

Paracelsus, the five matrices - and his alchemy as a ritual field

*Mercurius Hermes Trismegistus says that he who perfects this Art creates a new world.*¹

Alchemy is altogether a difficult subject. However, the last three decades of research has brought forth significant revisions to this complex subject resulting in an almost unanimous rejection of four related features of alchemy. Firstly, the notion that alchemy represents a monolithic tradition, i.e. it is unable to adjust to cultures and dynamic developments. Secondly, the notion that alchemy in essence is a psychological and a self-transformative endeavour (i.e. the Jungian approach).² Thirdly, the notion that alchemy is a ‘pseudo-science’, i.e. unable to contribute to scientific developments, and fourthly the notion that alchemy is different and distinguishable from chemistry. Alchemy consists of varied ‘positions’ and maybe one can speak of different ‘schools’ each with different practices and goals. Some alchemists sought to bring about metallic transmutations where other used their art to bring about medical improvement. Some were interested in establishing a chemical industry of sorts promoting the production of salt, metals and pigments, while others made their experiments in order to understand nature and/or the theological dimensions of reality. Very often, also, an alchemist could pursue several of these goals simultaneously³ - and hence alchemy often includes an ability to cope ‘additively’ with ‘beliefs’ involved. Further, according to recent research, alchemy as a natural philosophy in nature harbours two significant notions. First and foremost, the world is perceived as a battleground in which the forces of the evil (matter) battled the forces of good (spirit).⁴ Then, “like their ancient and medieval

¹ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Spirits of the Planets* (Vol. I, p. 85) in Arthur Edward Waite, *The Hermetical and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus*, Kessinger Publishing Co. As usual, no year of publication is given by Kessinger Publishing, but the book was printed in Oct. 2005. ISBN: 1425454275. This is a one-volume reprint of Edward Waite’s two-volume translation originally published by de Laurence, Scott & Co., Chicago, 1910. In the following the abbreviation HAW will be used for this new print. Two other textual compendiums are used as well, and this is *Selected Writings* (Jacobi: 1979) and *Essential Readings* (Goodrick-Clarke:1999). At the Zürich Paracelsus Project, still in progress, a new, modern and critical masterwork is about to be launched. A German dictionary is partially available online and can be found at: paracelsus.unizh.ch/index.html. I have chosen to give clear references to the many writings of Paracelsus by referring to his own titles.

² A rather informative article on the Jungian ‘mistake’ and influence on figures, as for example Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade and Betty J. T. Dobbs (*Foundation of Newton’s Alchemy* from 1990) can be found in Principe & Newman 2001: 401 - 415. It must be emphasised, however, that Jung did not claim Paracelsus to believe in psychological transmutations, but rather he considered Paracelsus as being responsible for converting alchemy into science.

³ Principe 2005: 12 - 15

⁴ Coudert 2005: 46.

predecessors early modern alchemists accepted transmutation as an observable fact of life”.⁵ No need to argue then for the relevance of investigation matrix number three: Dualism and monism are interdependent, including the mind and/or the world as a ladder.

It is in the light of modern research that an additive cognitive approach becomes appropriate. An important recognition in recent research is that even heavily-allegorical alchemy texts may be decoded and read in a pure materialistic and chemical way.⁶ What justifies an additive cognitive understanding between a piece of science and religion as a key approach, is also to be found in the works of A. G. Debus, who claims that Paracelsus consciously unified a chemical approach to nature based on alchemical, metallurgical and pharmaceutical information.⁷ A third argument is that ‘The Paracelsian chemists’, who all favoured the application of chemistry to medicine, did not necessarily subscribe to its cosmic implications.⁸ Whether or not Paracelsus made any chemical or medical inventions or progressions is not to be dealt with in this context.⁹ However, this is a subject of controversy, and at one hand Paracelsus is counted among history’s great doctors. On the other hand, his writings have never been “official textbook teaching materials and the medical reform which he so vociferously advocated has never been realised.”¹⁰ As visions Paracelsus’ ideas were inspirational, and Paracelsus is often recognised as the father of modern pharmacology, i.e. he produced ‘drugs’ or synthetic medicine. His idea of extracting the active medical principle is an important part of modern medicine, but with a great difference: to Paracelsus the active principle was a ‘virtue’, a power or a quintessence. Paracelsus regarded cosmos, nature (and the human body) as principally chemical in nature - and not, for example, based on mathematical principles.¹¹

*Paracelsus (1493 – 1541) in an esoteric context*¹²

In recent research alchemy is ‘naturally-philosophical in character’ understood in a broad and unbiased sense. Hence, one ‘side’ of alchemical texts, i.e. the religious and not the chemical, can perhaps be considered as belonging to esotericism. According to Faivre, as we have seen, alchemy is one of the

⁵ Coudert 2005: 42.

⁶ An illustrative example is El-Eswed (2006: 71-90). This article is fairly technical in nature, but highly informative. The author has identified different ‘spirits’ (al-arwāh) to be mercury, sulphur, ammonium chloride and arsenic sulphides. One place, for example, Jabir stated that the spirit ‘nushadir’, ammonium chloride, could be distilled from hair. Today scientists know that hair is composed of a protein, keratin, which contains glucine and serine. Decomposed (i.e. dissolved in water) and distilled (during heating) this actually becomes ammonium chloride.

⁷ Debus 1987: 235.

⁸ Debus 1987: 195.

⁹ Goltz 1998: 80.

¹⁰ Goltz 1998: 80.

¹¹ Debus 1987: 1 - 28; 185 - 196.

main currents and cornerstones in Western esotericism, being a notion and a practice as well. In his *Access to Western Esotericism* Faivre placed alchemy within the esoteric tradition mainly by stressing the theological similarities between Paracelsus and German theosophy. This includes, for example, the notion that “[n]ature emanated directly from the omnipotence of the Almighty.”¹³ Later, it will be demonstrated that on a ‘religious level’, alchemical processes in the furnace, and the whole set-up, can be viewed as a ritual. Metallic transmutations can be compared to transformations often found in rites of passage.

Comment: A prevalent idea in alchemy is the concept of minerals being born and growing under the surface of the earth: they are organic and living entities. A new study proposes cautiously that alchemy in art can be divided into four main categories:¹⁴ 1) images made within a proper alchemical context or culture; 2) genre images which portray alchemists and their environment; 3) Religious, mythological or genre images with a disguised alchemical symbolism and 4) images showing structural affinities with alchemy without an iconography alluding to it. The first category of particular interest in this context is mainly found in manuscripts and printed books to illustrate alchemical thinking and principles. Sometimes artists were hired by the alchemist or the publisher to create these images. An example from the first category can be an image illustrating the growing metals (making music in a cave beneath the surface of the earth).¹⁵

Paracelsus and the five matrices

As pointed out by Debus, Paracelsus and Paracelsians had a deep belief in the truth of the macrocosm-microcosm analogy, and even man “could, in turn, affect the great world.”¹⁶ In the following it must be taken into account that all matrices, except maybe number one, ‘providence rather than karma or sin’, more than less, has been testified to in different publications dealing with Paracelsus. Therefore, the main focus will be on matrix number one, but the other matrices will be analysed too.

Holism

There is an all-pervading holism present in Paracelsus’ writings, and it is impossible to understand his organic and communicative universe without this aspect. Paracelsus world were filled with murmur of

¹² Paracelsus is a pseudonym for Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim.

¹³ Faivre 1994: 62.

¹⁴ Wamberg 2006.

¹⁵ *Musaeum Hermeticum*; Wamberg 2006: 48; Roob 2001: 31. This engraving (from *Musaeum Hermeticum*) can also be found on web: gnosis.art.pl/iluminatornia/alkimija/musaeum_hermeticum_frkf_1749.jpg.

¹⁶ Debus 1987: 237.

worlds for those who can decipher them.¹⁷ Not only herbs, plants and trees whisper their words, also minerals and metals “show their indications and signs which they have received at once from the *Archeus*¹⁸ and from the higher stars, each one telling its genus by differences of colour and of earth.”¹⁹ To Paracelsus, planets and metals are nearly identical, containing the same ‘spirit’, a kind of essence, and in the alchemical furnace, as we shall see later, under the alchemical fire (identical with the Sun, which in turn receives its light from God), the ‘spirits’ of metals and planets become identical. Sun produces gold, Moon produces silver, Mercury produces common quicksilver, Venus produces copper, Mars produces iron, Jupiter produces tin and Saturn produces lead.

Man is the most elevated of all beings on earth, equal even to angels. Man is created by God as a quintessence extracted from the four elements and from the essence of the stars consisting of wisdom and reason. These two essences, the elemental and the astral, are now blended with *massa*, also known as *limus terrae*, i.e. the mud (or primordial stuff) of earth.²⁰ Accordingly, man becomes the centre of the whole cosmos:

“Therefore man is the fifth essence, the microcosm and the son of the whole world, because he has been created as an extract of all creation by the hand of God [...].”²¹

Paracelsus’ belief in holism is so strong that he holds that there is an inner Mars, an inner Venus etc., that resides in the major organs of the body. In this way the Sun resides in the heart, the Moon in the brain, Venus in the kidneys, Mars in the gall bladder, Jupiter in the liver, Saturn in the spleen and Mercury in the lungs.²² As an extract of all creation, man simply becomes a centre in the network of sympathetic communications, and due to his elevated position man’s sympathetic interaction with heaven is as an equal.

To improve a defective world and matrix number two

¹⁷ Foucault 1992: 27.

¹⁸ *Archeus* is an agent impressing individual attributes upon the material world.

¹⁹ Paracelsus, *De Natura Rerum* (I. xi. 387 - 9); *Essential Readings*, p.188. Note: I. xi. 387 - 9 refers to the notation in *Sämtliche Werke*. This German edition is not used in this thesis.

²⁰ Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna* (I. xii. 36 - 7); *Essential Readings*, p. 116. Man’s creation is similarly described in *The End of The Birth, And The Consideration of The Stars*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 289.

²¹ Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna* (I. xii. 39 - 40); *Essential Reading*, p. 117.

²² Paracelsus, *Alchemy: The Third Column of Medicine*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 148. This treatise is the third chapter of *Liber Paragranum* or *Das Buch Paragranum*.

When dealing with Paracelsus' view of nature one should focus more on nature as 'good' or 'bad', and what kind of ontological status and quality it represents. To Paracelsus nature does not leave much room for idealism - at least not as much as to be expected. One can learn from the light of nature, and Paracelsus is rather explicit; nature simply needs to be improved:

“Nature is so keen and subtle in her operations that she cannot be dealt with except by a sublime and accurate mode of treatment. She brings nothing to the light that is at once perfect in itself, but leaves it to be perfected by man. This method of perfection is called Alchemy.”²³

Epistemologically nature is, or can be, a teacher for those who understand to read the light of nature, but ontologically nature does not represent, or offer, any excellent quality. There is always a poison “concealed beneath the goodness in everything which man takes as his nourishment. That is to say, there is an *essentia* and a *venenum* (poison) in everything: the *essentia* supports him, the *venenum* causes him illness [...]”²⁴ Paracelsus separates nature's epistemological and ontological qualities and thus he breaks with a strong tradition in Greek philosophy. Here, probably always, epistemology and ontology are so closely interlaced that they can be conceived as 'twins', for example, as described by Plato in his *Republic*²⁵ - and the same linkage is found throughout Hermetica. For Paracelsus the light of nature is not that difficult to explore. However he is ambiguous here as he is elsewhere.²⁶ It is Nature herself that instructs, but all she requires is the 'attention' of the students.²⁷ Nature offers epistemological opportunities that exceed what it offers on the ontological level. Translated into modern times, this compares modern biogenetic research that learns from nature including the human body, in order to improve it. Paracelsus also belonged to a Renaissance era with an increasing interest in nature and particularly in gaining control over it.²⁸ Man is also a ruler in Paracelsus' worldview, able to command both heaven and nature, if he is wise:

²³ Paracelsus, *Alchemy: The Third Column of Medicine*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 148. Paracelsus uses the following metaphor: “Nature first produces the harvest; then Alchemy reaps, mills, and bakes it before it reaches the mouth [...]”

²⁴ Paracelsus, *Volumen Medicinae Paramirum* (I. i. 195 - 6); *Essential Readings*, p. 51 (my parenthesis).

²⁵ Here, one can draw on the Allegory of the Cave, but it is better to employ the Allegory of the Line (509D-511E).

Imagine, says Plato, a vertical line divided into four pieces, all representing *ontology* on the right-hand side and *epistemology* on the left side. Four 'pairs' of ontology-epistemology connections are thus established. From the lowest part of the line and upwards: the ontological level of shadows (and mirror images) relates to presumption; the ontological level of physical phenomena relates to 'beliefs'; the ontological level of mathematical objects relates to discursive thinking and axiomatic cognition; the world of ideas relates to philosophical comprehension.

²⁶ “*Lumen naturae* is a minor light, probably like Moonlight, but God will not abandon the light of Nature. The study of the light is given by Nature to those being amenable to it – just as knowledge of cures comes naturally to the born physician.” Pagel 1982: 58.

²⁷ Paracelsus, *Alchemy, The Third Column of Medicine*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 149.

²⁸ Metzler 2006: 140.

“The wise man can dominate the stars, and is not subject to them [...]. The stars compel and coerce the animal man, so that where they lead he must follow, just as a thief goes to the gallows [...]. And although he is the son of Saturn, and Saturn is his parent, still he can withdraw himself from him, and so conquer him that he becomes the offspring of the Sun, and can thus subject himself to another planet, and make himself its son.”²⁹

Here Paracelsus advances Thomas Aquino’s argumentations: astrology only affects the animal mind of man with its instinctual reactions, but never the rational mind. For Paracelsus it is also a question of leveraging the planets magically, and one can then choose the most elevated star, the Sun, as birth star. Even a worker slaving away in a mine can attain a lifestyle with no work but with ‘plenty of food and drink’.³⁰ So confident is Paracelsus in the sympathetic powers that the lower world (represented by man) gains control over the higher world (cf. matrix number 2):

“And as there are two worlds, the lesser and the larger, and the lesser rules the larger, so also the Star of the Microcosm governs and subdues the celestial star. God did not create the planets and stars with the intention that they should dominate man, but that they, like other creatures, should obey him and serve him.”³¹

Another clue as to how man may affect heaven and nature is to be found in Paracelsus’ concept of imagination as a superior factor. Imagination supersedes the influence of the stars, and the imagination of the parents, or the mother alone, can suspend the influence of astrology. Even, “the superior strength of imagination of one partner as compared with the other decides the sex of the child begotten.”³² Further, by imagination one can control even distant objects through ‘magnetic attraction’ by manipulating the ‘spirit’ of the object.³³ Man can also build a heaven in his birth star by using his imagination.³⁴ Paracelsus also developed a kind of psychiatry where different passions, drawn in from a planet, and reinforced by imagination, were the cause of mental disturbances.³⁵

²⁹ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*. HAW, Vol. I, pp. 174 - 175.

³⁰ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 175.

³¹ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 176.

³² Paracelsus, *Liber de Generatione Hominis*. Pagel 1982: 124.

³³ Pagel 1982: 121 - 122.

³⁴ Paracelsus, *The End of the Birth, and the Consideration of the Stars*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 306.

³⁵ Pagel 1982: 123 - 124; 150 - 52; 179.

Here, discussing matrix number two, ‘the dialectical relationship between man and God or the divine, including healing of other people, society and/or the earth’, Paracelsus can also assure that the higher stars give the inclination to lower things³⁶ - and thus a dialectical relationship is established. From a more abstract point of view imagination was *coelum in homini*, i.e. heaven in man, by which man could magically manipulate the ‘arcane’, i.e. stellar virtues, located within all phenomena.³⁷ In the chemical philosophy of Paracelsus, one finds a dominant microcosm able to handle, deal with, affect and even manipulate nature and cosmos. Matrix number two is rather explicit in Paracelsus’ alchemy, but primarily it is nature and earth that are healed.

Metamorphoses Planetarium

The icon is the front-page illustration on J. de Snyders: *Metamorphosis Planetarium* from 1663. The text reads: “Metamorphosis of the Planets, this is a wonderful change of the planets and described through the metallic forms in their first being with a moistening process added, revealing the three keys to obtain the Three Principles³⁸ and the Universal King belonging to them.” Through the links of sympathia, the planets and metals are closely connected. They are more or less the same. By improving the metals, the planets and subsequently the whole earth are improved. This icon supports or communicates the second matrix: the dialectical relationship between man and God (or the divine), including the healing of other people, society and/or the Earth.

Dualism/monism – and the achievement of ‘coniunctio’

It is necessary for some moments to discuss briefly some practical aspects of alchemy. First, the alchemists ‘dissolved’ matter into *prima materia*.³⁹ This was an undifferentiated yet potential state similar to ‘chaos’ (Paracelsus: Iliaster) - or the beginning of God’s creation (see more below). Next, he transformed the undifferentiated matter (*prima materia*) into a new and much more elevated kind of matter. This was characterised as a perfect union of purified opposites called ultimate matter, *coniunctio*.

The initial process in alchemy was that of the separation of elemental matter back into an ontological condition as that of Iliaster. Separation was a big subject in alchemy. It was carried out in a number of ways: by distillation, resolution, putrefaction, extraction, calcinations, reverberation (filtering),

³⁶ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 176.

³⁷ Sculakowska 2006: 172.

³⁸ Symbolised as salt, sulfur and mercury (quicksilver), i.e. the principles of fixity, fusibility (flexibility) and inflammability (setting forth a process).

³⁹ *Prima materia* is called “erste materien” by Paracelsus. Pagel 1982: 91, n. 242.

sublimation, reduction, coagulation, pulverisation and lavation (washing).⁴⁰ It was a process of decomposition, and its fulfilment was *nigredo* or 'blackness'. In this process 'impurities' were removed (by filtration or other means) and the remaining ingredients were 'purified' into a uniform black material. The alchemist carefully watched his alchemical vessel, which was made of glass in order to see the changing coloration of the chemical reactions. *Nigredo* was attained literally when the colours of the compound in the vessel were finally transformed into blackness. Colour phenomena in the vessel were 'indices' to the ontological levels achieved during the processes of transmutation.⁴¹ The next two major stages after the achievement of *nigredo* were *albedo* (whiteness) and *rubedo* (redness). *Albedo* was attained by repeating alchemical procedures over and over again "and by the end of the *albedo* stage they were left with two elements viewed as though in polar opposition to one another."⁴² The last major state *rubedo*, was attained when the two *coincidentia oppositorum*⁴³ from the preceding *albedo* states were united in a stable unity referred to as *coniunctio*.⁴⁴

Logically, the question comes to mind as to how dualistic nature was before the alchemists tried to perfect it in order to create a new world. Investigating possible sources of Paracelsus, Walter Pagel ascribes influences both from Gnosticism and from Neoplatonism. Maybe correctly so, but it is worth paying attention to Pagel's conclusion: Paracelsus' cosmology advocates a 'vitalistic monism'.⁴⁵ Indeed, it is very difficult to pinpoint Paracelsus' cosmology, if it must fit a priori into a static definition. In this thesis dualism and monism are interdependent and constitute a progress towards monism (i.e. the world in a 'healed' condition). Paracelsus does not perceive nature as dualistic in essence, but rather that it has some dualistic traits linked to processes in alchemy. Every single 'object' in nature is a carrier of an *essentia* and a 'poison' (or defilement). There are a few exceptions such as gold and perfect 'stones' hidden somewhere in nature. Man's stomach and inner organs (those linked to a planet) function as 'alchemists', and had it not been for their capacity to separate the 'unclean from the clean', man could not live on earth. Each of the major inner organs is endowed with an 'essential force', *archeus*, which

⁴⁰ Additionally, Paracelsus outlined the different types of separation in further detail, for example the process of calcination involved the separation of everything combustible (for example grease, moisture and natural colour). Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 163.

⁴¹ Paracelsus believed in three basic principles, salt, sulphur and mercury. In the Paracelsian tradition these principles could manifest as 'ash of the philosophers', i.e. as a colour phenomenon resembling a dragon, in the alchemical vessel. Pagel 1982: 268.

⁴² Voss 1998: 158.

⁴³ Voss 1998: 159.

⁴⁴ Voss 1998: 159.

⁴⁵ "It is in such 'monistic' tendencies of Gnosticism rather than its original 'dualistic' position that its kinship with the ideas of Paracelsus emerges. For the latter advocated what has been called a 'vitalistic monism'." Pagel 1982: 208.

distinguishes between useful and toxic substances.⁴⁶ Also non-organic matter like minerals and stones contains an essential part and some defilement, which have to be 'separated'. Even medicine, though created by God, is not fully prepared or perfected.⁴⁷ Things in nature have not reached their 'perfection' (see above) and as such - from the point of view of perfection - they contain 'defilement' or 'impurity'. Alchemy is the art, says Paracelsus that separates that which is useful from that which is not by transforming it into its ultimate matter and essence.⁴⁸ Nature will in time perfect herself - a process "which takes a very long time and be reproduced in the laboratory at a much faster rate."⁴⁹ So even without the help of alchemy, nature strives for perfection into a state of elevation with no 'impurity'. Thus, nature by itself develops from a certain level of dualism into a state of 'unity' or *coniunctio*. Alchemy itself is able to create *a new world* (see the quotation at the beginning of this chapter) and by its strong and sympathetic links with nature, and the powerful idea of an all-pervading holism, it may be concluded that matrix number three is met, i.e. 'dualism and monism are interdependent, including the mind and/or the world as a ladder'.⁵⁰ One could perhaps say that matrix number three rests on a massive foundation of evidence.

Alchemy - as science and religion

It is probable that nowhere during the history of Western esoterism have religion and science been so interweaved as they have in alchemy (i.e. matrix number 4), and it is still a puzzle whether Paracelsus was a man of science or a clever magician.⁵¹ But dealing with that question is basically not the task of historians of religion. It is better to accept that the borderline between religion and science is not always that clear. Instead, one should look to the religious dimension, for example in alchemy, and leave it to others, i.e. historians of medicine, general science and chemistry etc., to determine the actual degree of scientific evolution. At least it is recognised that some Paracelsians contributed to scientific progress, for example the Dane Peter Severinus.⁵² Probably, Stephen Pumfrey has it right when he concludes that in Paracelsian epistemology all knowledge about the light of nature exists a priori in the human mind.⁵³ The light of nature is reason permeating both man and nature. "Everything that man does and has to

⁴⁶ McKee 1998: 293. For 'The Archeus as a principle resident in the Stomach', see Pagel 1982: 106 - 107.

⁴⁷ Paracelsus, *The Book of Alchemy*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 166.

⁴⁸ Paracelsus, *The Book of Alchemy*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 167.

⁴⁹ Pagel 1982: 107.

⁵⁰ Cf. Coudert when saying, that 'transmutation is an observable fact of life', i.e. a transmutation towards perfection (note 5 above; Coudert 2005: 42).

⁵¹ Grell 1998 - is dedicated to that question.

⁵² Grell 1998: 245 - 267.

⁵³ Pumfrey 1998: 43.

do, he should do by the light of nature. For the light of nature is nothing other than reason itself.”⁵⁴ Paracelsus’ understanding of empiricism therefore differs from that of modern scientists, and in this respect man is no *tabula rasa* who requires a “reasoning mind on the evidence of sensory observation.”⁵⁵ Knowledge, or *scientia*, to Paracelsus, is a concept not limited to man’s mind, and hence not only a cognitive faculty, but also a ‘force’ found in the world and in the things of the world.⁵⁶ Paracelsus’ research in nature became a project which wanted to prove a relationship between macro- and microcosm where man “possessed within himself all knowledge and all power of nature.”⁵⁷ Such a view can only be possible if Paracelsus viewed scientific laws to be synonymous with spiritual principles, i.e. matrix number four. Thus in one sense, maybe somewhat surprisingly, Paracelsus tried to prove his religious worldview (seen from a modern point of view) by doing chemical, alchemical and medical experiments. Paracelsus’ *experientia* are thus restricted compared with a modern understanding of the word, because *experientia* can never alter *scientia*, only confirm it, and Paracelsus’ ‘proof’ becomes a typical religious proof. The strong correspondence between micro- and macrocosm, between man and signatures in nature, and the fact that knowledge is recognising of existing ideas (or relations), testify that matrix number four is met.

More research is needed when investigating the relationship between religion and science in the 16th and 17th centuries. One must not forget that Newton, for example, wrote on alchemy. Newton apparently believed in the growth of metals and that most of ancient Greco-Roman mythology was encoded alchemy.⁵⁸ Parts of Newton’s alchemy are currently recreated in different laboratories. This justifies the question: did he associate science with religion? And if he did, why and more precisely where did he see a connection?

Comment: In the case of Newton many projects are now in progress, for example, the edition of all his alchemical, religious and philosophical writings can be found on the web, already - and continuously updated. It will be interesting to see how future researchers will annotate the following extract:

“The purification of metals is done by many operations. First the culinary fire separates the heterogeneities. Then the secret fire produces the same effect but more efficaciously by introducing

⁵⁴ Paracelsus, *Ein Büchlein (Philosophia) de generatione Hominis* (I. i. 306). *Selected Writings*, p.104.

⁵⁵ Pumfrey 1998: 43.

⁵⁶ Pagel 1982: 356.

⁵⁷ Pagel 1982: 43.

⁵⁸ See William Newman, “Newton’s alchemy, recreated” on web: www.indiana.edu/~college/WilliamNewmanProject.shtml.

a fiery spirit into the matter which pens inwardly the secret gate which subtilises & sublimes the pure parts separating them from the terrestrial & adust parts. The solution which follows by the addition of the astral quintessence which animates the stone makes in it a third depuration & the distillation completes it.”⁵⁹

Paracelsus’ concept of fate and time (matrix number one)

As previously mentioned Paracelsus is at times difficult to understand and in dealing with the question of fate (matrix number one) this is particularly the case. At some point he declares free decisions to exist; in another context he does not admit of man any free will.⁶⁰ However, his proverb that the wise rules his stars together with his strong belief in imagination indicates that he, as did many of his contemporaries, believed in man and to a large extent in his free choice and will. Paracelsus’ ideas about prudence, free will, fate and providence are not that different from Agrippa’s. Here too, ‘fate’ is a compound made up of several factors.

Alchemy ‘speeds up’ what nature perfects over a much greater span of time and one of the most consistent interpretations of Paracelsus “is the *entelechia* which leads the individual to perfection, its ‘monarchy’ at a certain point in time [...]”⁶¹ *Entelechia* is both a realisation and also an end or final goal.⁶² The light of nature, which is not ignited and radiated by nature but a light permeating nature,⁶³ is also a light that pushes things and man ahead in the right direction towards *entelechia*.⁶⁴ The course of time runs between the beginning and the end of the world and thus time is mainly conceived to be linear - though it could, during its course, take other directions too.⁶⁵ This view is corroborated in *The Prophecies of Paracelsus* in which the future of the world is predicted mainly by thirty-two symbolic and enigmatic images (woodcuts) each with a short text below.⁶⁶ It is unclear how many years this prophecy

⁵⁹ Author: Isaac Newton, *Of ye first Gate* (c. 2800 words; ca. 1695). Keynes MS. 53. The NEWTON project; see result 45 under ‘Alchemical’ at: www.newtonproject.ic.ac.uk/prism.php?id=82.

⁶⁰ “Thus God left the seed to the free decision of man, and the decision depends upon man’s will.” (*Das Buch von der Gebärung der empfindlichen Dinge in der Vernunft*, I. i. 254; *Essential Readings* p. 59). “Some like to claim that we have a free will. This is not true. We do not choose, God chooses.” (*Liber Prologi In Vitam Beatam*, II. i. 76; *Essential Readings*, p.148).

⁶¹ Pagel 1982: 356 - 357.

⁶² The verb *en-teleutaō* means ‘end in’, or ‘stop in’. The adjective *en-telēs* means ‘flawless’, ‘perfect’ or ‘fully-grown’. Paracelsus’ alchemy was influenced by the Aristotelian idea that ‘things’ aspire to perfection or total realisation.

⁶³ Pagel 1982: 356.

⁶⁴ Pagel 1982: 356 - 357.

⁶⁵ Pagel 1982: 79.

⁶⁶ *The Prophecies of Paracelsus. Magic Figures and Prognostications made by Theophrastus Paracelsus about Four Hundred Years Ago*, translated by I. J. Kohn. William Raider & Son. London, 1915. The text was scanned and placed at sacred-text.com, February 2003, and can be found at: sacred-texts.com/pro/pop/pop00.htm. A reprint edition was published in 1992 by Holmes Pub Group Llc. ISBN: 1558181881

covered from 1530 AD as both 24 and 42 years are mentioned in the text. Maybe these were ‘mystical years’ covering a much greater time span. It is peculiar that thirty of the thirty-two step-by-step texts are addressed to the reader, to the ‘you’, and the many messages are related to a fate enveloped in spiritual and moral teachings. Adversity is a consequence of being self-willed and pretending understanding and wisdom. However, a new possibility of insight is offered and in the end a goal or heaven is reached where the ‘you’, after much work, may sleep in peace. A part of the last text simply reads: “Thou hast taken great trouble, therefore it is but just that after thy day’s work thou shouldst have rest and repose. Blessed is he that is born during sleep; he shall know no evil. For thou hast purified with great care, and hast endured much in thy days [...]”⁶⁷ In the preceding text to fig. 31 (showing children dancing in joy) time offers total renewal and man will be as children “that know nothing of the cunning and intrigues of the old.”⁶⁸ Fate is controlled by a *pronoia* leading to a goal of personal renewal and peace.

In Paracelsus’ writings of the Eucharist (the Last Supper) two important rules can be inferred: Nothing goes to heaven, which is not from heaven and man will go to heaven.⁶⁹ The gates of heaven are open for man. Even though Paracelsus’ later theological writings differ slightly from his earlier alchemical writings on providence, the guided working of man by providence towards a goal, again transcends the significance of sin/karma. In the theological writings, the spirit of man is already refined and hence the soul needs no set time for perfection. “If the spirit stands in repentance only for a moment, this is enough because of its perfections”, says Paracelsus, and repentance stands in eternity.⁷⁰ Though diseases of the purgatorial kind (other diseases may be natural), are a punishment, diseases are sent from God in order for us to realise that all our knowledge is nothing.⁷¹ Seemingly, this kind of illness strikes as a consequence of some sort of self-delusion or intellectual arrogance. There is a lesson to be learned, and once again fate becomes a learning principle offering a true understanding of life (or gnosis). According to Paracelsus, one should also know that all our diseases ought to abate in their own time, and that God provides sufficiently in maintaining life just as he provides for the birds.⁷² The last factor modelling man’s destiny is faith, which strengthens and perfects imagination and consolidates the will. Faith also consists of three parts: A faith in God enables one to move even mountains and to provide what is wished for; a faith in the Devil and his powers also generates what is wished for - if the

⁶⁷ Paracelsus, *The Prophecies of Paracelsus*, p. 92.

⁶⁸ Paracelsus, *The Prophecies of Paracelsus*, p. 91.

⁶⁹ Rudolf 1998: 192.

⁷⁰ Pagel 1982: 80.

⁷¹ Paracelsus, *Volumen Medicinæ Paramirum*, I. i. 226 - 7; *Essential Readings*, p. 56.

⁷² Paracelsus, *Volumen Medicinæ Paramirum*, I. i. 226 - 7; *Essential Readings*, p. 56. For the Christian allegory of the birds, see: *De Honestis Utrisque Divitiis*, II .i. 241 - 3; *Essential Readings*, p. 159.

Devil can fulfil it. Lastly, a faith in the light of nature not only guarantees that nature supplies one's needs, but in cooperation with imagination, also compels herbs to put forth their hidden nature, i.e. faith also reveals the curing effects of herbs.⁷³

If anything is predestined, according to Paracelsus, it is the duration of life where only God knows 'the end'. He advances the somewhat odd point of view that "[i]f a child is predestined to live but ten hours, its bodily planets will complete all their circuits, just as they would if it had lived for a hundred years."⁷⁴ On the other hand, somewhat contradictorily, there is considerable literature from Paracelsus concerning preservation of life, and in *A Book Concerning Long Life* it is a more conventional doctor who is speaking. Prolongation of life relates to kingdoms, districts, states and valleys affording joy, fresh air and humours. In addition, one must count the daily food and drink, and it is helpful to understand the beneficial influence from a healthy mind and the higher bodies, i.e. planets and stars.⁷⁵ In the case of plague dramatically threatening the duration of life, change of habits and diets were of no avail, instead 'insulators', i.e. amulets of different kinds to be worn around the neck were recommended. Especially helpful was the spirit of gold, a tincture, mixed with gems contained in sweet water. Such tinctures were from a modern point of view homeopathic, i.e. the alchemical purified gold was strongly thinned in a drinkable liquid, often oil or water. It is worth noticing that astrology was used according to the element of the Sun in which the plague erupted (i.e. by first observation). For example, if the Sun was placed in an earth sign (Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn), water lily, wild rue, rosemary or elixir of pearls would be helpful.⁷⁶

In summary many factors, some contradicting, are at play when determining 'fate' and its constituent parts. It is foolishness, lack of prudence and spiritual insight that matters, and sin plays a lesser role. The more spiritual insight, faith and imagination, the more fate was overruled and intrinsic magical skills realised. Free will, together with an appropriate lifestyle in healthy surroundings, also decided one's course in life. However, the major factor is the course of time in which spiritual and cognitive perfection will take place, a perfection created by the light of nature seated in the centre of the soul - and fortified by the providence of God.

Paracelsus' alchemy viewed as a ritual process

⁷³ Paracelsus, *Hermetic Astronomy*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 307.

⁷⁴ Paracelsus, *Volumen Medicinae Paramirum*, I. i. 206; *Essential Readings*, p. 53.

⁷⁵ Paracelsus, *A Book Concerning Long Life*. HAW, Vol. II, especially pp. 113 - 116.

⁷⁶ Pagel 1982: 180.

The work of the alchemist is linked to different rituals in Chinese alchemy, and ultimately the alchemist is a conclusive part of the alchemical transformation. The 'inner alchemy' (neidan) is a reflection of 'outer alchemy' (waidan) and in transcending time and space the alchemist must take extreme care, for example by using a talisman and in setting up the laboratory and in arranging the instruments properly. The word 'ritual' has two different meanings as regards Chinese alchemy. The first consists of preliminary ritual rules related to transmission of the sacred texts, to protection of the compounds and to starting the alchemical fire. The second meaning relates to the invoking of the macrocosm with its supernatural, but dangerous impact on the alchemist and his equipment. Especially perilous was the acceleration of time during the alchemical process, i.e. during 'fire-times'. It was believed that the alchemist could achieve in a few hours what nature took hundreds or maybe thousands of years to accomplish.⁷⁷

From a more general point of view, there is no question that Mircea Eliade has demonstrated the religious nature of Eastern alchemy.⁷⁸ Additionally, another revealing and genuine study must be mentioned concerning a possible connection between the so-called "Pronoia Hymn" in the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1) and the alchemical treasure *Dialogos philosophôn kai Kleophatras* (1 - 3 century A.D).⁷⁹ The following extract is of particular importance:

- a) The technical language in the alchemical source text is an allegorical (religious) language.
- b) The death (nigredo, blackness) and resurrection (albedo, brightness) of metals (or other substances) in the alchemical process is equivalent to baptism.
- c) The divine spirit descends from heaven, which is also the top of the apparatus.
- d) In both texts, a female figure Pronoia (Psychê in the alchemical treatise) 'calls' when entering Hades and 'raises' (humans or metals) and the task accomplished is called *oikonomia*.⁸⁰

The alchemical furnace as macrocosm

⁷⁷ This information is found at Fabricio Pregadio's website, *The Golden Elixir*, at: venus.unive.it/dsao//pregadio/index.html. Look for the section: Aspetti rituali dell'alchimia cinese (with its English summary).

⁷⁸ Eliade: 1978. Eliade's comparative studies address religion as a 'mode of being'. In his highly hermeneutical approach Eliade sees in alchemy hierophanies (as elsewhere in religion) such as *Terra Mater*, stones (rocks), the Sun and Waters. Minerals become 'sacred' because they grow in the belly of *Terra Mater* like embryos. Another, actual significant notion in alchemy is that metalworkers can intervene and speed up the growth of metals. Ultimately, as a consequence, alchemy 'speeds up time'.

⁷⁹ Charron 2005: 438 - 456.

⁸⁰ Meaning 'the management of a household' (or of a family, thrift or husbandry). This is, of course, somewhat cryptic.

Paracelsus' furnace is a model of the firmament, and it is by modelling and by imitation that it becomes efficient. The proportions must be correct to simulate the birth process of the universe as God created it. Then, and not until then, the alchemical fire in the laboratory becomes the Sun, the giver of life and endowed with a power that equals God's word (logos). There is something very ritualistic in the whole set up - and it resembles the preliminary ritual rules found in Chinese alchemy. Paracelsus writes concerning some of its practical details and religious implications:

“For in the same way as God created the heaven and the earth, the furnace with its fire must be constructed and regulated, that is to say, in the following manner: First, let a furnace be built at a height of six palms, with the fingers and thumb extended, but in breadth only one palm; [...].⁸¹ Let holes be left open underneath, four fingers in breadth, and to each hole let its own furnace be applied with a copper cauldron, which contains water. [...]. This is compared to the firmament. And there is another firmament in this place, namely, the matter contained in the glass. After these things follows the form of the world. The furnace then is to be placed as the sun in the great world, which affords light, life, and heat to the whole furnace itself, and to all the instruments and other thing which it encloses.”⁸²

“[...] Nature herself fulfils all the operations in the matter spoken of, and not the operator, only in a philosophical vessel, and with a similar fire, but not common fire. [...]. The reason why they could not compass their intention is that Nature refuses to be in this way dragged asunder and separated by man's disjunctions, as by earthly glasses and instruments. She alone knows her own operations [...] of which she brings about without the aid of any operator or manual artifice, provided only the matter be contained in the secret fire and in its proper occult vessel.”⁸³

“Who does not see - I ask you, my brethren - that the form of the whole created universe has the similitude of a furnace, or to speak more respectfully, the form of that which contains the matrix of a womb [...]. These things are transparently clear, I will not say to philosophers, but even to boys, wherefore we will not insist upon them further.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Here follows a description of the proportion of the furnace.

⁸² Paracelsus, *Concerning the Spirits of the Planets*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 85.

⁸³ Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 67.

⁸⁴ *De Transmutationibus Metallorum*. HAW, Vol. I, Appendix V., p. 284. This text appeared in the year of 1581 AD in Frankfurt and “it attempted to collect and digest into a single methodical treasure the whole substance of alchemy, as taught and practised by Paracelsus”. HAW, Vol. I, Appendix V., p. 283.

The above three quotations clearly demonstrate how the furnace became identical with the macrocosm and the vessel, with the earth performing as a womb.⁸⁵ Normal fire and vessel cannot accomplish anything, only an 'occult' or 'philosophical' fire and vessel can initiate the workings of nature. When the furnace imitated the heavenly firmament, the vessel imitated the earth (as a womb)⁸⁶ and the fire the Sun, the alchemical processes could start. At that moment fire was no longer ordinary 'heat' but a donor of life and light. Paracelsus makes it very clear that God himself burns in the Sun and that the vessel becomes a living and corporeal spirit. "But the sun receives light from no other source than God Himself, Who rules it, so that in the sun God Himself is burning and shining. Just so is it with this Art. The fire in the furnace may be compared to the sun."⁸⁷ Therefore, an important clue in understanding Paracelsus' alchemy lies in the following identifications:

I. Alchemical fire under the furnace = Sun = God's presence.

II: The whole apparatus in form and proportion = macrocosm = earth firmament = womb (= a living spirit able to be fertilised).

It is important to understand Paracelsus' view of the creation of the world. In the beginning there was only the 'body of Iliaster', a cosmic vessel, where the contents were in a potential and not yet differentiated form. God is the greatest alchemist, and his second act in creation was to separate the potentials in the body of Iliaster. Three ingredients and principles, Mercury (mediator), Sulphur (form) and Salt (substance), are dormant in this body:

"This body He made up of three ingredients, Mercury, Sulphur, and Salt so that these three should constitute one body. [...]. In them lie the hidden mineral, day, night, heat, cold, the stone, the fruit, and everything else, even while not yet formed. [...]. So the body of Iliaster was a mere trunk, but in it lay hidden all herbs, waters, gems, minerals, stones and chaos itself [...]."⁸⁸

God's third act was to separate the four elements which were co-producers of the world: for example fire produced all that was warm and dry. Then, God created heaven and earth, the visible firmament

⁸⁵ In *The Aurora of the Philosophers* Paracelsus also stresses the right proportion of the vessel (as a womb) in order to "be governed by the heavenly bodies." HAW, Vol. I, p. 68. See also Pagel 1982: 238 - 240.

⁸⁶ It is, however, not that easy to find or describe the exact form of the vessel. Paracelsus, *The Aurora of the Philosophers*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 69.

⁸⁷ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Spirits of the Planets*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 74.

⁸⁸ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Generations of the Elements*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 204.

and the water. God was an alchemist, who separated (and hence created) the world in a chemical fashion from a big vessel (or trunk).⁸⁹

Comment: A major conclusion in the research project *Art & Alchemy* is the trustworthiness of many, but not all, alchemical images. However, sometimes the artists, interested in or employed to paint or engrave alchemical symbols or allegories, misunderstood their subject.⁹⁰ It is reasonable to assume that alchemical iconography delineates USP and ritual activity involved in the art of transmutation. *Alchemy and Mysticism* is a standard work of alchemical iconography, which must be categorised as depicting images “made within a proper alchemical context or culture.”⁹¹ A series of images are labelled ‘Genesis in the retort’,⁹² which in all likelihood is not a coincidence. In the alchemical glass vessel one sees God’s creation. Alchemy thus emulates or becomes identical with creation (or the events in the body of Iliaster). Noteworthy is emblem number 2, where the alchemist prays to God (who himself is an alchemist wearing a hat in the form of the symbol for sulphur while holding a vessel in his left hand) and asks him for his presence in the work. Significant are engravings depicting the cosmos as a diagram shaped like an alchemical oven.⁹³ Peter Forshaw’s publication on ‘Alchemy in the Amphitheatre’, an engraving reproduced in *Alchemy and Mysticism*,⁹⁴ is highly informative, and the engraving is easy to find on the web (key: amphitheatrum). The left side of the image with the kneeling alchemist is the realm of God while the right side (with no alchemist) is the realm of nature. Finally, the author suggests that the table in the centre “signifies Man as he relates to these two realms via Magic.”⁹⁵ This suggestion is in accordance with the five matrices, i.e. in one aspect Western esotericism functions as an advanced kind of magic, which does not exclude, however, that the ‘magician’ can pray to God in a Christian manner.

Alchemy as a ritual field

On their journey to the highest transmutations, metals must ‘die’ in order to be reborn. Though Paracelsus did not describe this process as baptism (see above on the *Dialogue between Cleopatra and the Philosophers*) but as ‘putrefaction’ and ‘generation’, he emphasised that putrefaction was a process of ‘death’, which was the removal of the metal’s bodily structure.⁹⁶ This process can be depicted in

⁸⁹ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 160.

⁹⁰ Bäcklund & Wamberg 2006: 14.

⁹¹ Bäcklund & Wamberg 2006: 13.

⁹² Roob 2001: 124 - 53.

⁹³ See for example Roob 2001: 159.

⁹⁴ Roob 2001: 331.

⁹⁵ Forshaw 2006: 195 - 212.

⁹⁶ Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*. HAW, Vol. I, p. 139.

alchemical image art as the “Torment of metals”.⁹⁷ Similarly, ‘generation’ can be depicted as a process of resurrection understood in a Christian framework.⁹⁸ A highly central question is whether the construction of the furnace with its vessel and fire can be viewed as a ritual? One can address this question by looking at Rappaport’s definition and ‘entailments’ in the ritual form. I will argue that the ‘objects’ of the ritual, metals and herbs, are transformed as in ‘rites of passage’.

To reiterate, Rappaport establishes a ritual as ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performer’. According to this definition it is unclear if formal acts are sufficient or if a ritual also needs utterances. Probably, as nonverbal religious rituals do exist, the definition is complete because the structure is not totally encoded by Paracelsus (the performer) as far as he stands in the tradition of alchemy.⁹⁹ Looking at the logical entailments of ritual form, the ritual entails: (a) the establishment of convention, (b) the sealing of social contracts, (c) *Logoi*, (d) encoding with morality, (e) construction of time and eternity, (f) a representation of a paradigm of creation, (g) the generation of the sacred and sanctification of conventional order, (h) the generation of theories of the occult,¹⁰⁰ (i) the evocation of numinous experience, (j) the awareness of the divine, (k) the grasp of the holy, (l) the construction of orders of meaning transcending the semantic.¹⁰¹ Now, the problem is to understand how these entailments are related to a ritual. Most likely Rappaport believed these to be related to a ritual *per se*, i.e. they are “features often associated” with rituals.¹⁰² Scrutinising the entailments, it becomes obvious that some entailments do not fit to the ‘alchemical ritual’ while other entailments are at play, namely c, e, f, i and j:

c) *Logos* for Rappaport is “an ordering principle subordinating and binding all that exists into a coherent and enduring whole.” Further, it refers to the word ‘truth’.¹⁰³ *Logoi* (plural) refers to more than one cosmic order represented as wholes. It is unclear whether Rappaport requires one ritual to entail one or several cosmic orders at the same time or not. According to Olsson, as we have seen, a ritual can respond to ‘different pictures of reality’ and hence it can entail different ‘truths’ and *logoi* at the same time. It should be obvious that the alchemical process in the furnace viewed as a ritual by its

⁹⁷ Roob 2001: 205 - 221.

⁹⁸ Roob 2001: 216 - 29.

⁹⁹ See for example Bianchi 1994: 17 - 50.

¹⁰⁰ This category is rudimentarily developed by Rappaport. The ‘occult’ is an element of religion (p. 1 and 3) with a high degree of “efficacy”. Rappaport 1999: 50.

¹⁰¹ Rappaport 1999: 27.

¹⁰² Rappaport 1999: 26.

¹⁰³ Rappaport 1999: 348.

identification of the alchemical fire, vessel and furnace with Sun/God, earth's firmament (womb) and heaven's firmament, binds everything into an enduring wholeness.

e) There is a strong construction of time and eternity in Paracelsus' alchemy elaborated in detail by Pagel.¹⁰⁴ Time for Paracelsus is qualitative as contrasted to a numeric perception. The attainment of prima materia is an imitation of the 'body of Iliaster' - as a condition 'out of time' or a priori to time (and as such a kind of eternity).¹⁰⁵

f) Paracelsus' chemical philosophy offers, as we have seen, a myth on how the world and humans are created and part of that myth (Iliaster) is actually 'replayed' in the attempt to re-create prima materia.

i) The alchemical process offers a numinous experience as it is a 'proof' of the presence of God (see above for the identification of light, Sun and God). Further, the light of nature (including signatures) is an USP to Paracelsus constantly activated and present in alchemical experiments. As such, it is the alchemical process that transforms the light of nature into the real, the natural and the numinous.

j) The 'resemblance' or 'identification' of fire, light, Sun and God in the 'alchemical ritual' attests a clear awareness of the divine and its presence in alchemical processes.

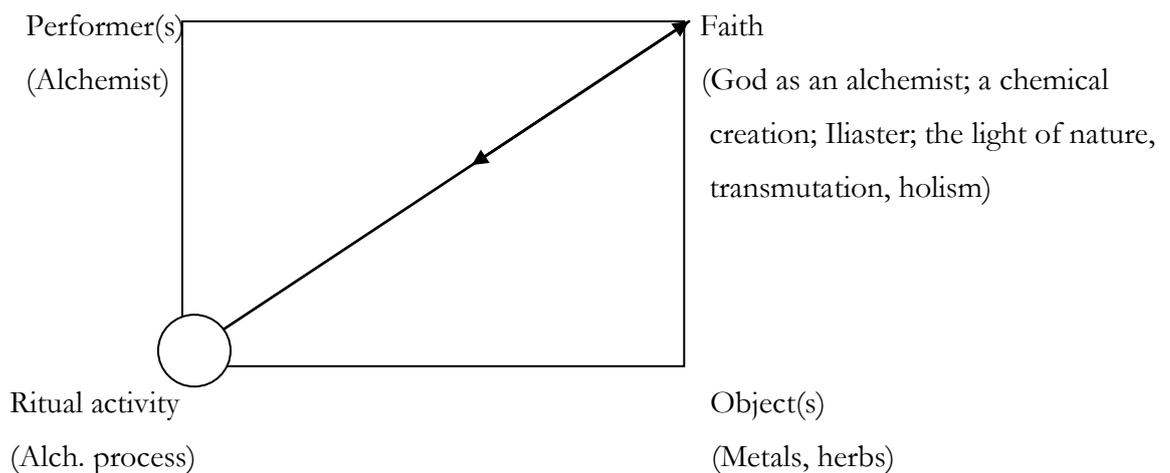
These five points constitute, I think, alchemy as a ritual. Most significant is point f, and it is my experience that most scholars for that reason alone will recognise the alchemical procedure to be a ritual. A further argument is found in Victor Turner's outlining of Gennep's idea of rites of passage. For Turner a ritual is a 'process' more than a 'structure' creating a 'before' and 'after' difference on the 'objects' (single humans, society) involved. In Turner's version the in-between, the limen, is also a creative state known as liminality, where not only the 'objects', but also what surrounding them, i.e. culture, is reduced to its fundamental parts, its 'alphabet'. From the state of liminality, the 'objects' and the related 'culture' can now be re-created into new patterns, and liminality is thus not only a phase, but rather a room or a space of possibilities. It is evident that such a concept works best, or is most understandable, in small societies (which does not exclude its relevance in bigger societies).¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Pagel 1982: 72 - 82.

¹⁰⁵ "In this theological view, time is approximated to, if not identified with, eternity, for the latter is, according to classical definition, an 'eternal Now'." Pagel 1982: 80.

¹⁰⁶ For this brief summary, see Grimes 2000: 263 - 267.

Now, the reader must imagine herbs and metals to be the ‘objects’ in the alchemical process viewed as a ritual. Next, that herbs and metals in this process are subjected to a transformation from the natural condition via nigredo to albedo (or rubedo). What is of concern here is the progress from natural physical object (the ‘before’) via nigredo (liminality) to albedo/rubedo (the ‘after’). It is not uncommon in religions to initiate ‘things’, for example statues, buildings or amulets, in order to transform them from ‘ordinary’ (profane) things into more sacred objects. More important, however, is the notion that herbs or metals are living entities with a ‘body’ and a ‘spirit’, which live and grow, and even planets are grown out of heaven according to Paracelsus. In such an animated worldview, it becomes understandable that metals and herbs can be held as ‘objects’ in a ritual process (as if they were human). Nigredo, the ontological state of Iliaster or prima materia, is in a rather literary sense a ‘space’ or ‘room’ for fundamental elements (a primordial alphabet) from which an innovative re-creation (towards albedo/rubedo) can take place. As God created nature from a vessel of potentials, so the alchemist can re-create metals and herbs into new combinations. This process in a broader sense also includes the ambitious task of the perfection of ‘society’ (nature) - due to the sympathetic links in nature. The ritual process has a spillover effect on nature, as rites of passage can have on even large-scale societies. Below is the diagram of the ritual field developed in chapter 2 depicted once again, but now with more proper expressions added in parentheses when dealing with alchemy as an ritual field.



A relevant question concerns whether or not Paracelsus reckoned the alchemist (the performer) to be a part of the ritual process, as in Chinese alchemy. Unfortunately, it is substantially easier to simplify what can be found in a text than to explain what is not in the text. Again, examining Paracelsus' alchemical writings, there is no mention of the alchemist being a compulsory part of the alchemical ritual, nor is there any notion of a psychological (or spiritual) transmutation related to the alchemical transmutation.¹⁰⁷ Neither is there any warning issued against ontological or psychological dangers in performing this art, rather than perhaps a warning against sending money up the alchemical chimney. Actually, the elevated anthropological status of man negates the compulsory bond found in Chinese alchemy. Humans are, according to Paracelsus, created as a first hand 'chemical' product, a quintessence, the microcosm and the son of the whole world. Man is, in contrast to physical matter in the natural world, already 'transmuted' by God.

Comment: The absence of psychic transmutations parallel to metallic transmutations is somewhat delicate, as Faivre's typological definition of esotericism is questioned hereby. The fourth criteria, 'experience of transmutation' is for Faivre a 'metamorphosis', a transformation which deals with nigredo as a 'decapitation of the old man', albedo as a rebirth and rubedo as a spiritual crowning of perfection.¹⁰⁸ Faivre also includes Hermetism as a current in Western esotericism and thinks of alchemy as an original 'hermetic science', views that explain his confidence in spiritual transmutations as a criterion.¹⁰⁹ Contrary to human deification in *Corpus Hermeticum*, man never becomes God's equal nor is he able to enlighten himself. "And as regards man, he is nothing by himself, and what he fancies himself to be has no worth".¹¹⁰ In the (theological) writings of Paracelsus, it is easy to miss the presence of a strong Christian piety apparently reducing the significance of hermetic components. Recent research in alchemy clarifies a distinction between 19th century occultist belief in a self-transformative spiritual alchemy and earlier religious alchemy. Pre-18th century alchemy, to which Paracelsus belonged, used extensive linguistic parallels between the chemical and religious aspects, but seldom between alchemy and self-illumination and psychic transformation.¹¹¹ As such, Faivre's idea of psychological transmutations is relatively modern.

¹⁰⁷ There is, however, a transmutation of the *eternal* body before it can enter heaven. "For this body too will have to cast off all dross of earthy life, and it will have to go through an even more difficult test by fire [...]" Paracelsus, *Liber de podagricis et suis speciebus et morbis annexis* (II. i. 301 - 11); *Selected Writings*, p. 214. The physical body is mortal and 'will become a feast for worms'. The eternal body having been in contact with the physical body during life must be 'clarified' or 'transfigured' in order to enter heaven; Rudolf 1998: 192 - 193.

¹⁰⁸ Faivre 1994: 13.

¹⁰⁹ Faivre 1998b: 110.

¹¹⁰ Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna* (I. xii. 231- 232); *Selected Writings*, p. 193.

¹¹¹ Principe 2005: 14

Today the belief in spiritual transmutation is widespread, probably much reinforced by Jung's interpretation and the 'inner alchemy' found in Chinese sources, but it does not constitute a ritual field as outlined by Olsson. Two components are obviously lacking: the alchemical furnace (the ritual) and the built-in experience related to the ritual alchemical field. In rare cases, however, a modern alchemical ritual field actually exists,¹¹² but nowadays the popular concept of 'transmutation' is disintegrated from its original source. Though many adherents possess conceptual insight into transmutation, it is not derived from practising alchemy. The belief in spiritual transmutation has been 'overtaken' by other rituals in the 19th and 20th century, primarily but not exclusively, the clairvoyant ritual field.

Astrology and alchemy

Paracelsus' alchemical philosophy is centred on astrology with an impact so strong that it is likely there would be no alchemy without astrology. To Paracelsus nearly all significant things came from the stars. "The light of Nature in man comes from the stars [...]. In the stars lie all faculties, all arts, all crafts, all wisdom, all reason [...]. But what is in the light of Nature is subject to the influence of the stars. The stars are our school in which all these things must be learned."¹¹³ In medicine, prognostications based on critical days and astrology followed when the diagnosis was unclear, or when there was no obvious cure at hand.¹¹⁴ Paracelsus criticised the school of Galen for using too little astrology, and he expanded the influence of astrology primarily as a tool for designing proper medical remedies. A planet does not create sickness in its related organ (see above), rather the cause lies in the 'inner planets' (synonymous with the inner major organs). A remedy can be found in herbs 'signified' - and not governed - by the celestial planet (the signifier). "Then it must be known what is the star of this disease, and what is the star in medicine (i.e. the herb and its related star) that operates against this disease".¹¹⁵ First, however, the herb must be purified by an alchemical process, i.e. transformed into its volatile nature by getting rid of its earthly or dense qualities, so that the heavenly planet can work on it.¹¹⁶ When volatilised, the 'vapour' or 'air' from the herb was casually-influenced by the proper planet. When the alchemical

¹¹² See for example *Alchemy Journal*, Vol. 3 No. 2. It is available on web: alchemylab.com/AJ3-2.htm. Here an American team claims to have transmuted the medical herb 'yerba santa' and the transmutation is related to spiritual transformation. In such rare cases, the reader ought to know that he or she is dealing with a modern alchemical ritual field.

¹¹³ Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna* (I. xii. 22 - 23); *Essential Readings*, pp. 113 - 114.

¹¹⁴ Demaitre 2003: 765 - 788.

¹¹⁵ Paracelsus, *Alchemy, The Third Column of Medicine (Liber Paragranum)*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 151 (my parenthesis).

¹¹⁶ "Heaven does not rule it except these earthly elements be separated from it. If you have effected this separation, then Medicine is in the power of the stars, and is ruled and protected by them." Paracelsus, *Alchemy, The Third Column of Medicine*. HAW, Vol. II, p. 150.

furnace cooled, the vapour (spirit) became condensed and reunited with the ‘dead corpus’ of the herb, i.e. its cleaned earthly side, though often in a fluid state. The medicine was thus properly prepared.

By attaining ‘conjunction’ during the alchemical process between the heavenly planet and the herb (labelled the ‘grown’ planet), the related disease may be cured.¹¹⁷ This model makes use of an analogical as well as a casual view of astrology. The heavenly bodies do not affect physical matter, only the released ‘astral-body’ of all individual things. It is only the ‘spirits’ of the herbs that are casually affected by the stars. Between the heavenly bodies and nature, merely analogies and signatures exist. Maybe, all medical remedies had to be transformed into their volatile states in ‘conjunction’ with the planets at the right astrological moment due to the qualitative nature of time, i.e. when the signifier was strong, for example on its day or in its hour.¹¹⁸ In this manner, Paracelsus primarily allowed the space for the alchemical experiment to take place by putting alchemy in charge, not the planets. If the planets had dominated the earthly herbs directly, they could be utilised immediately as medicine - without any alchemical purification. The planets that bring the disease can also cure it. “The higher stars weaken and cause death, but they also heal.”¹¹⁹ Hereby, Paracelsus attempted to unite a casual (or deterministic) interpretation with an analogical understanding of astrology. The first point of view was very widespread in Hellenistic astrology, as for example in *Hermetica*, where the planets exercised their sway over the earth. Plotinus, however, assumed the opposite viewpoint, denying the planets to be causes,¹²⁰ but instead he granted them an analogical role. The planets only ‘signify’ (*sémainó*),¹²¹ says Plotinus, “by the systematic use of analogy (*analogos*) - for instance, if one said that when the bird flies high it signifies some high heroic deeds.”¹²² If Pagel is right in assuming that ‘Gnosticism’ and Neoplatonism equally inspired Paracelsus, then Paracelsus also overrode a conflict between a casual and an analogical mode of astrology. The light of nature emanating from the stars was not a casual light acting on physical nature, but a light illuminating man’s mind so all elements (or things) in physical nature were made recognisable by indications and signs. Though Paracelsus, in a sophisticated way, took advantage of the astrological conflict between an analogical and a casual interpretation in order to make space for the necessity of ‘alchemical perfection’, it still does not reduce the influence of astrology. Astrology as a huge ritual field in Western esotericism also comprised much of Paracelsus’ alchemy.

¹¹⁷ Paracelsus, *Das Buch Paragranum* (I. viii. 182 - 184); *Essential Readings*, p. 75.

¹¹⁸ This becomes clear if one includes *Archidoxis Magica* attributed to Paracelsus, but the work was maybe written by Gerhard Dorn, or another advocate of Paracelsus, around 1570 AD. For an understanding of the ‘astrological timing’ described in *Archidoxis Magica*, see Larsen et al. 2000: 96 - 98.

¹¹⁹ Paracelsus, *Alchemy, The Third Column of Medicine*. HAW, Vol. II, especially p. 149.

¹²⁰ Plotinus, *On Whether the Stars are Causes* (Ennead II. 3).

¹²¹ I.e. ‘designate’ or ‘doing recognizable by signs’”. Berg: 1978.

¹²² Plotinus, III 1.6 (my parentheses).

Recently, two professional publications mark two different opinions on the partnership between alchemy and astrology, one edited by William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton, the other written by Kocku von Stuckrad. Newman and Grafton find astrology and alchemy rather alien in nature because the “fundamental practices of the two fields were vastly different.”¹²³ Stuckrad, on the other hand, declares astrology as standing in the centre of alchemy since Renaissance times.¹²⁴ Who is correct? Both definitively have a point, but Stuckrad, maybe, overlooks the free choice of the alchemist to decode alchemical religious language into plain chemical language. Hence, the alchemist had the option of ignoring astrology. Newman and Grafton probably fail to notice that alchemy and astrology both affirm and confirm the notion of holism. According to *Tabula Smaragdina*, a short alchemical charter, a link between heaven and earth has always been present in western alchemy.¹²⁵ Viewed as rituals, both alchemy and astrology are ‘contracted’ expressions (Olsson) of the same belief (in holism). No wonder then, that some alchemists considered alchemy and astrology to be a joint venture. On the other hand, however, astrology and alchemy as rituals also promote *per se* partly different USP. The light of nature (Paracelsus) together with its ability to perfect nature (with the help of the alchemist) was definitively an USP not found in earlier classical astrology, and in that sense Newman and Grafton also make their point.

Summary and some comments

The five matrices are met in Paracelsus’ ‘chemical philosophy’, although one could perhaps argue that matrix number three rests on massive evidence. Matrix number four, religious principles conceived as scientific principles, has probably never been in such focus as within alchemy. Though written in religious terminology, alchemical texts may be decoded and understood in terms of pure chemistry, according to recent research. This is somewhat challenging for theorists on religion, religious texts and ritual, and it seems that Olsson’s notions on religious text as ‘conglomerates’ of different experiences, principles and thoughts, on additive applications and on rituals able to reflect different partial pictures of reality, are very striking. First, it seems very likely that alchemists could neglect different ‘conglomerates’ within the alchemical manuscript, for example those parts concerning transformation of different metals into gold. There is not much proof of Paracelsus being a gold-maker, rather he sought to purify or transform metals, plants and herbs into an essence of great medical potential. Next, there are different additive applications possible in alchemy. If one assumes that the decoded text was

¹²³ Newman & Grafton 2001: 15.

¹²⁴ von Struckrad 2000: 5.

the starting point, then the alchemist could add (or not) a certain amount of cosmological superstructures to his worldview according to his needs and tastes. As Debus has pointed out, Paracelsians did not have to believe in Paracelsus' religious implications in order to make alchemical experiments. Thirdly, if one accepts that the alchemical process is a ritual, it can then reflect and serve as a focus of different religious concepts found amongst alchemists with their individualistic view of life. It is important for future research to uncover the *dialectical* relationship between the decoded level (i.e. the chemical level) and the religious dimensions in alchemy. In Paracelsus' alchemical writings, there is a clear dialectical relationship between the alchemical process (viewed as a ritual) and 'beliefs' involved, for example in those depicted above in the diagram of the alchemical ritual field. Beliefs in 'God as an alchemist', 'Iliaster' and 'a chemical creation' were derived from the alchemical process (ritual). On the other hand, the prevalent belief in holism also affected the alchemical ritual. The furnace had to resemble the heavenly firmament, the vessel the earthly firmament (a big womb) and the alchemical fire the Sun (equal to God's presence). Then, and not until then, it seemed that great empowerment ensued.

As we have seen, Paracelsus' 'philosophical alchemy' belongs to Western esoterism and it seems very likely too that Paracelsian alchemy also met the criteria of the five matrices. It is, perhaps, most correct to label this branch of alchemy 'religious-technical alchemy' due to its very ritualistic nature, without denying the existence of both a 'philosophical alchemy' and a pure 'chemical alchemy'. Philosophical alchemy thus make use of, and interprets itself into, philosophical cosmological principles, for example those found in Aristotelian philosophy, without observing any ritual dimensions in alchemy. In Paracelsus' 'religious alchemy', the alchemical ritual's ability to reflect different beliefs, for example in holism, Iliaster and transmutations, explains why different USP from alchemy and astrology are able to join each other. Seen in that light, Faivre is right in pronouncing alchemy to be one of the cornerstones of esotericism. Alchemy became a powerful and fascinating ritual because of its ability to bring together and communicate very different 'partial pictures of reality': the reality of epistemological signals in nature, of transmutations, of ordinary chemical principles, of holism, of astrology, of a chemical creation and in the reality of mastering nature. Simply stated, and in an additive way, alchemy brought together principles from science, philosophy and religious beliefs.

It is impossible to understand Paracelsus (or Western esotericism) as any kind of '-ism', or coherent philosophy, for example as Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism or Hermetism. There are many

¹²⁵ See chapter 8, p. x, below.

contradictions found in the writings of Paracelsus because his religious texts - as other religious texts - consist of different experiences (Olsson) acting as conglomerates, for example those concerning destiny. Here, factors such as providence, imagination, free will, faith, healthy conditions, prudence, God's lessons (in the case of some sort of illness), fate (from the stars or manipulation of the stars), stupidity and spiritual insight have all played a role, as we have seen, in the lifecycle of man. All these factors are 'experiences', for example the experience that free will has an influence on man's lifecycle, or the experience that wise behaviour dominates the outcome of one's life. It is also a human experience that occurrences can still be so radical that no-one can find a rational explanation for them, and for this reason, perhaps, many believe in a fate controlled by the gods, the stars, or otherwise. Moreover, Paracelsus' experience of imagination playing a role in human life could have been adopted from medicine.¹²⁶ It has been and still is well-known in the history of medicine that imagination has an effect on health or sickness. Today one can think of the placebo-effect.

¹²⁶ For Paracelsus' dependency of the concept of imagination in medicine, see for example Schott 2004: 99 - 108.