and real people, as we tend to see the former in the latter through projection.

The dismemberment and cooking of the body, as Jung points out, is accepting self-sacrifice to find the inner spirit. The idea is not new and part of our psychic structure, which occurs many times in many cultures. Osiris willingly stepped into a chest, was later dismembered and his sexual instinct transformed with the help of his sister wife Isis and son Horus. Jesus willingly suffered torture and an agonising death to be resurrected days later. The common theme in these examples is to differentiate the spirit from the body with a descent to hell, dismemberment, crucifixion, entombing, boiling, burning, torment, pain and so on, before the ascension to heaven. In other words, it is a sacrifice of outer attachments to the physical world, a journey into ourselves to find the soul(s) and her accompanying spirit and relate them to the body and physical world.

How does one go about this in our everyday lives? This question is difficult to answer as it varies from person to person. Obviously, death and torture is symbolic for the self-sacrifice of one's attachments, needs and desires. As Zosimos says, it is a natural process and unfolds in its own time. We all go through symbolic deaths and resurrections in our

⁷ Gnostic text Asclepius 21-29

lives. For example, the transition from childhood to adulthood through puberty and the expulsion from paradise is an agonising period for the individual as their behaviour indicates. A milder example includes the transition from one life to another, such as single life for married life and the responsibility of partner and children. Another example is the transition from one function to another like a sense oriented sport or physical activity to an intellectual pursuit. Another could be a concern for tools and objects to more interest in people. Yet another, the change from outer to inner interests like dreams, visions, ideas and the functioning of the inner world.

Transformations like these require the sacrifice of previous concerns and interests for new activities and interests. One-sidedness applies to both spirit and body and can be detrimental to the wellbeing of either. "Too much of the animal distorts the civilized man; too much civilization makes sick animals".⁸ Another way to become aware of the opposites is to consciously remove oneself from the world. This enables us to reflect on our place in it and encourages relationship to our inner world. As mentioned previously, it depends on one's type and natural orientation. For example, the hairy and down to earth Esau from the Torah could do with some of the spirit and introversion of his brother Jacob. Then again, Jacob could learn from Esau how to forgive and be upright and honest.

Introspection enables us to "know oneself" in Gnostic terms, and how we behave and relate to others. In this way we can transform the idea of a person to a closer approximation of their reality. Jung regarded it as withdrawing the projection, but the work of Kant and his conviction that we cannot know the object and only the idea of the object, indicates a different system. We always have an idea of a person even after removing a projection. In other words, knowledge and experience of a person makes the person clearer and the idea of them changes into one closer to their reality.

The ancients projected their inner characters onto the planets and stars and endowed them with magical significance and personality. Today we know that the sun is an insignificant star fuelled by nuclear fusion, yet its influence on our lives has not changed since the ancients. The idea has changed through knowledge but its influence and our experience of it, has not. It is still the source of all life on earth and we depend on it for everything. Part of the idea transformed but part of it remains the same. Similarly, the idea of another person includes their physical characteristics, which change very little over time. This shows that the

⁸ JUNG, C.G., Two Essay on Analytical Psychology, Vol. 7, Princeton University Press, 1972, page 28

idea of a person or object is partly based on perceived physical qualities and partly on their behaviour. An idea of something still includes how it looks, so withdrawing the projection of a deity onto the sun doesn't change that part of the idea that includes its heating, lighting and life giving properties, which is anchored in its physical nature.

The ultimate goal however, is to know the difference between the physical world of object and people, and the inner world of ideas and characters. It is a common mistake to regard the things in our mind as created and belonging to us. The fact is, ideas and inner characters quite often have us, rather than we have them. We can see this in the way professions possess individuals so they feel they are that character. The same goes for political movements of left and right, when in reality, we are capable of both left and right attitudes. We never seem to understand that socialism is like a traditional mother wanting to take care of everyone equally in a collective, and conservatism a traditional father wanting to help everyone stand on their own two feet and be independent. Naturally, there are many shades between these two sides and Alchemy's goal is to unite them in one attitude. This is what they call the 'Philosophers Stone' (Lapis Philosophorum). It is the stable, solid, incorruptible and understanding attitude that sees the physical world in all its shades and the inner world of ideas and characters, and not identifying with either.

The method or process of transformation, as described by Zosimos, begins with the original state of black, living in the body; the whitening is extracting the spirit of awareness and understanding, thus forming the pair of opposites black and white⁹. The next stage the yellowing and differentiating the opposites through the mediums of fire, heat and the fluidity of intuition and distilling the differences and similarities. The final stage in the process is the reddening and the relating function, which brings the differentiated opposites into the royal pair (purple) and the emergence of the central inner character (Lapis), which includes body, soul and spirit united. It should be kept in mind that this is a method devised by Zosimos and may vary depending on an individual's typology.

Alchemy not only had a strong relationship to Gnosticism, but also Hermeticism, which is based partly on the sacred texts purportedly, written by Hermes Trismegistus, called the Corpus Hermetica. It is a compilation of seventeen books of numbered sayings and sentences, which describes the differences between the physical and psychic.

First, God; Secondly, the World; Thirdly, Man.

⁹ This is colour symbology of the opposites of female/male, in/out, unconscious/conscious and so on.

The World for Man, Man for God.
Of the Soul, that part which is Sensible is mortal, but that which is Reasonable is immortal.
Every thing that is, is double.
The Mind in God.
Reason in the Mind.
The Mind is void of suffering.
Nothing good upon Earth, nothing evil in Heaven.
God is good, Man is evil.
Time is the Corruption of Man.
The Earth is brutish, the Heaven is reasonable or rational.¹⁰

The above text shows a similar understanding of the body, soul and spirit to Zosimos. Hermes also has a similar attitude toward the body being evil and corrupt, and the mind and pure thought as good. The striving for the light of the mind over the instinctuality and functions of the body still preoccupies the alchemists in this era. It is clearly a mental activity and that God is rational, reasonable and good, whereas man is corrupt, the double of God and evil. The next passage shows the differentiation of the Platonic elements into two pairs of opposites.

6. Then from that Light, a certain Holy Word joined itself unto Nature, and out flew the pure and unmixed Fire from the moist Nature upward on high; it is exceeding Light, and Sharp, and Operative withal. And the Air which was also light, followed the Spirit and mounted up to Fire (from the Earth and the Water) insomuch that it seemed to hang and depend upon it.

7. And the Earth and the Water stayed by themselves so mingled together, that the Earth could not be seen for the Water, but they were moved, because of the Spiritual Word that was carried upon them.¹¹

The pair of opposites are fire/air and earth/water. This projection of ideas onto the material world shows that he realised there is relationship and unity in reality, but preferred the spirit (fire/air) to the base material (earth/water). This stage is equivalent to the differentiation of white from black as opposites in the method of Zosimos. Hermes describes the opposites as "Mind being God, male and female, Life and Light,....."¹² then the connection between the two pairs as follows:

23. Which when he saw, having in itself the unsatiable Beauty and all the Operation of the Seven Governors, and the Form or Shape of God, he Smiled for love, as if he had seen the Shape or Likeness in the Water, or the shadow upon the Earth of the fairest Human form.¹³

¹⁰ HERMES Trismestigustus, The Corpus Hermetica, First Book, pages 3-5

¹¹ Ibid, The Second Book. Called "Poemander" page 6

¹² Ibid, page 7

¹³ Ibid

The differentiation brings forth much feeling and recognition of the beauty and love of the relationship between the opposites. This emphasises the way the upper form reflects the water and the shadow that falls upon the earth.

26. And for this cause, Man above all things that live upon Earth, is double; Mortal because of his Body, and Immortal because of the substantial Man: For being immortal, and having power of all things, he yet suffers mortal things, and such as are subject to Fate or Destiny.

27. And therefore being; above all Harmony, he is made and become a servant to Harmony. And being Hermaphrodite, or Male and Female, and watchful, he is governed by and subjected to a Father, that is both Male and Female and watchful.

This is the first indication of a harmonious quaternity union with an emphasis on the hermaphroditic nature of the father who is aware (watchful) of the opposites and how they interact. The conflict common between opposites has in this text been resolved into a harmonious interplay of male/female, with the characteristics of fire/air and earth/water. This pairing is particular to Hermes as an individual, as there are many possible combinations of the elements and how they relate. In this case, air supports fire and is necessary for light; earth and water intertwined and sit nicely alongside each other. Additional interactions include air bringing forth water in the form of rain; water puts out fire; fire transforms water into air (steam) through earth in the form of a vessel; water erodes earth; earth is consumed by air and fire; air moves earth and gives water.

Hermes then disparages worldly concerns of power, wealth, deceit of concupiscence, ambition, boldness, confidence etc., and praises the characteristics of his inner God as father of all things, will, word, image, pure soul, unformed, strength, excellence and so on.

18. For shining steadfastly upon, and round about the whole Mind it enlighteneth all the Soul ; and loosing it from the Bodily Senses and Motions, it draweth it from the Body, and changeth it wholly into the Essence of God.¹⁴

The text describes the transformation of the soul (inner female) loosened from bodily senses and into the realm of the mind and consciousness. This shows that the evolution of humanity at this time had a similar viewpoint to the Christian story. The soul needs separation from the body and elevated to the idea of God. This does raise a curious question

¹⁴ Ibid, The Third Book. Called "The Holy Sermon", page 14

though. If the soul is elevated beyond the physical nature of the body and what animates the body removed, an empty shell is left behind. Even Jesus is reported to have had a physical relationship with Mary Magdala and was often seen kissing her on the mouth. What Hermes is missing or unwilling to acknowledge is the dual nature of the soul that is often characterised by two women, one light and pure, and the other darker and down to earth. Mary, the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdala are an example of such a pair. Hermes continues with his 'either or' of the soul and how she is, if not liberated from the body.

27. And the wickedness of a Soul is ignorance; for the Soul that knows nothing of the things that are, neither the Nature of them, nor that which is good, but is blinded, rusheth and dasheth against the bodily Passions, and unhappy as it is, not knowing itself, it serveth strange Bodies, and evil ones, carrying the Body as a burthen, and not ruling, but ruled. And this is the mischief of the Soul.¹⁵

Hermes explores the senses and their relationship to knowledge by saying "Knowledge is the end of sense" and attempts to relate them in the following sentence:

34. Knowledge is the gift of God ; for all Knowledge is unbodily but useth the Mind as an Instrument, as the Mind useth the Body.¹⁶

He then states something quite remarkable and recognises not only psychic reality, but also the underlying unity within it.

39. Because the World Is a Sphere, that is a Head, and above the head there is nothing material, as beneath the feet there is nothing intellectual.
42. The whole is a living wight, and therefore consisteth of material and intellectual.¹⁷

He draws a definite distinction between a mental or psychic process and the physical world of matter but stops short of recognising the psychic aspect of matter or the difference between matter and the idea of matter as described by Kant. The above does show that he has an intuition about psychic reality and recognises it as a sphere being the head. Hermes then elaborates on the spherical nature of reality by connecting the spirit to the body.

46. But the Soul of Man is carried in this manner, The Mind is in Reason, Reason in the Soul, the Soul in the Spirit, the Spirit in the Body.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid, page 15

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

He returns to the elements and how they relate to each other in the following:

60. When therefore the Mind is separated, and departeth from the earthly Body, presently it puts on its Fiery Coat, which it could not do having to dwell in an Earthly Body.

61. For the Earth cannot suffer fire, for it is all burned of a small spark; therefore is the water poured round about the Earth, as a Wall or defence, to withstand the flame of fire.

As mentioned previously and reinforced by Hermes's own text, the earth is consumed by the spirit (fire) and needs the intermediary function of water as the third uniting function to temper fire and relate them. He does hint at an earthly character represented by water but stops short at naming her as another soul. He does however hint at another soul later in the text: "7. For where there is a Soul, there is the Mind, as where there is Life, there is also a Soul."¹⁹ Hermes equates God with the sun as the most influential of the heavenly bodies and greater than earth and water in the following:

15. The Sun is the greatest of the Gods in heaven, to whom all the heavenly Gods give place, as to a King and potentate; and yet he being such a one, greater than the Earth or the Sea, is content to suffer infinite lesser stars to walk and move above himself; whom doth he fear the while, O Son?²⁰

Humanity identified the sun with a great deity due its overwhelming and far-reaching influence over our body and earth. Today we know its atomic structure and how it burns and have to some extent transformed the idea of it. The former projection of a deity onto the sun still exists as well, in the form of an all light giving powerful idea of father and consciousness. Hermes equates God to a 'workman' like a carver or painter seen in the mind that has no body but creates bodies in the physical world. He then puts all the elements together in one passage with God in the central place, which not only holds the unity together, but also relates the elements to each other.

25. Hermes. Yet is it so, as I say, O Son, He that Looketh Only upon that which is carried upward as Fire, that which is carried downward as Earth, that which is moist as Water, and that which bloweth or is subject to blast as Air; how can he sensibly understand that which is neither hard, nor moist, nor tangible, nor perspicuous, seeing it is only

¹⁹ Ibid, The Eleventh Book. Of the Common Mind to Tat, page 40

²⁰ Ibid, The Fifth Book, page 19

understood in power and operation; but I beseech and pray to the Mind which alone can understand the Generation, which is in God.²¹

This passage shows that each element has its place but can only be differentiated and united through the understanding of God. The text indicates that Hermes knows how to see his God not only in sleep, but during the day through synchronicity, association and amplification.

105. For with this living wight alone is God familiar; in the night by dreams, in the day by Symbols or; Signs.²²

The following passages show that Hermes was still on the ascent to overcome the natural man in himself and his unity still lies in the rarefied air of heaven.

29. For the things that are, being two Bodies, and things incorporeal, wherein is the Mortal and the Divine, the Election or Choice of either is left to him that will choose; For no man can choose both.

30. And of which soever the choice is made, the other being diminished or overcome, magnifieth the act and operation of the other.²³

The work of Hermes was a signpost in humanity's evolution and part of the era where the spirit of good was approached through overcoming the body, which was regarded as negative. The liberation of the spirit from matter and the body brings us to heaven. The liberation of the spirit from heaven brings us down to earth. The centre between heaven and earth is what Jung calls the 'Self'. It is the inner character that unites above and below and capable of both good and evil. Identification with either side negates the unity between them. Just as the physical world is outside of us and objective, so too is the inner world of image and idea, which is equally objective. This brings the individual down to normal parameters and liberates him or her from the identification of body with evil. Behaviour expresses good and evil which can be spiritual as well as physical. Jung feels that a morally neutral stance is preferred, although this is difficult to achieve. We always feel very protective over our family and no amount of understanding would accept their destruction.

Medieval Alchemy was an undercurrent to the Christian church and remained hidden for centuries because it was regarded as heretical. Notable Alchemists that braved the wrath of the church and tried to add alchemical knowledge and experience to the Christian doctrine were Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon and Thomas Aquinas. At the latter stage

²¹ Ibid, The Seventh Book, His Secret Sermon in the Mount of Regeneration, and the Profession of Silence. To His Son Tat, page 25

²² Ibid, The Eleventh Book, Of the Common Mind to Tat, page 45

²³ Ibid, The Twelfth Book His Crater or Monas, page 48

of the medieval period and the beginning of the Renaissance Theophrastus von Hohenheim, commonly referred to as Paracelsus, was born in 1494. He was a Swiss physician, astrologer, philosopher, and alchemist and noted for being the father of toxicology. Although Paracelsus regarded himself as a Christian, he sought divine inspiration from nature and his own capacity for reason, which often led him to conclusions at odds with Christian doctrine.

Like previous alchemists, he had disdain for the body and its natural functions and regarded the flesh as twofold in nature. The first we share with beasts is physical and carnal, and the second purified non-physical and sidereal. He was a difficult man with a volatile temper and often critical of his contemporaries regarding the practice of medicine. He had however, great compassion for his patients and dedicated his life and work to their healing. He regarded the only true healing of the body and soul was through the integration of the idea of God and his relationship to nature. This led him to conclusions completely at odds with the Christian faith he so cherished. For example, he believed that under certain circumstances, polygamy was not only understandable, but necessary.²⁴

Paracelsus's approach to medicine was spiritual and required the spirit's extraction as the entity that heals 'that does not die' from the body. He sought out many different people, from barbers to nobles, to learn his art in his quest to understand the human condition. He had a conception of the unconscious he termed the 'matrix' or 'maternal womb', as the origin of the world and all its creatures. God created man so that his spirit had a dwelling place in the flesh, which correlates with early Gnostic and Alchemical ideas.²⁵ He regarded the primordial body made of four (?) elements including mercury, sulphur and salt and in them the opposites of day/night, warmth/coldness etc., still unformed and requiring differentiation (*separatio*). Man received his carnal body from earth and water and his sidereal body from fire and air.

Hence man has also an animal body and a sidereal body; and both are one, and are not separated. The relations between the two are as follows. The animal body, the body of flesh and blood, is in itself always dead. Only through the action of the sidereal body does the motion of life come into the other body. The sidereal body is fire and air; but it is also bound to the animal life of man. Thus mortal man consists of water, earth, fire, and air.²⁶

²⁴ PARACELSUS, *Selected Writings*, Edited by Jolande Jacobi, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1995, page 36

²⁵ *Ibid*, page 13

²⁶ *Ibid*, page 18

Paracelsus, as did other Alchemists, attempted to reconcile the Platonic elements with the human body and spirit. He states that man has two fathers, one the earth, the other heaven, and from the earth, he receives his material body, and heaven his character. This insight into personality and where it comes from laid the groundwork for future research into our nature and typology. He describes the composition of character as three parts complementing sulphur, mercury and salt with feeling, wisdom and art, which as opposites, are one. He continues with a description of more functions of character and their permutations which is an early form of psychological types:

The body has four kinds of taste-the sour, the sweet, the bitter, and the salty. . . . They are to be found in every creature, but only in man can they be studied. . . . Everything bitter is hot and dry, that is to say, choleric; everything sour is cold and dry, that is to say, melancholic. . . . The sweet gives rise to the phlegmatic, for everything sweet is cold and moist, even though it must not be compared to water. . . . The sanguine originates in the salty, which is hot and moist. . . . the salty predominates in man as compared with the three others, he is sanguine; if the bitter is predominant in him, he is choleric. The sour makes him melancholic, and the sweet, if it predominates, phlegmatic. Thus the four tempers are rooted in the body of man as in garden mould.

From the above we can see the emerging awareness and knowledge of character differences and how they relate to each other. He continues with the idea that the sun, moon, planets and stars are contained within man in the 'young heaven' in contrast the 'great heaven' of God. This shows an awareness of projection and further differentiation between the physical cosmos and the inner cosmos as expressed by the characters of ancient Egypt and Greece. To them there was no difference; the Gods were the stars and planets. Paracelsus knew the difference, "For what is outside is also inside; and what is not outside man is not inside."²⁷

Paracelsus discusses the need for chastity to ensure a pure heart. His attitude towards women is one of respect for their function as mothers given by God. He never married though and lost his personal mother when he was seven or eight years old. He therefore saw the mother and maternal womb (matrix) as an inner character, which gave birth to a 'pearl' (spirit) of God. He also regarded the process of conception, incubation and birth in an alchemical or spiritual light where the seed of man and woman combined and transformed into a third new function (child). God gives the child spirit, soul, reason and understanding.²⁸ These opposites of male/female differentiate into two natures, the first from the stars, second from the material elements. He states:

²⁷ Ibid, page 21

²⁸ Ibid, page 30

The light of nature in man comes from the stars, and his flesh and blood belong to the material elements. Thus two influences operate in man. One is that of the firmamental light, which includes wisdom, art, reason. All these are the children of this father. . . . The second influence emanates from matter, and it includes concupiscence, eating, drinking, and everything that relates to the flesh and blood. Therefore one must not ascribe to the stars that which originates in the blood and flesh. For heaven does not endow one with concupiscence or greed. . . . From heaven come only wisdom, art, and reason.

As great as the difference in form and shape between the two bodies, the visible and the invisible, the material and the eternal, is the difference between their natures. . . . They are like a married pair, one in the flesh, but twofold in their nature. . . . And because this is so, a contradiction dwells in man. . . . Namely, the stars in him have a different disposition, a different mind, a different orientation than the lower elements; and on the other hand, these elements in turn have a different wisdom and a different disposition than the stars in man.²⁹

The text describes how the two natures of the physical body and the ethereal body, want to exceed their bounds and expel the other giving rise to enmity. Paracelsus puts forward a possible solution to this problem using a third uniting function as a container. He describes the two halves united into one whole man; “they are like two men united in one body,”³⁰ and hints at the actual difference between the two sides in the following passage:

Thoughts are free and are subject to no rule. On them rests the freedom of man, and they tower above the light of nature. For thoughts give birth to a creative force that is neither elemental nor sidereal.³¹

He elaborates on this idea by citing the example of a carpenter who builds a house in his head, combines the idea with experience and builds the house through ‘active practice’. As we shall see later, Paracelsus equates this as an alchemical process of inception, transformation of base material (prima materia) through spirit (idea) to final perfected work. This is like the creative process of a sculptor having an idea (spirit) and bringing it into physical reality as a work of art through experience (skill) and practice (moulding and shaping). Indeed, Paracelsus puts great emphasis on his medical training and practice as an art. He goes as far as regarding medicine having four pillars namely: Philosophy, astronomy, alchemy and ethics.

²⁹ Ibid, page 41

³⁰ Ibid, page 43. This is a classical Alchemical image of two halves with different characteristics such as Bishop/King or a man with sun/moon head and so on.

³¹ Ibid, page 45

Paracelsus then makes a curious statement “A man without a woman is not whole, only with a woman is he whole.”³² It is clear from what follows that this is an inner union of male and female as he says in the following sentence: “Similarly, man and remedy derive from the same substance, and both together form a whole, that is to say, a whole man...In this sense, the disease desires its wife, that is, the medicine.”³³ Finding the neglected opposite in his patients is Paracelsus’s secret to healing. He later differentiates spiritual and physical diseases but stops short at being able to cure spiritual diseases without a physical remedy. This reluctance to see psychic material on its own is understandable as the psyche itself communicates in images borrowed from the physical world. Dreams for example, use familiar imagery, yet the laws of physics do not apply to their behaviour, and this is how it reflects our physical life. The text continues with the typical alchemical cooking, burning, purifying process of transformation and the creative act of building:

Just as gold is of little use if it has not gone through fire, so there is little virtue or use in a remedy that has not been purified in fire. For all things must go through fire in order to attain to a new birth, in which they are useful to man.³⁴

When a carpenter builds a house, it first lives in him as an idea; and the house IS built according to this idea. Therefore, from the form of the house, one can make inferences about the carpenter's ideas and images.³⁵

In the next section, Paracelsus characterises fire with the ancient Roman God Vulcan, and again equates the alchemical transformation with known metallurgical processes and the everyday day task of cooking food.

God created iron but not that which is to be made of it. . . . He enjoined fire, and Vulcan, who is the lord of fire, to do the rest. . . . From this it follows that iron must be cleansed of its dross before it can be forged. This process is alchemy; its founder is the smith Vulcan. What is accomplished by fire is alchemy-whether in the furnace or in the kitchen stove.³⁶

He discusses dreams as one of the primary expressions of unconscious material and the importance of their interpretation:

³² Ibid, page 73

³³ Ibid, page 74

³⁴ Ibid, page 90

³⁵ Ibid, Man and Works, Inner and Outer Worlds, page 123

³⁶ Ibid, page 93

The interpretation of dreams is a great art. Dreams are not without meaning wherever they may come from—from fantasy, from the elements, or from another inspiration. Often one can find something supernatural in them. For the spirit is never idle. If the earth gives us an inspiration—one of her gifts—and if she confers it upon us through her spirit, then the vision has a meaning.

Anyone who wants to take his dream seriously, interpret it, and be guided by it, must be endowed with "sidereal knowledge" and the light of nature, and must not engage in absurd fantasies, nor look upon his dreams from the heights of his arrogance; for in this way nothing can be done with them. Dreams must be heeded and accepted. For a great many of them come true.

For the most part presentiments appear to man in so unimpressive a form that they are ignored. And yet Joseph discovered in his sleep who Mary was and by whom she was with child. And because dreams are not sufficiently heeded, no faith is put in their revelations, although they are nothing other than prophecies.

The dreams which reveal the supernatural are promises and messages that God sends us directly; they are nothing but His angels, His ministering spirits, who usually appear to US when we are in a great predicament. . . . Of such apparitions we must know how they take place and how they come to us; when we are in great need, we can obtain them from God's kindness if our prayer pours in true faith from a truthful mouth and heart.

Then God sends us such a messenger who appears to us in spirit, warns us, consoles us, teaches us, and brings us His good tidings. From time immemorial artistic insights have been revealed to artists in their sleep and in dreams, so that at all times they ardently desired them. From time immemorial artistic insights have been revealed to artists in their sleep and in dreams, so that at all times they ardently desired them.

³⁷

There is not much I can add to this except to say that this attitude was carried through to the ground-breaking studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Freud, Jung and others. Paracelsus describes the Arcanum (secret medicines) and their fourfold virtue. The first stage begins with 'prima materia'. The second the 'lapis philosophorum' which purifies the body of filth and bring fresh young energy, the third 'Mercurius vitae' which renovates the old body and finally, the 'Tinctura' which removes the harmful parts, its crudity and incompleteness and transforms everything into a pure, noble and indestructible being. This final stage is often represented by the

³⁷ Ibid, Man and Works, Interpretation of Dreams, page 134-136

Uroboros, which is the serpent or dragon eating its own tale. At this stage, projection is lessened and we are open to the reality of both idea and object and more importantly, their differences. Emotional outbursts decrease, as we tend to look inside behind the affect for the image(s) that helps us understand ourselves. This is a lifelong task, and situations will challenge the integrity of the closed system and break it apart. Understanding and reason liberate us from the chaos of external events as we have an inner order and stability. The text continues with the importance of knowledge, reason and feeling in understanding:

Wisdom consists in knowing and not in imagining; a man who has wisdom understands all things and uses them with reason, his reason and wisdom are free from stupidity, free from folly, free from confusion and doubt.

The nature of a man's virtue is like that of his feelings. His treasure lies where his heart is.³⁸

Indeed, if one feels another's viewpoint with knowledge and reason and free of judgement, we can understand where the other person is in their life process and behave accordingly. This does not mean that the outcome will necessarily be harmonious or pleasant, as some people need to be 'kicked in the bottom' metaphorically speaking, and benefit from an honest and open response. Paracelsus continues his differentiation of functions in religious language:

The spirit is not the soul, but-if it were possible-the spirit would be the soul of the soul, just as the soul is the spirit of the body. For the spirit of man is not the body, and not the soul, but a third thing in man.³⁹

Finally, he describes the unity of life as the Godhead:

There is one single number that should determine our life on earth, and this number is One. Let us not count further. It is true that the Godhead is Three, but the Three is again comprised in the One. And because God transforms Himself into the One, we men on earth must also strive for the One, devote ourselves to the One and live in it.⁴⁰

The life of Paracelsus was indeed an extraordinary one and possibly the precursor to the healing professions of psychology and psychotherapy of the twentieth century. He had the compassion of a saint towards his patients and the venom of a snake towards his contemporaries and this is his unique form of unity. His idea of unity resided in his Christian beliefs

³⁸ Ibid, Man and Works, Knowledge and Faith, page 163-164

³⁹ Ibid, Man and Spirit, Power of Faith, page 200

⁴⁰ Ibid, God, The Eternal Light, page 230

and regarded medicine having four pillars: philosophy, astronomy, alchemy and ethics. With these pillars, a physician could help transform matter and personality for the sole purpose of healing and attaining the idea of unity. Above all, he regarded experience of the light of nature and God with equal value to his Christian faith and makes many attempts to reconcile them. He regarded the ailments of the body as ailments of the soul and attempted to treat that aspect with the hope that the body would also heal. Psychosomatic illnesses are a reality and inner conflicts of differing characters do express themselves with physical symptoms. Obviously there are diseases that attack the body and have little to do with the soul or spirit, and Paracelsus addressed these as well and is why he is the father of Toxicology.

Paracelsus lived in an age where psyche and matter were still intertwined and undifferentiated. Astrology contaminated Astronomy; Chemistry concealed within Alchemy, and magic was commonplace. His connection to the earth was through his patients and his writing; he never married and did not know the pleasure and pain of a wife and children. His ideas were expressed and developed through his medical practice as he came to understand the upper and lower halves of reality personified by Sol (gold) and Luna (silver). He also recognised the hermaphroditic Mercurius (quicksilver) as soul and central figure who had both earthly and heavenly characteristics. Unlike Zosimos, Paracelsus regarded alchemy in a broader sense, which included creative endeavours such as painting, sculpture and building. He saw alchemical transformation and the extraction God's spirit from matter through ideas, knowledge and skill of an artist. Indeed, building starts with the earth and its products of timber, stone and iron, to be transformed through the fire (intuition) of the spirit as an idea, then applied to the materials for further transformation, refinement, assembling, shaping etc., to the final perfected form of a building.⁴¹

Christians, Mary the Prophetess, Zosimos and Paracelsus, still attempted to overcome the body for the upper idea of and all good God. The differentiation of astronomy from astrology and chemistry from alchemy enabled our modern scientific age. The ideas in astrology and alchemy could then be regarded as psychological determinants and methods of personal growth. In some instances, we are still under an alchemical influence, particularly when we have reached the limits of our knowledge and are groping in the dark for answers. The 'God particle' is a suitable description of the 'spirit in matter'.

⁴¹ Anyone who has built their own home knows the pain and suffering involved in its conception, refinement and construction. They would also know the satisfaction and joy felt when completed.

The character Mercurius as both male and female, shows that he has the ability to relate to the upper realm of ideas, reason, insight, divine knowledge, understanding, etc., and the lower realm of matter, body, instincts, etc., and form a unity between them. In this case, Mercurius is more unified than the central Christian character as it includes all we are, not just who we want to be.

Christ's spirituality was too high and man's naturalness was too low. In the image of Mercurius and the lapis the "flesh" glorified itself in its own way; it would not transform itself into spirit but, on the contrary, "fixed", the spirit in stone, and endowed the stone with all the attributes of the three Persons.⁴²

Paracelsus was symbolically aware that things happen according to nature in their own time and that life is an unfolding process (*unio mentalis*) and each phase has its own concerns. For example, a typical journey of a natural male starts with childhood, and a time of creativity and play. Teenage years are a time for growth, adventure and enjoyment of physical nature.⁴³ Young adulthood is an appropriate time for establishing the lower soul of career, power, wealth, partner and family. Middle age the continuing nurture of career base and family, with a movement towards spirit. At the sun's zenith, other things become visible and he moves closer to the upper soul and spiritual concerns. When the body is less robust in old age, it is an excellent time for deeper thought and a return to creativity.⁴⁴

We can conclude from the above that Alchemy is an ongoing process of the union of the opposites of spirit and body within the third character of Mercurius as soul who like Janus, has a viewpoint to the inner and outer realms at once. It was a natural reaction to the rarefied air of the Christian story and its rejection of the body. Alchemy sought the spark of the divine in matter and the body and devised methods to extract that spirit. The life of Paracelsus emphasises how everything we are can be incorporated into a unity. In closing this chapter, I shall leave the final word to Jung and urge the reader to explore his comprehensive study in this field.

In general, the alchemists strove for a *total* union of opposites in symbolic form, and this they regarded as the indispensable condition for the healing of all ills. Hence they sought to find ways and means to produce that substance in which all opposites were united. It had to be material as well

⁴² JUNG, C.G., *Alchemical Studies*, Vol. 13, Princeton University Press, 1976, page 96

⁴³ This is the time for athleticism, living and enjoying the body to its fullest potential.

⁴⁴ Naturally, this example is schematic and should be regarded as such. There are no hard and fast rules concerning one's life journey and different types live their life in different ways.

as spiritual, living as well as inert, masculine as well as feminine, old as well as young, and- presumably- morally neutral.⁴⁵

⁴⁵JUNG, C.G., *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, Vol 14, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1977, Page 475

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