

CHAPTER 5

ALCHEMY AS CHEMISTRY, COSMOLOGY AND RITUAL ACTIVITY

*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 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

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.

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.

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 context¹²

In recent research alchemy is 'naturally-philosophical in character' understood in a broad and unbiased sense. Hence, one 'side' of alchemical.....

⁷ Debus 1987: 235.

⁸ Debus 1987: 195.

⁹ Goltz 1998: 80.

¹⁰ Goltz 1998: 80.

¹¹ Debus 1987: 1 - 28; 185 - 196.

¹² Paracelsus is a pseudonym for Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim.