

QUADERNI DI STUDI INDO-MEDITERRANEI

V (2012)

Transmutatio

La via ermetica alla felicità
The Hermetic Way to Happiness



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La via ermetica alla felicità
The Hermetic Way to Happiness

a cura di
Daniela Boccassini e Carlo Testa



Edizioni dell'Orso
Alessandria

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Alchymia Archetypica: *Theurgy, Inner Transformation and the Historiography of Alchemy*

by Hereward Tilton

*Al mastirs which write of this soleyne werke,
Thei made theire bokis to many men ful derk,
In poyses, parabols, and in methaphoris alle-so,
Which to scolers causith peyne and wo.
Thomas Norton, The Ordinal of Alchemy*

Introduction

In late antiquity and the Middle Ages the ambiguous and often surreal symbolism of alchemy was purposefully employed to protect closely guarded secrets of laboratory practice, which most commonly concerned the manipulation and simulation of precious metals. Enigmatic figures such as the green lion, the black sun and the hermaphrodite were elements of a cipher language for the initiated laboratory worker; usually the tracts utilising this language were readily recognisable as recipes, but the extended allegories of Arabian and Hellenistic Egyptian provenance provided a further level of abstraction in the relationship of sign to referent.

The ever-shifting significance of alchemical symbolism over time established another obstacle to the interpretation of alchemical texts, as one symbol came to indicate a multitude of processes, while the number of symbols signifying a single process steadily proliferated. And an equally perplexing source of ambiguity was the Hermetic doctrine of correspondences, which could pose the added difficulty of determining the level of the microcosm or macrocosm to which alchemical symbols alluded — in the words of the *Tabula smaragdina*: «That which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing» («Quod est inferius, est sicut quod est superius. Et quod est superius, est sicut quod est inferius, ad perpetranda miracula rei unius»; Trismegistus 1566: 32).

With the rise of the Western esoteric traditions in the Italian Renaissance and ensuing Reformation, the significance of alchemical symbolism becomes ever more multivalent. As a subject of contemporary scholarly study, today Western esotericism encompasses a number of historically related traditions emerging in the wake of the Renaissance humanist reception of Hermetic, Neoplatonic and Gnostic currents of thought and their assimilation with a syncretizing Christian interpretation of the Jewish Kabbalah. Within these tradi-

tions the symbols of alchemy were applied extensively to subjects other than laboratory alchemy, most notably to processes of personal, inner transformation from a base, earthly condition into a more spiritual, moral or divine state. This is the domain of so-called “spiritual alchemy”, and in the following pages we will discover that a wide variety of ideas and practices have been cast together under the rubric of this contested historical category.

Indeed, such is the diversity of these phenomena — ranging from alchemically conceived theurgy through Protestant alchemical allegory to the ingestion of alchemically produced entheogens — that I will be proposing the use of a more specific and nuanced terminology in closer keeping with historical lines of descent. As such the present paper constitutes work toward a historiography of alchemy reflecting recent scholarly investigation of the genesis and development of the Western esoteric traditions; it is by no means conceived as a comprehensive survey of “spiritual” alchemical traditions, but nevertheless problematizes prominent historiographies such as those proposed by Telle (1978) and Principe and Newman (2001), as well as challenging the standard Jungian model of a «fission of the *physica* from the *mystica*» (Jung 1972: 267) or «wide-ranging emancipation of theory from practice» dated to the turn of the seventeenth century (Maillard 2006: 268-269). At the heart of the reevaluation I am proposing lies the tradition of Renaissance theurgy, which shared with the art of alchemy a concern with techniques for the transfiguration or spiritualization of the human body; this common aspiration saw alchemical practice pressed into the service of theurgy well into the eighteenth century, while the Renaissance conceptualisation of theurgic transfiguration in alchemical terms remained an important source for nineteenth-century notions of “spiritual alchemy”. What is more, the teachings of St. Paul — otherwise a bulwark of orthodoxy — concerning the transfigured body of the resurrection formed an important focal point for the introduction into early modern Christian doctrine of heterodox magical and alchemical conceptions of divinised nature.

In recent years the “spiritual” phenomena in question have been marginalised in a misguided attempt to salvage the subject of alchemy as a topic for “serious historians” (most notably Newman 1982, 1996; Principe and Newman 2001), and hence their historical significance has been largely overlooked. Nevertheless, the category of “spiritual alchemy” is indeed problematic for reasons that have yet to be fully clarified. Although I have employed it prominently in my own work (Tilton 2003), use of the phrase “spiritual alchemy” implies that the very diverse individuals — Christian Cabalists, Freemasons, laboratory alchemists and Protestants of varying shades of orthodoxy — who have used alchemical symbolism to signify processes of inner transformation all thought of their activity as a *species of alchemy*. This is manifestly not the case. That it

might appear to be the case from our historical vantagepoint is undoubtedly due in large part to certain nineteenth-century interpretative paradigms that portrayed inner, spiritual processes as the very essence of alchemy.

In a revised historiography it would initially seem logical to reserve the category “spiritual alchemy” for those nineteenth-century interpretations of the alchemical corpus that specifically employ the term (and their near ancestors). Nevertheless, even within this narrow historical context one is immediately struck by the diversity of meanings attached to the phrase “spiritual alchemy”. In its English form it was first popularised at roughly the same time by the founder of the Theosophical Society, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), and the noted occultist Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942), yet their conceptions of the phenomena to which it referred were quite distinct. In his 1888 republication of *Lives of the Alchemystical Philosophers*, Waite refers to «spiritual alchemy» or «psycho-chemistry» as:

a grand and sublime scheme of absolute reconstruction by means of the Paracelsian *Orizon Aeternitatis*, or supercelestial virtue of things, the divinisation, or deification, in the narrower sense, of man the triune by an influx from above. (Waite 1888: 36)

I will return to the significance of this rather distinctive terminology in due course. For now it suffices to note that Waite believed most alchemical literature is not available to a “mystical interpretation”: in his eyes only a few «true and far-sighted adepts» understood that their «theory of universal development» was as applicable to man as it was to metals (Waite 1888: 273-274). These words were directed primarily against the theories of Ethan Allen Hitchcock (1798-1870), who in his *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists* (1857) had argued that all alchemy was a mystical pursuit, couched in pseudo-chemical language in order to deflect charges of heresy from the Church.

Although Blavatsky believed the ambiguous symbols of alchemy betrayed traces of laboratory work, her views on “spiritual alchemy” are closer to those of Hitchcock and are ultimately derived from that writer. A year prior to the appearance of Waite’s edition of *Lives of the Alchemystical Philosophers*, Blavatsky wrote in the first volume of *Lucifer* that the alchemists and Rosicrucians have purposely concealed a «spiritual alchemy» or «alchemy of the Soul» under the «peculiar phraseology of the Fire-philosophers» (Blavatsky 1887: 210). In *The Secret Doctrine* published in the following year she also referred to «spiritual alchemy», which together with the related art of «physical transmutation» was taught to men by angels and passed on by the priests of the Egyptian mysteries. During the Middle Ages it had become necessary to veil the spiritual aspect of these mysteries in an «esoteric language» due to the danger of persecution (Blavatsky 1888: 3.164, 301-302).

Blavatsky derived this idea from Alexander Wilder (1823-1908), an American populariser of Neoplatonic thought who in his essay *New Platonism and Alchemy* (1869) also argued that the alchemists had employed «a peculiar mystic form of speech» due to the great peril posed by the Inquisition (25). These words in turn seem to have been derived from the work of his countryman Hitchcock, as does his statement that alchemy was «a spiritual philosophy, and not a physical science» (26-27). According to Wilder, «the wonderful transmutation of baser metals into gold» was a symbolic means of expressing «the transformation of man from his natural evils and infirmities into a regenerate condition, a partaker of the divine nature» (27).

This nineteenth-century conception of alchemy as a more or less exclusively spiritual, subjective pursuit arose as a natural concomitant of the progress of Enlightenment science and the collapse of laboratory alchemical paradigms, in particular the decline in the plausibility of metallic transmutation. As such the views of Blavatsky, Wilder and Hitchcock are part of a broader post-Enlightenment re-evaluation of the esoteric traditions typical of nineteenth-century occultism, which is associated with a significant lull in the practice of laboratory alchemy. Clearly this was a relatively late development. As we shall see, amongst the Freemasonic higher grades “spiritual alchemy” went hand in hand with a laboratory alchemy that persisted on a relatively large scale into the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, the Freemasonic appropriation of alchemical symbolism (such as we find it, for example, in the Rite Ecossais philosophique, cf. Bogdan 2007: 107-120) was undoubtedly an important source for nineteenth-century spiritual alchemy. The son of a prominent Vermont Freemason, Hitchcock explicitly compares his conception of spiritual alchemy as a veiled doctrine of moral purification and rebirth with the «secret language» of Freemasonry, employed to communicate «among the initiated, doctrines of which they had taken “an oath” not to speak directly» (Hitchcock 1857: 151). The influence of Freemasonry is also evident in the work of another exponent of the exclusively spiritual interpretation of alchemy, Mary Anne Atwood (1817-1910). In her anonymously published *Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* (1850), Atwood proposed that alchemical symbolism reflected a calculated effort to mislead those seeking in the outer world a perfection that was only to be found within the human being. Drawing on the doctrines of animal magnetism, she endeavoured to show that «man [...] is the true laboratory of the Hermetic art, his life the subject, the grand distillatory, the thing distilling and the thing distilled, and Self-Knowledge [...] is] the root of all alchemical tradition» (153). Significantly, she also described the alchemical art as a type of «Freemasonry», declaring that the alchemists’ striving to perfect Nature and build an «immortal

Edifice of Light» could only be achieved by a «Master Mason» or «Grand Architect» (460). At the end of the *Suggestive Inquiry* another work by Atwood is advertised: a poem on alchemical symbolism in which «Masonic formulae» are held to be disguised references to the Hermetic Art (533). This poem was never published, and indeed, for reasons that are still not entirely clear, Atwood recalled most copies of her *Suggestive Inquiry* and destroyed them.¹

Freemasonic alchemy

Although the Freemasons' goal of moral or spiritual transformation would seem to lend itself readily to alchemical allegorising, the persistence of laboratory alchemical pursuits in the eighteenth-century continental Freemasonic milieu and the variety of ways in which the alchemical worldview was integrated within a Freemasonic framework again makes any sweeping reference to "spiritual alchemy" problematic. We certainly should not assent to Coudert's assertion that «it was an exclusively spiritual alchemy» that was envisaged in the eighteenth-century Freemasonic grades (Coudert 2006: 387).

Here I will briefly consider some prominent examples of the role of alchemical symbolism and practice in eighteenth-century Freemasonry, where we find that the external laboratory and internal subjective work are united by their common subject (a substance of divine origin pervading the universe). Amongst the Hermetically inclined Freemasons of the eighteenth century this panentheistic vitalism went hand-in-hand with that other mainstay of the defunct scientific paradigm, the doctrine of correspondences: the parallels drawn between laboratory process and a subjective, personal transformation are not mere metaphors, but rather expressions of archetypal laws governing all the various levels of the cosmos.

These doctrinal elements are evident, for example, in *L'étoile flamboyante* (1766) issued in Paris by Baron Théodore Henri de Tschudi (1727-1769). This

¹ In his highly eccentric work *The Rosicrucians, their Rites and Mysteries* (1870: 217-218), Hargrave Jennings makes mention of a manuscript by Atwood entitled «The Enigma of Alchemy and of Oedipus resolved; designed to elucidate the fables, symbols, and other mythological disguises, in which the Hermetic Art has been enveloped and signalised in various ages, in ecclesiastical ceremonies, masonic formulae, astronomical signs and constellations — even in the emblazonments of chivalry, heraldic badges, and other emblems; which, without explanation, have been handed down, and which are shown to have originated in the same universal mystic school, through each particular tracing their allusion to the means and mechanism». A more grandiose example of Eco's Hermetic «overinterpretation» is hard to imagine.

work sets forth a legitimating pseudo-history concerning the Knights of Palestine, precursors of the Knights Templar who occupied themselves with the art of alchemy for the purpose of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem (de Tschudi 1779: 1.22-64). Morienus Romanus, the composer of an important Arabic text on the transmutation of metals, was purportedly among their number (de Tschudi 1779: 1.32-33). Within *L'étoile flamboyante* there is a catechism for an Adept grade envisioned by de Tschudi which sets forth a number of parallels between the work of the Freemason and that of the alchemist: while the alchemists are concerned with the art of perfecting what nature has left imperfect in the mineral species, and thus obtaining the treasure of the Philosophers' Stone, Freemasonry is similarly concerned with the art of perfecting what nature has left imperfect in the human species, and thus obtaining the treasure of true morality (de Tschudi 1779: 2.176). Hence that unhewn stone which for the Freemason denotes unenlightened man is known to the alchemists as Iliaster (the Paracelsian term for undifferentiated primordial matter) (de Tschudi 1779: 2.183). The means by which the alchemist brings this primordial matter to its perfection is a «sulphuric lightning» within a «heavenly quintessence», which penetrates and purifies the impure body in an instant (de Tschudi 1779: 2.188). Likewise, Freemasons allude to this heavenly quintessence with the symbol of the blazing star, which is also known as the central and animating fire, or an «astral gold» in the solar rays that penetrates all living, growing and mineral entities (de Tschudi 1779: 2.188, 193). Thus de Tschudi thought of alchemy and Freemasonry as parallel symbolic systems, the former referring to laboratory work and the latter to subjective transmutation. These two systems are related not only by virtue of the correspondence of the macrocosm to the microcosm of man, but also because both work with one and the same *prima materia* shared by men and metals alike, as well as one and the same animating and transmuting principle.

In 1766 de Tschudi joined the Conseil des Chevaliers d'Orient (Council of the Knights of the East) and began to reform it in accordance with the pseudo-histories and grades set forth in *L'étoile flamboyante* (Priesner 2011: 84). In the following year another alchemically oriented Freemasonic group emerged in the form of the Templer-Klerikat (Templar Clericate), a daughter lodge of Baron Karl Gotthelf von Hund und Altengrotkau's Strikte Observanz founded in Wismar by Johann August Starck (1741-1816) (Lenning 1867: 3.304-305). This prominent Lutheran theologian claimed to represent a spiritual tradition descending from the Knights Templar and complementing von Hund's purely chivalric Templar Rite (Lenning 1867: 3.305). The explanatory material accompanying the seventh degree of the Templer-Klerikat — Magus or Ritter der Klarheit und des Lichts (Knight of Clarity and Light) — is expressed in the

terms of both laboratory and “inner” alchemy, and may well reflect the influence of the alchemist Ernst Werner von Raven (1727-1787), who joined the Templer-Klerikat in February 1768 (Lenning 1867: 3.18-19). The text is concerned with the procurement of a *prima materia* or universal Chaos containing the seeds of all things animal, vegetable and mineral; drawing on the work of Paracelsus, Khunrath and Vaughan, this *prima materia* is also named Aeschmayim (“heaven”) or a fiery water (Wöllner 1803: 1.219-220). The alchemical work is likened to the Genesis creation account; its goal is to dissolve silver and gold in the universal Chaos and bring their seeds to germination and growth (Wöllner 1803: 1.219, 264-265).

While this process is abstruse and complex, the instructions for gathering the universal Chaos are fairly simple, and involve placing an unnamed poisonous substance in a glass away from the sun and covering it with a paper lid (!) (Wöllner 1803: 1.215-230). The separation of corporeal and spiritual components which ensues is paralleled with the ascent of the human spirit and its unification with the resurrected, glorified body at the end of time. In devotional language the author declares his fearlessness in the face of death, for God’s fire is a spark of love which will separate the dross away and purify him, freeing his spirit from earthly suffering so he may stand at the throne of God as an angel to witness the new Creation (Wöllner 1803: 1.216-217). Hence the goal of this inner transmutation is described in the Protestant terms of the transfiguration of the elect rather than the Freemasonic terms of moral enlightenment; here there are also shades of the theurgic angelification we will consider shortly, although the document’s publisher, the ex-Rosicrucian Wöllner (cf. *infra*), states he cannot allow details of Templer-Klerikat dealings with spirits to be printed (Wöllner 1803: 1.213).

Starck seems — initially at least — to have welcomed the employment of alchemical doctrine within the Templer-Klerikat grades as a quasi-scientific defence of the articles of Christian faith against the onslaught of rationalist Enlightenment philosophy. The alchemy of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz (Gold and Rosy Cross) order associated with Bernhard Joseph Schleiß von Löwenfeld (1731-1800) was similarly in keeping with the group’s marked anti-Enlightenment religious, political and scientific designs — hence in his preface to *Der Compaß der Weisen* (1779) by de Jolyfief, von Löwenfeld rails against the «mechanistic chemists» and their ignorance of the omnipresent divine quintessence that destroys gold and makes it potable (Jolyfief 1779: 44-45).

The very designation of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz as “Freemasonic” is problematic, given the fact that it considered the three Craft degrees to be a mere “nursery” from which to pluck potential members (Löwenfeld 1777: 11). Thus in 1780 the order created a front in the form of an unauthorised fifth

degree of Scottish Masonry known as the Theoretischen Brüder der Salomonischen Wissenschaft (Geffarth 2007: 56). The degree's initiatory oath interprets the symbols of the Craft degrees in alchemical terms — the unhewn stone (customarily symbolising the candidate) is equivalent to the *prima materia*, the Star of David signifies “Nature” (also known as the divine breath, invisible volatile spirit and universal animating fire), while the three lights are the Light of Nature, the Light of Revelation and the Light of Reason (an Enlightenment-inspired addition to the two lights of Paracelsus) (Löhrbach 1785: 65-66, 92). There is no explicit reference to inner transformation in the oath, and although the “Theoretical Brothers” were promised knowledge of God, Nature and self upon entrance into the order, the inculcation of basic conceptions of Paracelsian natural philosophy served as the basis for increasingly difficult laboratory processes in the higher grades of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz. The aim of this alchemy was to procure the universal solvent and create a transfiguring elixir through the dissolution of gold; in the words of a leading figure of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz, Johann Christoph von Wöllner (1732-1800), the alchemical experiments carried out by all Brethren in the nine grades of the order are made «in order that we may gain insight into who we are, what Man was in his Edenic state, how he may once again attain that state [...] wherefrom the possibility arises that at the End of Days all things can return to their spiritual state of light» (Geffarth 2007: 262). For those who doubt the very practical purpose of the order's alchemy, one need only point to an unsuccessful attempt in 1787 to complete the operations of the ninth grade, during which the laboratory of Prince Friedrich of Braunschweig narrowly avoided being blown sky high (Kopp 1886: 2.45).

The alchemy of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz is quite distinct from that of other alchemically influenced Freemasonic higher grades, as the long dedication to laboratory alchemical work was itself seen as a purifying spiritual discipline; likewise, the maintenance of oaths of secrecy also contributed to the initiate's promised transfiguration from an earthly to a spiritual man (Bode 1788: 122-123). This took place through the supercelestial magic of the final grade of Magus, which could only be reached once the initiate had obtained the Philosophers' Stone. Indeed, as the Stone seems to have been the very means of the promised heavenly ascent, it is necessary to investigate the higher grade teachings of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz, where we discover a curious hybrid alchemical-magical literature with roots in the Renaissance.

Entheogens and alchemically assisted theurgy

At this point in our exposition we must turn to the subject of theurgy, or the magical procurement of communication with benevolent spirits, most commonly for the purpose of gaining knowledge, producing miracles or attaining union with the divine. This is the realm of “addressative” magic, to use Weill-Parot’s neologism — magic that addresses intelligent, willing otherworldly entities. While this form of magical activity may strike the contemporary scholar as the expression of an alternative form of religiosity rather than a phenomenon separate in essence to religion, the dominant forms of Christianity since Augustine have deemed any such “addressative” activity taking place outside the church hierarchy as necessarily demonic and thus proscribed (Weill-Parot 2002: 169). With the revival of Neoplatonic, Hermetic and Kabbalistic theurgy in the course of the Renaissance there arose a distinction between theurgy (involving benevolent spirits) and *goetia* (involving malevolent spirits) (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1531: H iiiii *recto*), but given Augustine’s warning that demons can be indistinguishable from angels (*De civ. Dei* 19.9), both practices remained forbidden to the orthodox.

Hence in *Der im Lichte der Wahrheit strahlende Rosenkreuzer* we find von Löwenfeld (1782) denying that the Gold- und Rosenkreuzer concern themselves with matters of theurgy (263); yet the order’s detractor, Hans Heinrich von Ecker und Eckhoffen, cites a purported «Konstitution der Magi» (Constitution of the Magi) of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz to the effect that the good spirits of theurgy (white magic) are too unclean for the Rosicrucian magi, whose “divine magic” allows them to speak personally with both God and the angels purified by and living within His fire (i.e. theurgy by another name) (Ecker und Eckhoffen 1782: 172-173). Von Ecker und Eckhoffen’s polemic against the magic of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz is in the tradition of Protestant and Enlightenment anti-enthusiasm, and the order’s careful negotiation of the issue indicates theurgy remained a deeply suspect activity for self-professed Christians such as the Gold- und Rosenkreuzer to engage in. In order to determine the nature of that engagement we must turn from the printed material to the order’s manuscripts (curiously overlooked by Geffarth), where we find as yet unpublished, secret tracts describing the “divine magic” of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz in great detail.

Von Löwenfeld’s disavowal of theurgy seems slightly disingenuous in light of this manuscript tradition. Thus the *Testamentum der Fraternitet Roseae et Aureae Crucis* of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz in its pre-Masonic phase deals with the Christian Cabala, conceived as a magical means of uniting the soul with God (ÖNB Cod SN2897: 224-225); what is more, it also contains a remarkable

chapter dealing with the alchemical-necromantic creation of a homunculus. The procedure involves adding fresh blood to the rotting flesh of a virgin or child, and gestating the mass together with a *sal sapientiae microcosmi* for a number of months in a glass vessel. In this way an artificial reincarnation takes place, as souls in limbo are magnetically attracted to the new body and will willingly serve their master upon birth from the alchemical vessel. Should there be any doubt that we are dealing here with a profoundly black magic, it is even suggested one procure the flesh of a man who has not died in the grace of God (230-241).

While it may be objected that this chapter is excised from the greatly expanded version of the manuscript utilised by the Masonic Gold- und Rosenkreuz — the *Thesaurus thesaurorum à fraternitate roseae et aureae cruces testamento consignatus* — in this later work we find another remarkable example of alchemy pressed into the service of addressative magic. Within the section of the manuscript dealing with Christian Cabala and “divine magic” there are instructions imparted «sub summo silentio philosophico» for the preparation of a *lapis magicus* utilising the human body itself as the alchemical vessel and «true oven of the wise» («denn des Menschen Leib, und innerliche Qualitates Elementorum sind der rechte Ofen der Weisen, der nicht jedem bekannt ist»); HULB-TU Darmstadt Hs3262: 148). The author describes sequestering himself in his own room or «chymico-magical laboratory» for nine weeks; he mixes gold leaf or the finest gold powder with his own urine and drinks it day after day, taking care to eat nothing but fish and frogs; in this manner the «miracle-working Vulcanus and true Archeus» within his own body acts as the alchemical fire, «corrupting, putrifying and regenerating» the common gold until his urine takes on an «overwhelmingly pleasant smell» and his «inner spirit» becomes external and visible before his eyes (146-149). Eventually (and unsurprisingly, one might wryly add) the seven planetary intelligences appear before him in his room in both dreams and «waking visions»; particular attention is devoted to Saturn as a «heavenly fiery angel sent by God», who converses with him in a friendly manner, revealing divine secrets and miracles of nature for the benefit of humankind (145, 150).

Bizarre as it may seem, this magical operation is a logical extension of the doctrines of Paracelsus (1493-1541), who likened both the body of man and Creation at large to an alchemical work; he named the alchemist «Vulcan», the ancient smith of the gods, a principle working upon the *prima materia* within the matrix of the four elements to perfect it as the *ultima materia*, i.e. to bring all things to their specific form in accordance with their *telos*. In this work Vulcan is assisted by a force that separates and orders the material at hand, which Paracelsus calls the Archeus:

[...] all things are created as prime matter and Vulcan converts them through the art of alchemy into ultimate matter. The Archeus, the inner Vulcan, follows suit; it knows how to distinguish parts and to circulate and distribute them according to the arts of sublimation, distillation and reverberation. These arts are also within man just as they are present in external alchemy, which is its model. (Goodrick-Clarke's translation, 1999: 103)

Aber alle ding werden zu prima materia beschaffen und uber das so folgt der vulcanus hernach, der machts in ultimam materiam durch die kunst alchimiae. Also folgt der archeus, der inwendig vulcanus hernach, der weiß zu circulirn und praeparirn nach den stücken und austeilung, wie die kunst in ir selbs vermag mit sublimirn, distillirn, reverberirn, etc; dan die artes sind alle im menschen als wol als in der eußerlichen alchimei, die dise praefigurirt. (Paracelsus 1928: 188)

In the hands of the Gold- und Rosenkreuzer this expression of the doctrine of microcosmic-macrocosmic correspondence allowed a peculiarly transgressive form of theurgy — in which the Philosophers' Stone is associated with a taboo bodily fluid² and the indwelling *spiritus* of the human body — to be described as an ostensibly alchemical operation.

We might also conceptualise the Rosicrucian *lapis magicus* as a somewhat idiosyncratic example of the employment of the Philosophers' Stone — most commonly in the form of an *aurum potabile* or “potable gold” — to bring about an altered state of consciousness. Within this sub-category of the alchemy of inner transformation are the alchemically produced entheogens: that is to say, psychoactive substances produced in the alchemical laboratory that tend to elicit an experience of the divine. The most prominent of these substances is the solvent and anaesthetic diethyl ether, which we find depicted as a life-giving elixir granting visions of otherworldly spirits well into the nineteenth century. Thus the alchemical elixir of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842) that grants visions of elementals and the famed Dweller of the Threshold is described as highly volatile with a powerful fragrance (Bulwer-Lytton 1842: 157, 160, 207); it may be either inhaled or imbibed (207-208), produces an elevated mood (208), visual and auditory hallucinations (157-161, 208-212; cf. Holmes 1871: 46; Synge 1912: 210, 211), as well as death through excessive inhalation (Bulwer-Lytton 1842: 207). The description was manifestly based upon the author's own use of diethyl ether, a fact once exposed by Bulwer-Lytton's vengeful wife (Bulwer-Lytton 1854: 486).³

² The only other association of the elixir with human urine I am aware of occurs in the tantric literature (White 1998: 71).

³ The recreational inhalation of diethyl ether was stigmatised in the nineteenth century; for an association of ether abuse with occult “quackery” see Lee 1847: 164.

Substances with a chemical phenomenology and psychoactivity suggestive of diethyl ether begin to appear in the alchemical literature following the discovery of this organic compound by Paracelsus in the 1520's (Paracelsus 1930: 132-135; Severinus 1571: 334-335; Croll 1623: 160-162; Valentine 1740: 84-85; Pagel 1982: 276-278). As I have noted elsewhere (Tilton 2007), the Paracelsian alchemist and Christian Cabalist Heinrich Khunrath (c. 1560–1605) appears to have been the first to identify diethyl ether with that pure, shining heavenly substance known to the Greeks as *âither* and characterised by Aristotle as the fifth element, the *quinta essentia* pervading the superlunary spheres and comprising the heavenly bodies. In brief, Khunrath's quintessence is «the sweetest smelling substance» (Khunrath 1609: 129) which he has tasted with his own tongue and smelled with his own nostrils (Forshaw 2003: 380); it appears to be distilled from sulphuric acid (ULB Sachsen-Anhalt Ms. 14 A 12 (2): 14 *verso* - 20 *verso*, 24 *recto* - 24 *verso*), is «hot» to the taste (Khunrath 1597: 137), inflammable (Khunrath 1595: 21; Forshaw 2003: 346), volatile to the point it rapidly evaporates at room temperature (Khunrath 1597: 137) and does not wet the hands (Forshaw 2003: 459). Diethyl ether is one of the best mediums for creating gold colloids (Macquer 1781: 708; Priesner 1986: 130) — hence Khunrath also states the quintessence can be used to create an *aurum potabile* (“potable gold” or colloidal gold sol) (Khunrath 1597: 142-143, 145; cf. Svedberg 1909: 14, 213; Zsigmondy 1966: 46) and artificial rubies (Forshaw 2003: 473, 475; cf. Löwenstern 1738: 4; Keressenbrock-Krosigk 2001: 27); it can be reduced to a powder of (nanoparticulate) gold the colour of saffron (Forshaw 2003: 473; cf. Caseri 2000: 706); and it dissolves gold or silver in such a manner as to give the impression they have been permanently and irrevocably broken down (Khunrath 1597: 79-80, 93-94; cf. Zschimmer 1930: 833-834; Berger 1998: 18-20), producing red and white fluids capable of flowing over and «transmuting» a silver plate (Khunrath 1597: 67, 79-80, 145). Today the standard contemporary German definition of *Goldtinktur* remains «a solution of gold chloride [tetrachloroauric acid] in [diethyl] ether for the purpose of gilding» (Hanle 1972: 2, 907).

With regard to the psychoactive properties of Khunrath's «aurum potabile» or Philosophers' Stone, in the *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1609) we are told it «stimulates genius» and «promotes a perpetual cheerfulness» (Forshaw 2003: 475). Though Khunrath does not explicitly state that it induces the hypnotic visions and waking dreams that are a mainstay of his Christian Cabala (416, 418), it is the stimulation of man's innate genius that enables the «theosophical ascent» to obtain knowledge of God, oneself and the macrocosm of Creation (49). In accordance with classical pagan belief the genius is associated by Khunrath with an angelic «spirit of assistance»; this spirit and a ritual-

ascetic approach to laboratory work together constitute the prerequisites for the attainment of the Philosophers' Stone, which is a gift of God to the pious and divinely inspired (352). The "theosophical" and "Christian Cabalistic" employment of the Stone in its turn teaches a correspondence existing between the Stone's action in the macrocosm of nature and theurgic self-deification in the microcosm of man (473, 475).

Another entheogen (apparently real rather than legendary) prominent in the early modern alchemical literature is the so-called Angelical Stone of John Dee (1527-1608/09) and Edward Kelley (1555-1597), which according to Ashmole (1651: *Bi verso*) «affords the Apparition of Angells, and gives a power of conversing with them, by Dreames and Revelations». Purportedly the highest form of the Philosophers' Stone, the Angelical Stone was first linked with Dee and Kelleys' mysterious book of St. Dunstan by their friend and fellow courtier Edward Dyer (1543-1607) in his *Epitome of the Treasure of all Wells*,⁴ which in places appears to constitute a type of early psychedelic literature. While one recent author has rather implausibly suggested that the Angelical Stone was a type of hallucinogenic mushroom (Rogers 2005: 83-87), historians of chemistry have long pointed to diethyl ether as a common ingredient of early modern Philosophers' Stones (Macquer 1781: 708; Priesner 1986: 130). Thus Dyer specifically states it is the «most heavenly and fragrant smells» of the Angelical Stone that «ravish the senses» and grant «the apparition of most blessed and glorious angells» (Bodleian MS Ashmole 1419: 63 *verso* - 64 *recto*). What is more, the Angelical Stone is so subtle and fine a substance that it can neither be seen, nor felt, «yett you may sensibly heare itt with your aeriall gates making a noyse or sound in the body of man» (63 *verso*). In theurgical terms reminiscent of Agrippa (cf. *infra*) the author depicts the Angelical Stone as the means of a heavenly ascent and glorification of the body through the union of the human *mens* with the divine *mens*:

I Hermes having a flying bird within my minde that with her peircing clawes doth soo enclose my marble hearte that when she starts up in the wind she gripes and straines my stonish hearte within her feete that holds soe hard as where I stand now

⁴ Hence the initials upon the titlepage (f. 57 *recto*) of the *Epitome of the Treasure of all Wells*, E[dwardus] D[yerus] S[cripsit], and the author refers to himself as «Mr. E. D.» on f. 61 *recto*. Dyer's authorship of the *Epitome of the Treasure of All Wells* was also suggested by Black (1866: 51). It would appear the true title of the work is *The Abridgment or Treasure of my Harte* given at f. 80 *recto*; to add to the confusion, another hand has underlined «Wells» on the tract's titlepage (f. 57 *recto*) and written «Welth» in the margin.

with my right foote aloft upon the sun and with my left foote upon the bewty of the moon. She shall from them soe lift up my body, and place the same soo high in heaven, that all the last the brightnes of my stonish hearte within my body soe shall shine as itt shall make both dym and darke the burning lighte of the sun and the moon. (MS Ashmole 1419: 79r - 79v; cf. Agrippa von Nettesheim 1992: 509; also 1 *Cor* 15:41)

This is Dyer's description of an alchemical emblem supposedly to be found in an edition of the *Tabula smaragdina*, but which strikes me as an imaginary or psychedelic elaboration upon traditional alchemical imagery, here employed to express theurgical union with the divine effected by an entheogenic Philosophers' Stone.

Alchemically conceived theurgy

While Principe has provisionally classified the Angelical Stone with the phrase «supernatural alchemy» (2000: 197-200), here my description of its use as a type of alchemical theurgy, and specifically an alchemically *assisted* theurgy, seems more precise and consonant with the historical lineage of the ideas and practices in question. Another sub-category of alchemical theurgy might be termed alchemically *conceived* theurgy, in which we find the symbols of alchemy utilised to describe the theurgical processes themselves, in particular the gnostic heavenly ascent and angelification or self-deification; the close relation of alchemically assisted theurgy to theurgy conceived alchemically is evident in the words of Dyer cited *supra*, which encompass both sub-categories.

In the remainder of this paper I will chart the formative role of Renaissance esotericism in the emergence of the hybrid alchemical-theurgical literature in question. In light of this exploration, we find that — contrary to the assertion of Principe and Newman (2001: 398-400) — the operations of the school of “supernatural alchemy” and the early modern deployment of alchemical images to express spiritual themes possess much more than a superficial similarity to the nineteenth-century conception of spiritual alchemy. The terminology used by Waite in his description of “spiritual alchemy” immediately alerts us to an important continuity in the history of Western esotericism: the deification of man via the «horizon of eternity» (Waite 1888: 36) is a reference to John Dee's *Monas hieroglyphica* (Dee 1564: 27 *recto*), which draws in its turn upon the terminology of Italy's pre-eminent Christian Cabalist, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), to describe a transformative supercelestial virtue from beyond the «horizon of time» (i.e. beyond the celestial and sublunary realms governed by fate, cf. fig. 1) (Farmer 1998: 501).



Fig. 1 — Macrocosm and microcosm, from Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi, maioris scilicet et minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica historia* (Fludd 1617, title page).
 Sächsische Landesbibliothek - Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden, Med. Fol. 97
[\[http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id277592798/7\]](http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id277592798/7)

It is by means of this virtue that the Christian Cabalist effects an ascent through the heavenly spheres culminating in his own angelification or deification. Integrating Neoplatonic and Hermetic currents of thought and practice with a heterodox Christian interpretation of the Jewish Kabbalah, this central esoteric tradition of the Renaissance must figure henceforth in scholarly historiographies of alchemy; in this regard the present paper is very much consonant with the anti-eclectic historiography proposed by Hanegraaff (2012: 152, 377-379).

Indeed, to the best of my knowledge the phrase «spiritual alchemy» itself first occurs in an esoteric context in the work of a Christian Cabalist, the Englishman Robert Fludd (1574-1637). The work is the *Clavis philosophiae et alchymiae Fluddanae* (1633), and the context is Marin Mersenne's dispute with Fludd concerning the latter's defence of the elusive Rosicrucian fraternity. The Catholic Mersenne objected in particular to Fludd's Christian Cabalistic account of the human soul's union with the divine *mens* or agent intellect, which seemed to make man the equal of God; he also disputed Fludd's assertion that «the righteous man is an alchemist, who having found the Philosophers' Stone makes himself immortal with it» (Fludd 1633: 75). Fludd (referring to himself in the third person) responds thus:

Fludd does not deny that the pious and just [*iustus*] man is a *spiritual* alchemist. But does Mersenne understand or discern the true alchemist? He, indeed, is someone who can distinguish falsehood from truth, vice from virtue, darkness from light, the impure stain of sin from the purity of the god-like soul, and separate them with the fire of the divine genius. For by this way and no other is leprous lead transformed into gold — with the necessary washing and cleansing, to be sure. Thus with tears, penitence and abstinence, sin is separated from that scintilla of supercelestial life, from that true gold (so I declare) procured by Christ. Thus the son of darkness, assisted in his own activity by a divine act of the Word, arises and is exalted into the son of God and light. Thus the impious and unrighteous man, glorified by this spiritual alchemy, is elevated from the darkness into the light sphere of piety and righteousness. (My translation)

Non negat Fluddus hominem pium et iustum esse Alchymistam spiritualem. At scitne Mersennus, vel novitne verum Alchymistam? Est equidem ipse, qui falsum a veritate, vitium a virtute, tenebras a luce, impuram peccati labem ab animae Deiformis puritate distinguere, et igne divini ingenii separare potest. Hac enim et non alia via vertitur plumbum leprosum in aurum: nimirum debita ablutione et mundificatione. Sic lacrimis, et poenitentia, atque abstinencia, peccatum ab illa supercoelesti vitae scintilla, ab auro (dico) vero et a Christo emendo, separatur. Sic tenebrarum filius in sua propria industria divino verbi actu operante et assistente, exurgit atque exaltatur in filium Dei ac lucis. Sic vir impius et iniustus, clarificante ista

Alchymia spirituali, sublimatur e tenebris, in lucidam pietatis atque iustitiae sphaeram. (Fludd 1633: 75)

A practicing laboratory alchemist, Fludd carefully explains to his readers that his use of the term «alchemy» for such supernatural processes is not metaphorical. There is, he tells us, an «archetypal alchemy» (*Alchymia archetypica*) which governs processes in both the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of man: nature operates in her «chymical laboratory» through imitation of this archetypal alchemy, though not without the spagyric power of the archetypal agent or divine spirit residing in the sun (Fludd 1633: 77-78). Both the alchemy of human and divine artifice and that of the created natural world follow the archetypal alchemical laws of an «uncreated nature», which is eternal wisdom and the divine *logos*. Hence, Fludd argues, the word «alchemy» legitimately pertains as much to supernatural matters as it does to natural and artificial (78).

Here we should note that the conceptualisation of theurgy with the use of alchemical symbolism does not always constitute «a mere rhetorical embellishment or didactic exemplification» of an essentially non-alchemical pursuit (Principe and Newman 2001: 398): in the work of Dee and Fludd we are dealing with an activity we might indeed follow Fludd in terming «archetypal alchemy». The sweeping compass of this alchemy is expressed in three emblems from Fludd's magnum opus, *Utriusque cosmi, maioris scilicet et minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica historia* (1617-21). With regard to the macrocosm, Fludd was firmly wedded to the Ptolemaic system: hence at the centre of the first figure lies the earth, correlated in the microcosm of man with the genitalia as the basest of organs. In microcosmic matters Fludd was similarly medieval, adhering to the Galenic conception of the human body as the site of the distillation of ever-finer *spiritus*. Within the body the four humors correspond to the sublunary elements of earth, water, air and fire, above which lie the seven planetary spheres. The planets and their spirits rule over particular organs and members, and the highest faculties in man, *ratio*, *intellectus* and *mens*, correspond and grant access to the supernatural empyrean realm of God and His angels (figures 2, 3).

In Fludd's work both the universe at large and the spiritual processes within the microcosm of man mirror the transformations observable within the laboratory alchemical vessel; what is more, the spirit operative within the various macrocosmic and microcosmic manifestations of this archetypal alchemy is of divine origin, in accordance with Ficino's equation of the alchemists' quintessence with the *spiritus mundi* transmitting occult virtue from heavenly to earthly bodies (Ficino 1989: 257; cf. Matton 1993: 143-148; Kahn 2007: 65-66).

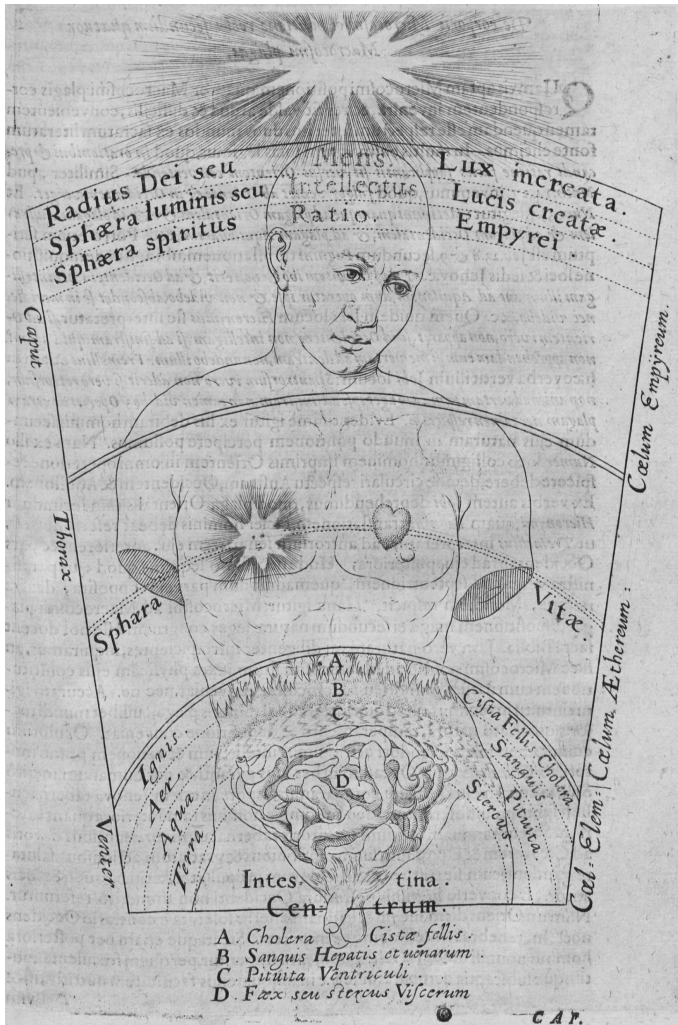


Fig. 2 — Ratio, intellectus and mens, from Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi, maioris scilicet et minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica historia* (Fludd 1619, 105).
Sächsische Landesbibliothek - Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden, Med. Fol. 98
[<http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id277598370/109>]

Derived in part from Ficino's reading of the *Picatrix* (Ficino 1989: 434, n. 3), this pantheistic blurring of the division between Creator and created played a key role in the synthesis of alchemical natural philosophy and Christian

Cabalistic theurgy in the Renaissance and early modern periods, when the history of alchemy decisively breaches the confines of the laboratory and merges with the history of an anti-institutional, inspirationist religiosity associated with the so-called Radical Reformation.

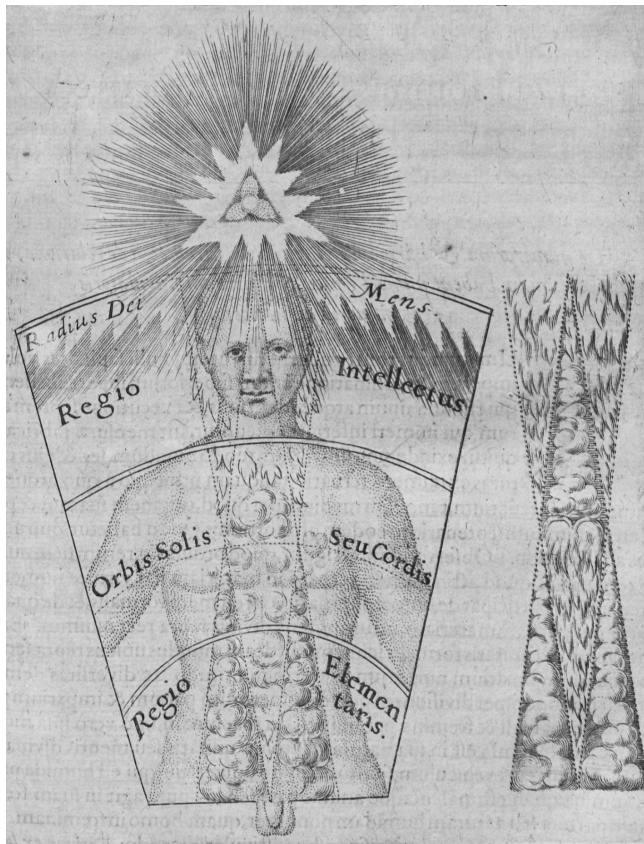


Fig. 3 — The tripartite cosmos and the uncreated light, from Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi, maioris scilicet et minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica historia* (Fludd 1619, 83).
Sächsische Landesbibliothek - Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden, Med. Fol. 98
[<http://digital.slub-dresden.de/id277598370/87>]

Signs of this merger were already in evidence on Palm Sunday, 1484 — the day on which a Joachimite prophet and Christian Hermetist by the name of Giovanni “Mercurio” da Correggio rode into Rome on an ass (as reported by

his disciple Lodovico Lazzarelli, 1447-1500; see Lazzarelli 2005: 27). Upon his head was a bloodstained crown of thorns, to which was affixed a silver crescent moon inscribed with the following «mystical oracle of the Holy Spirit»:

This is my Servant Poimandres, whom I have chosen. This Poimandres is my supreme and waxing child, in whom I am well pleased to cast out demons and proclaim my judgment and truth to the heathen. Do not hinder him, but hear and obey him with all fear and veneration; thus speaks the Lord your God and Father of every talisman of all the world, Jesus of Nazareth.

Hic est puer meus Pimander quem ego elegi. Pimander enim hic ipse parvulus meus altissimus & accrescens in quo & mihi sic bene complacui eiicere demonia: & facere iudicium & veritatem meam in gentibus. Nolite prohibere eum: sed ipsum cum omni metu & veneratione audite ac observate: dicit dominus deus & pater omnis *thelesmi* totius mundi Iesus nazarenus. (Lazzarelli 2005: 121; Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn's translation)

This inscription not only identifies Christ with Hermes as the divine *logos* and spiritual father of Poimandres from the Corpus Hermeticum (*Corp. herm.* 1.6), but also first introduces the *Tabula smaragdina* within the context of Renaissance theurgy. Ostensibly an alchemical text of Hellenistic Egyptian provenance, the *Tabula smaragdina* itself can be profitably understood as a work of “archetypal alchemy”, as the alchemical processes it describes can be interpreted both microcosmically (as a recipe for laboratory procedure, the dominant medieval reading) and macrocosmically (as a description of the creation of the universe at large). The *Tabula smaragdina* is also an important source of alchemical panentheism, as an ambiguity inherent in the text (and possibly reflecting a Stoic influence) does not allow the reader to determine whether the «one thing» to which it refers is a physical entity (i.e. the Philosophers' Stone) or the animating power of divinity itself (or both). Giovanni da Correggio's reading is evidently a theurgical one emphasising the magical operation of the divine and occult virtue, as he describes Christ-Hermes himself as the «father of every *talisman*».⁵

Newman rightly points to the *Tabula smaragdina* as a key text in the Renaissance reconceptualization of alchemy. However, contrary to Newman's

⁵ Ruska's Arabic version of the *Tabula smaragdina* gives *tilsam*, corresponding to Greek τέλεσμα. Latin translators had difficulties with this word, sometimes interpreting it to mean the secrets (of divination), and other times speaking of the «father of perfection»; that it was a reference to talismanic magic was clear to Albertus Magnus at least, as he interprets the «one thing» of the *Tabula smaragdina* as the occult virtue inhering in stones (Ruska 1926: 112-114; Steele and Singer 1928: 499).

assertion, what was new about the Renaissance reception of the *Tabula smaragdina* was not merely a «cosmological» reading of the text (Newman 1982: 129; Newman 2006: 502). After all, a cosmogonic interpretation was already explicit in the «sic mundus creatus est» appended to twelfth-century Latin recensions, in which the impersonal «mediatio unius» of an earlier text had already become the «meditatio unius» of a divine architect (Ruska 1926: 117, 185). It is not that «it simply did not occur to this [medieval] tradition that “Hermes” might be depicting a cosmic process rather than a recipe in *Decknamen* [cover names]» (Newman 1982: 129) – rather, there were theological difficulties inherent in the text’s panentheistic ambiguity, which from the standpoint of orthodoxy dangerously blurred the boundaries between God and Creation. The novelty of the Renaissance reading of the *Tabula smaragdina* lies in its embrace of this dangerous ambiguity amidst a decline in ecclesiastical authority and doctrinal cohesion — thus the text becomes integrated with a syncretizing humanist appropriation of ancient gnosis⁶ by men who were, first and foremost, theurgists rather than laboratory alchemists.

That is not to say there were no laboratory workers among this new wave of hermeneuts. According to Trithemius, Giovanni da Correggio «promised the transmutation of metals» (Lazzarelli 2005: 330-31), while Lazzarelli for his part certainly busied himself with laboratory alchemy, striving to obtain the «secret of the elixir» possessed by his direct teacher in these matters, Jean Rigaud de Branchis (Lazzarelli 2005: 97). Referring to the *Tabula smaragdina* as a concise statement of the secrets of alchemy, magic and theology alike, Lazzarelli calls Hermes the father of all three disciplines, which constitute three distinct classes of magic as set forth in the *Picatrix*: the *alchemist* is a natural magician who seeks the Philosophers’ Stone by unifying the heavenly quintessence with the purified virginal earth; the *magician* proper seeks to perform miracles by unifying the planetary spirits with earthly talismanic images; and the *theologian* is a divine magician concerned with the union of the spirit of God with the spirit of man (Lazzarelli 2005: 274-277; cf. Ritter and Plessner 1962: 7). The purpose of Lazzarelli’s schema was to elevate the magical arts rather than the alchemical, so at no point does he describe supercelestial magic as a form of alchemy, which would reduce its significance to the level of what is essentially the lowest of the three forms of magic he enumerates. Hence it would be misleading to speak of Lazzarelli’s theurgy as a “spiritual alchemy”.

⁶ With the term “gnosis” I am broadly referring to the movement(s) in late antiquity encompassing the so-called Gnostic sects proper, as well as the creators of the Corpus Hermeticum and certain early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria, all of whom pursued an uncapitalized “gnosis” — i.e. a salvific esoteric knowledge synonymous with a return to one’s divine origin.

Likewise, “spiritual alchemy” would also be a misnomer for the metaphorical employment of alchemical symbolism by Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) and Francesco Zorzi (1466-1540) to describe the theurgical union of the human spirit with the spirit of God. Thus in *De verbo mirifico* (1494) Reuchlin expresses a negative view of the art of alchemy: while he likens the Philosophers’ Stone to the divine *logos* that effects the union of man and God, this wonder-working Word far surpasses that Stone for which «the erring alchemists» strive (Reuchlin 1494: f. G vii *recto*). Reuchlin’s occasional use of alchemical symbolism is far less extensive than that of Zorzi, a devout Franciscan friar of Venice, whose *De harmonia mundi* (1525) is an important source for the tradition of alchemically conceived theurgy. It is also, after Reuchlin and Pico, one of the principal sources of the Christian Cabalistic tradition *in toto* (Secret 1964: 138). The structure of Zorzi’s work reflects the universal harmony it describes: thus its three books or “hymns” focus consecutively on God as Creator, Christ as mediator, and man as the subject of redemption, and these books are subdivided in their turn into eight “tones” in accordance with the diatonic scale. The whole forms a symphonic neo-Pythagorean meditation upon the cosmos, and Zorzi revels in the fact that each part of the whole reflects the whole in its structure — as Campanini argues, the work’s ordering principle is the fractal self-similarity of the *Zohar* and the Hermetic doctrine of microcosmic-macrocosmic correspondence itself (Campanini 1997: 13; cf. Farmer 1998: 93-94).

Although *De harmonia mundi* was eventually placed on the Index (Stecca 1989: 104), Zorzi managed to maintain significant power and influence within the Church hierarchy while navigating a course at the uneasy frontier between orthodoxy and heresy. Emphasising an idealised primitive apostolic community and its Pentecostal revelations rather than the authority of Scripture, Zorzi’s vision of reform was also Joachimite in character and anticipated the Platonic Spiritualists of the Radical Reformation (d’Ascia 1999: 694; Zambelli 2007: 33 n. 62). Promoting a familiar critique of Scholastic philosophy and the limits of human reason, Zorzi felt metaphor provided the best way to communicate the deepest mysteries of Christian inspiration — hence his recourse to alchemical symbolism. Attained through asceticism, ritual purification and deep meditation, the ecstatic ascent of the spirit of man and its union with God at the *binsi-ca* (the Abulafian “death of the kiss”) is described by Zorzi as a process of «transmutation» by which the body becomes spirit and the spirit becomes God. This is not merely an illumination of thought, but takes place through the «melting, unifying, transforming divine fire» («Sed cum transformatio ista fiat non tantum per mentis ipsius collustrationem, verum etiam per unientem amorem, qui ignis quidam divinus est, conflans, uniens, & transformans»); Zorzi

1525: 3:f. I iiiii *recto*). Following Pico's statement that God has imparted to man «the germs of all kinds of life» («Nascenti homini omnifaria semina et omnigenae vitae germina indidit Pater»); Pico 1504: f. lxxxv *recto*), Zorzi believed we may be transformed into demons, angels or even into God himself — hence his use of the terminology of transmutation, with its implication of a fundamental transformation of species (Zorzi 1525: 3:f. G vi *verso*). We might note that the influence of Pico is also present in Khunrath's later comparison of the deification of man with the “fermentation” of the Philosophers' Stone, which like man can also «transform itself into whatever it wishes», be it vegetable, animal or mineral (Forshaw 2003: 473).

For Zorzi, deification occurs through the creation of a harmony between the human spirit (*ruach*) and the higher immortal soul (*neshamah*) mediating between man and God.⁷ Such harmony is created by *synderesis*, when man follows the *scintilla conscientiae* or spark of conscience away from evil and towards the good (Zorzi 1525: 3. f. G vii *recto*; cf. Meister Eckhart's «vünkelin» of the soul, Predigt 76, par. 3). This harmony leads to a union of *ruach* with *neshamah*, from whence the mediating higher soul leads the human spirit to eventual blissful union with God. The mediating, escorting role of *neshamah* is likened to that spirit employed in the *ars transmutatoria* which has become «clothed» and has imbibed the essence of gold, after which it may lead the baser metals into a golden state (Zorzi 1525: 3. f. G vi *verso*).

However, the spirit of man may also be led downwards to union with its lower, animal soul (*nephesh*), and this process is described by Zorzi in both alchemical and Kabbalistic terms. Here Zorzi utilizes a form of the combinatorial technique of צרף (*ziruph*), a term meaning both to combine and to melt, refine or purify metals in the fire (Frey 1842: 267); this involves splitting the Hebrew alphabet in two and placing the second half reversed beneath the first, then exchanging certain letters to form complex laws of permutation (Ginsburg 1865: 163). By this means the word רוּחַ (*ruach*) becomes חוּר (*chur*), hole or aperture, and Zorzi continues his alchemical metaphor by describing the «distillation» of gold through the fine «holes» of a sieve. When the human spirit (*ruach*) is conjoined with the subtler *neshamah* it may pass through these apertures, but if instead it is conjoined with the lower soul (*nephesh*) it is too gross to pass through the holes and descends back down into the vessel (Zorzi 1525: 3. f. G vi *verso* - G vii *recto*).

⁷ According to Jospe, the tripartite soul of the Jewish Kabbalah (*nephesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*) corresponds closely to the Aristotelian tripartite soul (vegetative, sensitive, rational) and reflects Greek influence upon medieval Jewish philosophy; see in particular the *Sefer ha-Nephesh* of Shem-Tov ibn Falaquera (Jospe: 1988).

Unlike Lazzarelli, Zorzi was not a practising alchemist, and in *De harmonia mundi* he makes a distinction between the natural magic of «the more secret Philosophers» and the supercelestial magic of «the more secret Theologians», among whom are numbered the Platonists and Kabbalists (e.g. Zorzi 1525, 1:f. V i verso, 3:f. G vi verso). Nevertheless, his notion of theurgy is certainly conceptualised on the model of alchemy. The same cannot be said for Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), who elaborated on the statement of the Latin *Tabula smaragdina* that «all things have proceeded from one by the contemplation of one» («omnes res fuerunt ab uno, meditatione unius»; Trismegistus 1566: 32) by describing the created world as a descent from, and return to, the monad via the Pythagorean tetraktys, i.e. through the mathematical progression $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$. Absorbing traces of the nineteenth-century paradigm of “spiritual alchemy”, Brann writes of Trithemius’ vision of a «*reformatio magica*, entailing a passage of the soul, on the model of alchemy, through a series of purgative stages to a state of godlike sanctity and enlightenment» (Brann 1999: 116). For Brann the *Tabula smaragdina* lay at the heart of this «expressly alchemical basis» of Trithemius’ «magical theology» (126). Yet such assertions are not borne out by the sources. Where Trithemius does speak of alchemists he damns them as the «disciples of apes» (Trithemius 1567: 69) and slavish servants of a «chaste whore» (i.e. alchemy), who remains a perpetual virgin while her handmaidens are prostituted in her name to the avaricious and the foolish (Trithemius 1518: f. Q v verso).⁸ In his private correspondence dealing with the tetraktys Trithemius contrasts fraudulent alchemy not with an *alchymia vera* (contrary to Brann’s statement in 1999: 126-127) but with a «celestial philosophy» by which we may achieve «all those things promised by the astronomers, the mathematicians, the magi, the envious persecutors of nature [known as] alchemists or the still worse necromancers with their demons» (Trithemius 1567: 69-70). Thus when Trithemius does draw a parallel *per similitudinem* between the inner life of the celestial philosopher and the progression from and return to the monad (Trithemius 1518: f. A vi verso),⁹ it is on the model of neo-Pythagorean philosophy, and not on the model of alchemy.

⁸ Citing the same passage from the 1571 Cologne edition of the *Polygraphiae libri sex* (pp. 597-598), Brann (1999: 150) states that Trithemius prefaces his list of alchemical ciphers by distinguishing false alchemy from a true alchemy «dedicated to a spiritual transmutation of the alchemical lover»; yet there is no such distinction in this place.

⁹ Clulee (2001: 193-194) cites Brann’s (1999: 118) translation of this passage, in which the magus’ perfection of the natural sciences is said to come about through his elevation to «an uncompounded pure state of utter simplicity»; but Trithemius in fact writes only of an attainment of the knowledge (*noticia*) of this state (1567: 82-83).

When we turn to consider the attitude towards alchemy of Renaissance Germany's most famous theurgist and "magical Reformer", Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535), we find he borrows the condemnatory rhetoric of Trithemius, not only in the declamatory *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* (1531) but also in his private correspondence.¹⁰ In *De incertitudine* Agrippa condemns alchemy as a deceit (*fucus*) that transforms alchemists into *cacochimici*, paralysed by exposure to mercury and driven by poverty to counterfeiting (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1531: f. V viii *recto*). Nevertheless, he also gives a cryptic description of a sweet-smelling Philosophers' Stone that he says only the «sons of the art» and «initiates of the mysteries» will understand — for he himself has newly been initiated into the secrets of alchemy, and is sworn to secrecy (V viii *verso* - X i *recto*). In *De occulta philosophia* (1533) Agrippa again intimates he is a practising laboratory alchemist when he paraphrases the influential passage from Ficino's *De vita libri tres* (3:iii) equating the alchemical quintessence with the *spiritus mundi*. But here he confesses that, having extracted the quintessence from a given amount of gold, he was unable to produce any increase in the net amount of gold when applying it to another metal. Agrippa explains his failure by stating that the extracted quintessence did not possess the gold's *forma intensa* (i.e. the Aristotelian *forma intrinseca* and its generative power); nevertheless, he does not deny a net increase in gold may be achieved in some other manner (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1992: 113-114).

While this frank admission lent him something of a reputation as an abortive alchemist (Maier 1618: 13), Agrippa evidently believed one and the same divine virtue was responsible for the miraculous operations of both natural and celestial magic, which operate within the sublunary and celestial worlds respectively. What is more, for Agrippa a parallel exists between the magical function of the *spiritus mundi* and the divine transformative power operative in theurgy, the magical art dealing with the supercelestial realms. Agrippa brings alchemy into relation with this theurgy, and specifically with self-deification, on two occasions in *De occulta philosophia*. While discussing the divine mania, he likens the transmuting quintessence of alchemy to the light of God that effects a sublimation of the human soul during the amorous frenzy, by which means it is elevated beyond the intellectual sphere to become an equal of the angels and

¹⁰ Agrippa continued to work on his revised version of *De occulta philosophia* even as he recanted certain aspects of the work as a folly of his youth in *De incertitudine*, a fact that has given rise to a great deal of speculation concerning the relationship between the two works and the views of the mature Agrippa. Following Bowen, van der Poel (1997) convincingly accounts for the discrepancies by situating *De incertitudine* within the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition of the declamation; his conclusions are very much consonant with those of Perrone Compagni on the matter (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1992: 49-50).

receive the spirit of prophecy (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1992: 553). The second passage occurs in a chapter dedicated to the creation of man in God's image, and the influence of Pico is clear in the marginal note, which refers to «the perfection and dignity of man»:

Whosoever knows himself, will know all things within himself. Foremost he will know God, in whose image he is created; he will know the world, of which he bears the simulacrum; and he will know all creatures, to which he is united by a symbol [...] And Geber in the *Summa Alchimiae* teaches that it is not possible for anyone to reach perfection in that art unless he has recognized its principles within his own self. Instead, the better every man will know himself, the greater will be the force of attraction he is able to obtain and the more wonderful the operations he will succeed in performing. He will rise to such a level of perfection as to become a son of God and be transformed into the very image that is God, united with Him [...]

Quicumque igitur seipsum cognoverit, cognoscet in seipso omnia: cognoscet in primis Deum, ad cuius imaginem factus est; cognoscet mundum, cuius simulacrum gerit; cognoscet creaturas omnes, cum quibus symbolum habet [...] Et Geber in *Summa Alchymiae* docet neminem ad eius artis perfectionem pervenire posse, qui illius principia in seipso non cognoverit: quanto autem magis quisque seipsum cognoscet, tanto maiorem vim attrahendi consequitur tantoque maiora et mirabiliora operatur ad tantamque ascendet perfectionem, quod «efficitur filius Dei transformaturque in eandem imaginem quae est Deus» et cum ipso unitur [...] (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1992: 509; Perrone Compagni's translation, 2000: 176)

Here Agrippa integrates a citation from the thirteenth-century *Summa perfectionis* of pseudo-Geber (Geber 1991: 250, 633) with the Christian Cabalist paradigm of heavenly ascent. While the alchemist and the supercelestial theurgist may operate on different realms, they work with the same universal principle of sympathy and antipathy, which is to be found through an introverted religiosity rather than the fallible reasoning and book learning of Scholastic philosophy. Through this principle matter and spirit are brought into indissoluble unity, be it within the alchemical vessel as the Philosophers' Stone, or through the heavenly ascent as the transfigured spiritual body, which Agrippa associates with the Platonic vehicle of the soul and the Pauline body of the resurrection (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1992: 514-515, 540).

Following Lazzarelli, Agrippa presents alchemy as a subset of magic rather than vice versa; nevertheless, his association of the heavenly ascent with alchemical symbolism is not merely an imaginative comparison or clever trope. Rather, it is based upon the fundamental identity in both principle and substance of cosmogonic, theurgical and laboratory alchemical processes.

Drawing on the Christian Cabalistic re-interpretation of alchemy as well as

the neo-Pythagoreanism of Trithemius, John Dee's *Monas hieroglyphica* (1564) expresses a similar relationship between alchemical process and a heavenly ascent granting knowledge of the Christian mysteries. This is a relationship of homology rather than analogy, i.e. a correspondence that reflects common origins in a divine archetypal order. While Agrippa subsumed alchemy under the rubric of magic, Dee's express purpose in the *Monas hieroglyphica* was to create a new discipline uniting *astronomia superior* (astrology) and *astronomia inferior* (alchemy); we may add that this pansophia also included supercelestial, divine magic within its ambit, a fact that underlies the difficulties of categorization faced by modern interpreters of the work (Clucas 2006: 15).

On this point, we need to focus on the specifically alchemical features of a diagram from Dee's *Monas hieroglyphica* (figure 4), which draws more than a mere parallel between laboratory alchemical work and the transfiguration of the supercelestial magician.

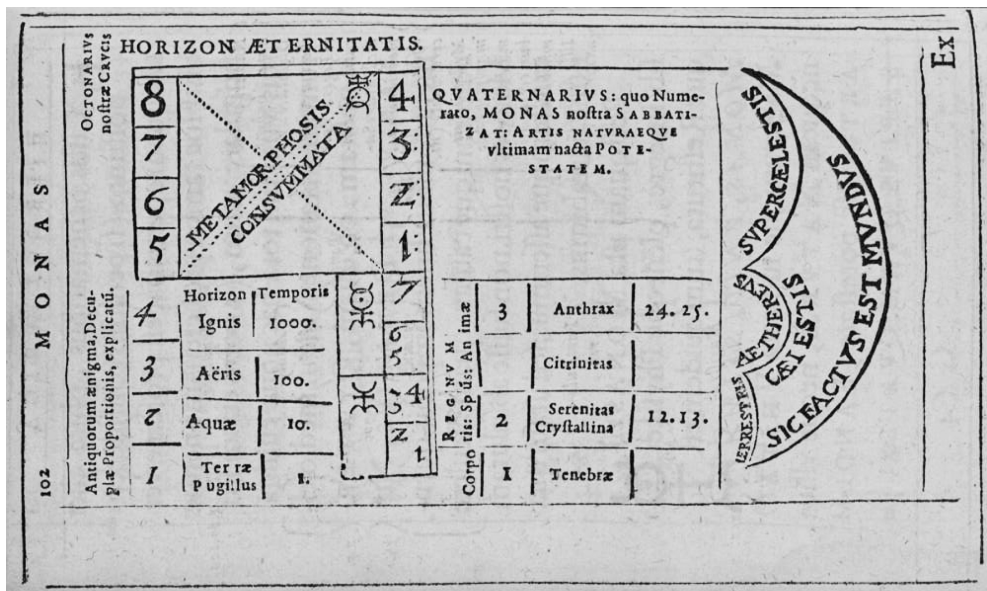


Fig. 4 — Alchemical-theurgical transfiguration, from John Dee's *Monas hieroglyphica* (1591 Frankfurt edition, p. 102). Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Res. Astr. P. 39f.

[http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0002/bsb00021038/image_104]

To the right, in ascending order, are the colour phases corresponding to the seven alchemical processes numbered to the left. The black phase (*tenebrae*) corresponds to the “preparation” and “putrefaction” of the matter within the

vessel, i.e. numbers 1 and 2 in the septenary to the left; the white phase (*serenitas crystallina*) involves a «separation» (3) of the volatile spirit from the body and their reintegration in a «conjunction» (4); the yellow phase (*citrinitas*) represents a further «coagulation» (5) of the spirit and a further «contrition» (6) or purification; while the final red phase (*anthrax*, from Latin *anthracites* or bloodstone) is associated by Dee with the process of «imbibition» (7), which on at least one level refers to the multiplication of the perfected Philosophers' Stone within the vessel (Josten 1964: 212-13). The alchemical process is also associated with the four elements, depicted in ascending order of subtlety; with the power of the Stone to transmute metals, expressed in powers of 10; and with the relative purity of gold, expressed in the enigmatic ratios 12:13 and 24:25.

The words to the far right of the diagram — «thus the world was made» («sic factus est mundus») — reflect the last lines of the *Tabula smaragdina* («sic mundus creatus est»), clearly showing the lineage of Dee's work via Trithemius. The cosmogony is a descent through the supercelestial to the celestial and elemental worlds, a cosmic work of alchemy culminating in the perfection of divinity in spiritualised nature (i.e. a «monadic quaternary» or squaring of the circle via the tetraktys). This reversal of the cosmogony is simultaneously its consummation — a consummation achieved, at the level of the microcosm, by the magus as he undergoes his metamorphosis or transfiguration into a being that exists beyond Pico's «horizon of time» separating the realm of fate from that of the divine. According to Dee this metamorphosis takes place as soon as the work is perfected with a «fourth, great, and truly metaphysical revolution», after which the adept «himself goes away into a metamorphosis and will afterwards very rarely be held by mortal eye» (Josten 1964: 135, 137). This Enochian “revolution” alluded to by Dee could be interpreted as a reference to the talismanic magical effect of a theurgic meditation upon the cosmic processes embodied in Dee's hieroglyphic figure, for it takes place upon completion of the monad, which is a *Gamaaea* or talisman (Josten 1964: 135; cf. Paracelsus 1929: 78). But as we have noted, it may also allude to the transfiguring effect of the Philosophers' Stone itself when “imbibed” by the adept, an ambiguity typical of the alchemical-theurgical literature: hence Thomas Vaughan later spoke of Dee's «invisibility of the Magi» being attained through the «perfect medicine» (Vaughan 1650: 45).

Conclusion

Clearly this historical overview of the application of alchemical symbolism

to processes of inner “spiritual” transformation has by no means been exhaustive. Versluis (2008: 83-93) has touched upon the “sexual alchemy” of the English Behmenist John Pordage (1607-1681) and the related Buttlar circle, while in my own work (Tilton 2003) I have detailed a Protestant allegorical employment of alchemical symbolism that is quite distinct from the “alchemical theurgy” discussed in the current paper. Its best-known expression is the *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz* (1616) of the Lutheran theologian Johann Valentin Andreae (1586-1654), and we also find the use of alchemical allegory to express an orthodox Lutheran soteriology in the work of the laboratory alchemist Michael Maier (1569-1622). This style of allegory flourished in the early Rosicrucian milieu and evinces an early Baroque love of ornament and the elegant expression of humanist learning; what is more, it had been sanctioned by the words of Luther himself (Luther 1568: 361 *recto*). Good Lutherans such as Andreae and Maier engaged in natural magic rather than the highly suspect supercelestial theurgy of the Christian Cabalists; nevertheless, Paracelsianism maintained an uneasy existence at the boundaries of all confessional orthodoxies, and through its influence the relation of alchemical sign to referent could easily tend from allegory to homology or, indeed, identity (i.e. an *alchymia archetypica*) (Maillard 2006: 280-81). Thus in the work of Maier we find the processes of laboratory alchemy interpreted as an expression of archetypal laws, the manifestation in the visible world of *insignia impressa* (i.e. Paracelsian signatures) imprinted by God throughout the Book of Nature — and indeed, imprinted in the worldly trials and salvation of the regenerate Christian. Nevertheless, in retrospect I would hesitate to use the term “spiritual alchemy” to describe Maier’s use of alchemical allegory, given the more nuanced terminology I have developed here.¹¹

The parameters of the present discussion of the alchemy of inner transformation have also been geographically limited, as it has been my chief concern to outline the impact of a Renaissance esoteric tradition upon the Western European use of alchemical symbolism. Nevertheless, the employment of alchemical symbolism to denote inner spiritual processes is a commonplace in

¹¹ However, I feel the waters are only muddied further by the recent critique of my position by Hanegraaff (2012: 290-91): regardless of his stated disdain for «bombastic» allegorization, Jung was very clearly an exponent of “spiritual alchemy” as his main source Silberer had developed it from the Freemasonic and Protestant allegorical traditions I have mentioned here. Indeed, Jung’s denigration of the «fantastic and baroque» late material appears in one place to be an attempt to disguise the degree of his indebtedness to Silberer (Jung 1989: 204). Once again, the nebulousness of the phrase “spiritual alchemy” appears to be to blame for the confusion.

Indo-Tibetan tradition, where this usage demonstrates remarkably clear parallels with its Western counterpart:

For like the supreme substance of the alchemists,
It takes our impure flesh and makes of it
The body of a Buddha, jewel beyond all price.
Such is the *bodhichitta*. Let us grasp it firmly! (Shantideva 2006: 53)

In a Partington Prize-winning essay Newman (1982: 126-27) once mocked Rexroth's portrayal of Vaughan's alchemy as a veiled expression of tantric yoga; and indeed, we will find much worthy of ridicule, not only in the work of Rexroth but in any number of modern esoteric interpretations of alchemy, if we consider them from the perspective of a partisan history of science rather than as a legitimate object of study in their own right. Yet there is in fact a distant historical relationship between Renaissance theurgy and Indo-Tibetan tantric tradition, and this common ancestry is evident in the ancient Gnostic literature, where we find the reversal of the cosmogony that constitutes gnosis associated with the microcosmic course of a «life-giving substance» along the spine from the genitalia to the brain (Irenaeus 1913: 337-38, 343; also Hippolytus 1886: 64, where it is specifically conceptualised as a «serpent»). Alarmingly aware of their manifest similarity to the Jewish Kabbalah that was a mainstay of his theurgy, Agrippa once sought to portray these Gnostic “secret oral teachings of Christ” as the derivative of certain central Kabbalistic practices rather than the (little-remarked) source they truly were (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1531: H viii *verso* - I i *recto*).

The common elements of the two systems extend from the *anthropos* motif to theoeroticism, isopsephy (numero-alphabetical manipulation related to the names of God) and the redemptive role of the divine efflux itself; the latter is described as a red and white «heavenly revivifying dew» in the *Zohar* (Giller 2001: 130-31), where there is no mistaking the concept's relation to the red and white *bodhichitta* or *amrita*, nectar of immortality, of Indo-Tibetan tantra (Beér 2004: 264), or indeed to the red and white elixirs of Western alchemy. Rexroth's mistake of equating concepts and practices that are in fact only distantly related homologues is characteristic of the benign schizotypy pervading the Western esoteric traditions; nevertheless, the question of the origin of these motifs is complicated still further by the role in their genesis of poorly understood psychophysiological processes that appear to be the common inheritance of humankind. This, however, is a topic that must await a different paper.

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