

ALCHEMICAL LANGUAGE

There is no equivalent for the origin of a process; and the words that identify it, that sets it apart in one's language, usually branches back into many languages, and into the deepest mists of antiquity. For example, *Alchemy*, at least in the West, may stem from *Chemia*, an ancient Egyptian Coptic word that refers to the "blackest earth" left behind by Nile River when it retreats and leaves behind a re-fertilized valley. But *Kem* is also refers to the pupil of the eye as it reflects an image before it. An image reflected within an image, again, no beginning.¹ Why alchemy then; why "the blackest of black"? Or may it actually refer to the embalming techniques of Ancient Egypt? Or to all of the above?

We can also say that alchemy began with the first life to appear on Earth, perhaps at the bottom of a salty ocean, where hydrothermal vents still heat mineral-rich waters that bubble up through cracks in the planet's mantle. Or perhaps alchemy began in the volcanic-associated freshwater hot springs "that emerged from a global ocean around 4 billion years ago, where RNA-like polymers are synthesized from mononucleotides."² Wherever, or whenever, life began to evolve on Earth the process involved heat and water; that is, the necessary substances for an alchemical process to begin. And at some point it must have called forth death, which is the *negredo* stage of alchemy,

To this day we don't agree on when either life or death begins, much less on when they first appeared on Earth. The physical work on these questions is presently carried on in laboratories, or on field trips, by scientists who write their data and theories in precise cryptic language—natural and mathematical—for publication in peer reviewed science journals. In 13th Century Europe, Constantine of Pisa wrote *Liber Secretorum Alchimie*, which includes a poem he calls a "table," as in our Periodic Table of Elements.

Lead is fetid and can be fused.
Copper is leprous.
Mars might be fluid but never melts.
Iron is squalid and falls apart.
Tin is shrieking and inconvertible
Mercury exhales vapors.
Quicksilver is Mother.
He ends with these mysterious words:
These are the Burning People.



At that time the academy had not yet raised walls between the humanities and the sciences, and thus "meanings (could be) cleverly hidden beneath allusion and

metaphor.”³ Constantine’s poem not only flies our imagination into heat of Mars, the planet that has most captured human imagination, it also offers “the Burning People,” which perhaps refers to the homunculus, the little man with great knowledge who bubbles and steams along with the elements alchemists fire up and circulate through their networks of glass tubing. Here mind and imagination compound into a substantive process.

Besides the precision we now expect from a scientific text, what the alchemists left out, at least wrote down, are the intimate details of “The Great Work”---such as singed fingers, smoke-stinged eyes, their blood pressure when the whole mess threatened to blow up; their curses shouted in the laboratory’s shadows, along with prayers mumbled.

James Hillman wrote, “first let us talk as alchemists, as if we were talking alchemically... For in that mode we can restore our speech---and that, after all, is our aim: the restoration of imaginative matter, not of literal alchemy.”⁴ By talking as alchemists Hillman of course means metaphorically, just as the alchemists themselves hid their formulars in “books of secrets.”

Another example of alchemical language is the poem “Calcination: The First Gate” by the eminent 15th Century alchemist George Ripley. Here are a few lines:

Neither with corrosives, nor with fire alone,
Nor with vinegar, nor with ardent water,
Neither with the vapor of lead,
Our stone is calcined according to our intent.
All those who to calcining so be bent,
From this hard science withdraw their hand,
Till they our calcining better understand.

We know of over two thousand Alchemical-inspired poems written in Medieval Europe, mainly composed in Latin, between the 14th and 18th centuries. There are examples from France, Germany, The Netherlands, and other European countries; but it was in England that this genre of poetry, written in Middle English, flourished. Shakespeare, in fact, alludes to alchemy in many of his plays, but especially in “King Lear,” in which, Jungian analyst Robert Macdonald opined, “an ailing King in need of renewal is melted down in order to be transformed.”⁵

At least until 1621, when Francis Bacon published his *Novum Organum Scientiarum*, introducing what we now call the “scientific method,” alchemical verse was a popular way of annotating scientific knowledge. Although in the late 17th Century the great physicist Sir Isaac Newton was deeply into alchemical texts, by this time scientific theses were already being written in a soulless prose format. In his essay, “Alchemical Culture and Poetry in Early Modern England,” Philip Ball wrote:

“...there is some particular affinity between alchemy and poetry; and...this affinity seems to have been felt also by the greatest English writers of the transitional age between the Tudor and Stuart monarchies. This is surely no mere quirk, but stems from the fundamental nature of alchemical discourse, which drew heavily on allusion and metaphor in a way that poets could recognize and exploit. The complaint often

(and justifiably) made against the alchemical literature by the likes of (Robert) Boyle – that it was cryptic and intentionally ambiguous and vague – identifies the very reason why alchemy was, then and subsequently, a source of inspiration to poets, playwrights and storytellers.”⁶

So Hillman proposes a poetical vocabulary that includes “corrosive acids, heavy earths, ascending birds...sweating kings, stench, urine, and blood,” then opines it is : “like the language of our dreams, and unlike the language into which we interpret the dreams.”⁷

While psychologists and neuroscientists don’t agree on why we dream—the most recent theory comes from AI machine-learning: dreams supply random noise so that our minds don’t over-specialize---we do know is that if we remember a dream at all it’s usually as a discombobulated fantasy that leaps from one scene or situation to another; and if we recognize someone in it, the chances are they don’t look like themselves, but are “a little off.” (Can active imagination lead us to what recognition is?)

The psychologist’s task is to account for a dream’s symbolic performance, which he or she usually does by wrestling it into the DSM’s (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) approved therapeutic terms. But dreams refuse to be trapped in jargon. When interrogated they don’t confess. Hillman adds that, “The language of psychology today doesn’t convey any emotion or any beauty of the experience itself that it’s describing.”⁸

In the arts, the movement most associated with dreams is Surrealism, which, its founder, Andre Breton said, was meant to “Rocket you out of your shoes to somewhere marvelous.” Or, as Shakespeare’s King Lear roars: You sulphurous and thought-executing fires, Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts, Singe my white head!”

An alchemist’s lair was very different from the office of most psychologists, or the laboratory of a modern scientist. The root of the word “laboratory” traces back to the spirit of alchemy, as it means both labor and prayer.

In his important essay, “The Alchemical Dreamworker,” Randolph Severson, wrote:

“After years of searching, one might be smuggled down an unused corridor in the oldest part of the monastery to a bolted door hidden in the shadows, or one could find oneself in the library of some elegant English lord such as John Dee. There the pungent smell of cooking chemicals would take the breath away, and mysterious instruments would dazzle wondering eyes.”⁹

There are many forms of alchemy. One is the forerunner of modern chemistry, separated but never completely divorced from each other This is the alchemy that pursued the making of gold. But “gold” can be understood metaphorically. For example, In Ancient China, it was “The Golden Elixir of Immortal Life.”



Called “salvation by ingestion,” instead of prolonging life, these substances, such as cinnabar, a soft red ore that Chinese alchemists called “dragon’s blood,” from which mercury used to be derived, in many cases proved fatal. Of course, the dream of immortality, especially by the rich and powerful, continues to this day. There is a recent story about Silicon Valley billionaires who are investing “in new biotechnologies that they hope will enable them to do what no human has ever done: cheat death. The technology includes some dubious treatments, such as being pumped with the blood of much younger people,”¹⁰

Another form of Chinese Daoist alchemy is “Philosophical, or Internal Alchemy,” (*Neidan*, Ch.), In Western alchemy this was the pursuit of the Philosophers’ Stone. However, in Chinese metaphysics the body is the apparatus in which the Golden Elixir is made by opening various channels using visualization and “embryonic breathing,” or “closed circuit respiration.”

In essence, this is the branch of alchemy C.G. Jung became interested in after reading Richard Wilhelm’s translation of the Daoist text, “The Secret of the Golden Flower,” and realizing that it was about symbolism, his “old friend.”

Here the alchemist’s mind is not separate from his apparatus; rather, he submits his imagination to the process of, in Jungian terms, “individuation.” Perhaps the next step would be, as posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti wrote, “becoming-imperceptible...the event for where there is no representation, because it rests on the disappearance of the individuated self.”¹¹

Transmuting the world into images that boil, bubble, and trouble is what an alchemical artist would do. Thus, a contemporary alchemical language would be a language of unstable metaphors rich in symbols, with a lexicon of revelations that channel words into images, and images into a crucible of words. Hillman wrote that:

“When alchemy speaks of degrees of heat, it does not use numbers. Rather, it refers to the heat of horse dung, the heat of sand, the heat of metal touching fire. These heats differ, moreover, not only in degree but also in quality: heat can be slow and gentle, or moist and heavy, or sudden and sharp...Heat (that) is not abstracted from the body that gives it.”¹²



Like the alchemist’s alembic, an alchemical poem can reach temperatures at which it threatens to explode. But it is not teleological. It has no goal beyond, as Jung said, “additional distillations,” beyond keeping the darkness boiling. “The strongest continuity between alchemy and 20th century art,” wrote art historian James Elkins, “is best sought not by tracing direct iconographic evidence of alchemical thinking...but by looking, in particular, at *strategies for increasing mystery...*”¹³

Perhaps the alchemy that still interests us is the mystery of why the human mind is not able to fully understand its unconscious states, or even know *why* it dreams. But we do know the value of a language of both words and images that can, at its best, embody the mysteries of the alchemical *experience*, as to be an artist is to be one of the “Burning People.”

Joel Weishaus
Pacifica Graduate Institute
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ENDNOTES

1. Indra's net describes a multifaceted jewel in which is reflected in all the other jewels; e.g. worlds, realities, etc. It is a favorite image of Hua-yen Buddhism. See, F.H. Cook, *Hua-Yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*. University Park, PA.,1977.
2. S, Stephens, “New Book by Biologist David Deamer Explores the Origins of Life” *Psys.Org*, March 15, 2019. <https://phys.org/news/2019-03-biochemist-david-deamer-explores-life.html>
3. L.M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*. Chicaco & London, 2013. p.176.
4. J. Hillman “The Therapeutic Value of Alchemical Language: A Heated Introduction.”” *Alchemical Psychology*. Putham CT: Spring Publications.2010. p.18.
5. R. MacDonald, “Prima Materia in Shakespeare’s King Lear.” <https://robertmacdonald.org/alchemy-2>
6. P. Ball, “Alchemical Culture and Poetry in Early Modern England.” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*. Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006)
7. Hillman, *Ibid*.

8. Hillman, Ibid.
9. R. Severson, "The Alchemy of Dreamwork: Reflections on Freud and The Alchemical Tradition." *Dragonflies*, Spring, 1979.
10. J. Abramson, "Billionaires Dream of Immortality. The Rest of Us Worry About Healthcare." *The Guardian*. 5 July 2017.
11. R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*. Cambridge UK, 2013. p.137.
12. Hillman. Ibid.
13. J. Elkins, "Four Way of Measuring the Distance Between Alchemy and Contemporary Art." *HYLE – International Journal for Philosophy of Chemistry*, Vol. 9 (2003), No.1. p.111.