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ALCHEMISTS OR ECOLOGISTS?
SOME REMARKS ON THE PHILOSOPHY
OF ALCHEMICAL TRANSMUTATION**

1. INTRODUCTION

IN this essay I intend to speak of alchemy from a broad historical point of view, without seeking to evaluate it critically as a philosophical and cultural phenomenon. Even if references will often be made in the article to the cultural or philosophical relevance of alchemy, they are not intended as a critical evaluation of alchemy but only as a better contextualization, in terms of history of ideas or long-term perspectives, of the alchemical world. This essay discusses, from a broad historical perspective, the ambiguous, yet quite meaningful, interplay between the exoteric purpose of the alchemist's "medical" approach (as the "philosopher's stone" was often regarded as a panacea), on the one hand, and the deeper, "esoteric" dimension of alchemy, that is, the alchemist's ultimate search for moral betterment, intellectual perfection, spiritual salvation, on the other hand. Then, it places alchemy within a broader context of perennial currents of thinking, and discusses its relevance beyond its strict historical settings. Hence the very composition of the essay: The first part is dedicated to considering the *lapis philosophorum* as symbolizing a powerful source of healing in terms of bodily illnesses, as a form of "restoration" brought about by the alchemist into the material world. In the second part the *lapis* is regarded as a metaphor for spiritual salvation, and as a source of "healing" in religious-soteriological terms (targeting human's sinfulness, moral corruption, etc.) Finally, in the third part, I will be trying, as a consequence of what will have been said in the first two parts, to look at alchemy as a form of

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** I wish to cordially thank the editors, as well as the anonymous referees, of «Acta Philosophica» for their comments and for helping me produce the final version of this article. An earlier version was presented at *The 37th International Congress on Medieval Studies*, hosted by Western Michigan University's Medieval Institute of the (2-5 May, 2002), in Kalamazoo, USA. That paper was awarded one of the prestigious "Congress Travel Awards". I wish to thank the anonymous referees of the Congress Awards Committee for awarding me the prize; special thanks go to Timothy Graham, then Assistant Director of the Medieval Institute, for guiding me through the application process. Several people have read earlier versions of this article: I am particularly indebted to Matthew Eddy and David Cooper, both from the University of Durham, for their important comments and observations.

latent ecology, and to advance a set of remarks about the larger significance of alchemy as an ongoing utopian project, as a body of knowledge transcending the various specialized discourses of natural sciences, psychology or theology.

Let me also add that, given the tremendous complexity of the subject, as well as the various, often divergent, interpretations on it, I have focused in my research only on a limited number of aspects of alchemy (*lapis* considered as a panacea and as a metaphor for salvation), and only on a limited number of alchemical authors and texts.

2. *LAPIS PHILOSOPHORUM* AS PANACEA

In the medieval alchemical traditions one of the most important functions of the “philosophers’ stone” was to stand for a universal medicine, for some miraculous substance (the so-called *Elixir Vitae*) capable of healing all imaginable bodily illnesses, as well as conferring upon the “patient” a constant perfect health and a prosperous, long – or rather “prolonged” – life. As E.J. Holmyard has put it, the «Stone was also sometimes known as the Elixir or Tincture, and was credited not only with the power of transmuting but with that of prolonging human life indefinitely» (Holmyard 1990: 15). As such, the area of applicability of the *lapis* was not limited to the mineral world, only to transmuting metals and non-organic substances, but it supposedly worked with good results within the organic realm as well. Paracelsus, for example, starts out one of his alchemical tracts in this vein:

«Having first invoked the name of the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour, we will enterprize this Work; wherein we shall not only teach to change any inferiour Metal into better, as Iron into Copper, this into Silver, and that into Gold, & c., but also to help all infirmities, whose cure to the opinionated and presumptuous Physicians, doth seem impossible: But that which is greater, to preserve, and keep mortal men to a long, sound, and Perfect Age (Paracelsus 1975 B)».

Within the Latin alchemical literature one can quite often encounter this equivalence between the Stone as a transmuting substance and as a medicine: *Lapis philosophorum seu Medicina universalis*. At the same time, it should be pointed out that such equivalence is not some accidental feature, but it is central to every system of alchemical thought/practice; anyway, it is probably one of the factors that made possible the survival and development of alchemy, as well as the success it has widely enjoyed, over the centuries.¹ There are sophisticated symbols and hardly intelligible terminology involved in alchemy; it is quite frequent that, when coming across an alchemical text, one

¹ «One alchemist complained that, falling under this suspicion [that he had discovered the secret of the *Elixir Vitae*] because he had happened to effect some rather spectacular cures during an epidemic, he had to disguise himself, shave off his beard, and put on a wig before he was able to escape, under a false name, from a mob howling for his elixir» (Holmyard 1990: 16).

has to fight some Hermetic and highly ambiguous manners of saying things, but, for all the obstacles of understanding and impossibility of obtaining a unique homogeneous interpretation, this single fact is relatively unambiguous and clearly supported by bibliographical evidence:² the special role played in the alchemical literature by the *lapis* considered as a medicine, as *Elixir Vitae*, whatever the names under which this is known: Red Tincture, *pharmakon athanasias*, *pharmakon zoes*, *aurum potabile* and the like. For example, in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652), in one of the poems a mention is made of:

«...the Golden Oyle called *Aurum potabile*,
A medicine most marvelous to preserve Mans health,
And of Transmutation the greatest can bee...
(Ashmole 1968: 422)».

Why this equivalence? How is it possible for the alchemists to arrive at this equation between the agent of transmutation and the panacea? The explanation lies in the fact that, in realising their *magisterium*, the alchemists are, in the first instance, somehow self-oriented: all the outward things they seem to work upon, and which seem to suffer so radical a transformation (*transmutatio*) through their approach, play as a matter of fact only the role of a *visible*, “solidified” metaphor for the inner transformation occurring within the alchemists themselves. A successful *transmutatio* presupposes the accomplishment of some state of perfect ontological transparency between the inner spiritual world of the alchemist (*artifex*) and the natural world around, as – according to the alchemical teachings – the *lapis* seems to be an empirical object belonging to the physical world and, at the same time, an ultimate abstract principle on which life itself is based: «*Verum est quod ista res [lapis philosophorum] sit ea que magis in te fixa a deo creatur, et ubicumque fueris, semper tecum inseparata manet, et omnis a deo creatus, a quo hec res separatur, morietur*» (Morienus 1974: 26) Granted, there is a certain amount of ambiguity implied here, but this is an ambiguity making possible the constant and fruitful interplay between the “inside” and the “outside” of the alchemical work. The outside appears as richness, good health, prolonged life, and so on, all of which are accompanied, at the inside level, by moral transformation, spiritual purity and even sainthood. Dealing with this dialectical relationship between the inward transmutation and the outer one Crisciani and Gagnon speak of:

«les indications assez fréquentes, même si parfois seulement allusives, sur la connexion nécessaire entre transmutation extérieure et intérieure, cette dernière consistant dans l’augmentation de puissance des valeurs spirituelles dans l’âme de l’artisan (*artifex*), comme aussi la fréquente interchangeabilité des buts sotériologiques prévus par certains courants alchimiques (correspondant à des sommets de perfection en différentes séries hiérarchiques: or, santé, longue vie, renouvellement spirituel). (Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 50)».

² One of Paracelsus’ most important alchemical works is even entitled *De vita longa*.

And it is particularly this fact that, in a sense, makes certain versions of alchemy resemble more a “spiritual technique,” more than simply a practical, profit-oriented craft. On the other hand, and on the long term, this explains sufficiently why alchemy enjoyed so long an interest on the side of several psychoanalysts in the 20th century. Carl Gustav Jung, with his writings on alchemy – especially his *Psychology and Alchemy* (Jung 1953) – is only the most widely known of them.

According to such a line of thought, the external, visible effects of the *magisterium* (serenity, spectacular longevity and perfect health, etc.) are only the “social signs” of a successful inner transformation; they are the inevitable (and pleasant) consequences of a deep and complex, sometimes painstaking, “inward transmutation” successfully performed. As a direct consequence of this fact, as it has been noticed, the «European alchemical literature overflows with delightful legends of adepts who attained magical longevity by virtue of their chemical accomplishments. The successful practitioner was typically revered as an ancient man whose physical well being, in addition to his wealth, marked outwardly the nobility of spirit derived from inward transmutation» (Lee Stavenhagen in Morienus 1974: 66). This is why the myth of longevity is, in most cases, related in some way or other to the arcane world of alchemy, if not openly derived from it.

Although the search for (not to say obsession with) a panacea is manifest in practically all alchemical traditions, it is within the Islamic alchemy that the *Elixir Vitae*, in the shape of a “real”, concrete pharmaceutical product, played a quite outstanding role. Here alchemy was professed most often by professional physicians, and some special relationships between alchemy and medicine was established. Such brilliant personalities as Jabir Ibn Haiyan (721-815), al-Razi (866-925) or Avicenna (980-1036) were known as physicians and alchemists at the same time. Indeed, it happened sometimes that the medical art itself was taken first of all for some form of alchemy as the alchemical “products” were constantly been used with good results in curing various illnesses. Razi, for example, explicitly admits that, in case that the «transmutation process» fails, «if the elixir is unsuitable to transform lead into gold or glass into rubies, it may quite possibly serve as a medicine» (Federman 1969: 71). In such a case, the medical function of the “philosophers’ stone” is exclusive and fundamental. Also, following Razi’ ideas, Avicenna saw in the philosopher’s stone a medicine:

«a medication of universal efficacy, the cure-all, the panacea. It was he who [...] started off the medieval adepts, who saw in the elixir the way to eternal health and everlasting youth. Though the line that leads from Avicenna to Paracelsus passes through the brains of ever so many monks, physicians, madmen and quacks, the idea is the same. It is the idea of the grand arcanum that cures all ills. (*Ibidem*: 73)».

In general, as several historians have noticed,³ Islamic alchemy had a marked

³ See, for example, Lee Stavenhagen’s commentary on Morienus’ *Testament of Alchemy*:

“empirical” character, with a special emphasis on its (re)sources in the natural world, as well as on its would-be applicability to the sphere of everyday life (in medicine, technology, etc.). Islamic alchemy was above all a practical enterprise, usually leaving little room, if any, for abstract speculations or esoteric developments.

3. THE PRODUCTION OF *LAPIS PHILOSOPHORUM* AS A SPIRITUAL SCENARIO

Christian alchemy, instead, came to acquire a strong esoteric and speculative dimension. Of course, the Islamic “medical” component was to great extent transmitted to the Christian world along with the alchemy itself (sometimes in the 12th/13th Centuries). But, in addition to all the practical and technical considerations, the Christian alchemists supplied their *magisterium* with a high degree of metaphysical and theological sophistication, as well as with a complex system of ethical and mystical speculations. Under the new Christian circumstances, alchemy turned out to be not only a simply “spiritual” technique, but also a sophisticated “soteriological art”, with its main component (*opus magnum*) playing the role of a metaphor for the Christian’s efforts to acquire the “eternal salvation”: «In Christian Europe, the Great Work, already reflecting a spiritual significance, often took on a profoundly soteriological character. Here, the stages of the Work, from the initial chaos of matter stripped of its basic qualities to the triumphant success of the last stage were regarded as a metaphorical process mirroring the struggle of the human soul toward salvation» (Kren 1990: viii).

Let us have a closer look at some of the successive phases of this process. First of all, there were the ethical, religious and “existential” requirements the alchemists had to meet before properly starting their approach. In other words, performing the alchemical art presupposed a careful and detailed *praeparatio* on the side of the alchemist, not only in terms of getting a specific knowledge and technical instruction, but also in terms of personal morality, self-discipline, and even liturgical *katharsis*: «The adept has to be morally worthy; his magisterium only witnesses the degree of refinement in virtue he has personally attained. Nobility of birth, ascetic faith, piety, and humility were still the fundamental requisites, failing which the magic elixir would certainly elude the seeker after knowledge» (Lee Stavenhagen in Morienus 1974: 66-67). Why so? Because, to put it briefly, at the very heart of their approach, the alchemists would come across the “fingerprints” of the Creator himself: to transmute elements, to produce miraculous, live-prolonging substances meant deciphering the ultimate codes on which the material universe was

«While Greek writers on this topic were inclined to employ allegory as their main technique, the great Islamic theorists generally moved in a more experimental direction, ingeniously combining astrology and number magic with patterns observed in metallurgical reactions» (LEE STAVENHAGEN in MORIENUS 1974: 64-65).

based. As such, the alchemists had to be prepared (purified, initiated) for this special enterprise as it will be at this point that, thanks to the distinctiveness and superiority of his art, the alchemists will meet God – of course not *facie ad faciem*, but through the numerous *vestigia* He has left in every single item of this world. And such a meeting obviously requires a special ethical preparation and a serious spiritual/theological training on the alchemist's side. As Paracelsus clearly says:

«This ART was by our Lord God the Supreme Creator, ingraven as it were in a book in the body of Metals, from the beginning of the Creation, that we might diligently learn from them. [...] Therefore, when any man desireth thoroughly and perfectly to learn this Art from its true foundation, it will be necessary that he learn the same from the Master thereof, to wit, from God, who hath created all things, and onely knoweth what Nature and Propriety he himself hath placed in every Creature. (Paracelsus 1975 B-B1)».

One of the most important guiding principles in Christian alchemy was that expressed by the formula *tam ethice quam physice*: the alchemist's involvement in his *operatio* was explicitly regarded not only as an empirical approach towards the physical world, but also as a way of accomplishing spiritual (ethical) values pursued *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. The medieval Christian alchemist has to be considered some sort of priest or ascetic, rather than simply a secular scholar.⁴ For Paracelsus, being able to perform the “royal art” was, in fact, not so much matter of scholastic instruction, but some consequence of a long series of *exercitia spiritualia* under the guidance of God himself:

«We will therefore take him [God] to be our Master, Operator, and Leader into this most true Art. We will therefore imitate him alone, and through him learn and attain to the knowledge of that Nature, which he himself with his own finger hath engraven and inscribed in the bodies of these Metals. (Paracelsus 1975 B1)».

Eventually, as a result of such this complex preparatory process, the alchemists are in a position to hope that they will be considered chosen (*electi*), that they will receive the *donum Dei* – that is, the special divine gift enabling them to perform the *opus magnum*. There is a sense in which the alchemists must be deeply modest persons, with an acute awareness of the partial, provisional – somehow uncertain – role that they have to play within the complex alchemical process. In other words, the alchemists have to be seriously aware that many of the things occurring during the *operatio* are out of their control,

⁴ This is, of course, a rather simplified view of the medieval alchemist for the sake of the argument. Actually, he played several social roles, and, as historians show, had a polymorphous, though picturesque appearance: «Au XIV^e siècle, de tout façon, l'alchimiste présente des aspects divers: il y a le médecin de cour, le franciscain dissident, les opérateurs présents à la cour anglaise, le savant spécialisé qui se croit digne, puisque sa recherche rentre entre les sciences (*scientiae*), de s'insérer dans l'institution universitaire» (Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 73).

and that ultimately the “secrets of alchemy are never merely to be found out by human labour, but by ‘bi teaching or revelacion’ and the Stone is to be obtained by grace, rather than reading”. The revelation was the key factor here: «alchemy depended ultimately on divine revelation. There is a notion of alchemical ‘election,’ just as there is a religious one...» (Roberts 1994: 79). Such a fact is clearly and repeatedly attested by the alchemical texts themselves. In some of these texts one can encounter the very term *donum Dei*, used in connection with the successfulness of the alchemical approach:

*«Quia istam rem, quam tu diu quesivisti, non poterit aliquis perpetrare nec perfectare, nec potuerit ad istam applicare ab aliquo sapiente nisi per dilectionem et humilitatem molliciem et amorem perfectum atque verum. Et est ista res quam deus adducit suis fidelibus quibus illam adducere disposuit cum fortitudine maiori usquedum sibi parat hominem a quo eam sciat et eam sibi detegat a suis secretis. Nec ista res aliquid est nisi donum dei, qui eam cui vult ex suis servis demonstrat, qui sibi sunt humiles et in omnibus subditi. (Morienus 1974: 10)».*⁵

The next stage of this process consisted of considering the entire alchemical process from a purely symbolical point of view. And the most appropriate religious framework within which such a symbolism could take some concrete forms was that offered by the Christian theology. Indeed, it was the Christian doctrine, with all its complex and already matured soteriology, Christology, Sacramenta, and ethics, that became at that moment something like a perfect home to the newly adopted alchemy. C.G. Jung shows in details how, for example, the holy sacramentum, as it is described by St Ambrose, is being made highly compatible with the alchemical “inner transmutation”: «St. Ambrose called the transformed [transsubstantiated] bread *medicina*. It is the *pharmakon athanasias*, the drug of immortality, which, in the act of communion, reveals its characteristic effect in and on the believer – the effect of uniting the body with the soul. This takes the form of a healing of the soul (*et sanabitur anima mea*) and a *reformatio* of the body (*et mirabilis reformasti*)». (Jung 1953: 297-298). In a way, from its very outset, alchemy contained a set of features that could be easily interpreted in a Christian manner: «Images of death and resurrection, which for later alchemists prefigured the dissolution of the prime matter and its reconstitution into the glorious Stone, were central to Christian doctrine [...] In the eighth century Stephanos of Alexandria used the transformation of metals as an analogy for the transformation of the soul. Later alchemists too thought of metals being redeemed from their ‘sins’». (Roberts 1994: 78) Once projected (explicitly and systematically) onto the Christian theological background, all the sophisticated symbols, figures,

⁵ «No one will be able to perform or accomplish this thing [the Great Work] which you have so long sought or attain it by means of any knowledge unless it be through affection and gentle humility, a perfect and true love. For this is something which God gives into the sure keeping of his elected servants until such time as he may prepare one to whom it may be handed on from among his secrets. Thus it is only the gift of God, who chooses among his humble and obedient servants those to whom he reveals it» (Morienus 1974: 11).

scenarios and devices of the traditional alchemy could live, so to speak, una vita nuova and enjoy a degree of sophistication, dissemination and eventually popularity never known before.

Eventually, as a result of this complex process, throughout the Christian literature on this subject the alchemical process comes to be considered symbolically: «The base matter... was man, corrupted by sin; the elixir was the cleansing power of the holy spirit; and so on. Consequently, the ultimate attainable by the Great Work was an *imitatio*, an approach to perfection as symbolized by alchemical gold» (Lee Stavenhagen in Morienus 1974: 66). As a result, the *Elixir Vitae* (*lapis philosophorum*) comes to be considered not only a panacea (*medicina universalis*), as it used to be in the Hellenistic or Islamic alchemy, but also a strong metaphor for Salvation itself, and constantly seen as a *speculum* of any human perfection. This is why, eventually, within the mainstream of the Christian alchemical tradition, the *Elixir Vitae* was regarded primarily not only as a means of curing people's bodily illnesses, but of saving their souls. As it were, producing the *Elixir* was a way of searching for an "eternal," sanctified life, rather than simply of obtaining a worldly medicine. In such a case, alchemy was not about "making gold" (*crysopoiesis*) any more, but about making people feel "saved", or – in any event – spiritually elevated; just as alchemy was not only a source of medicine for bodily illnesses (like in its Islamic version), but – moreover – a superior "spiritual technique," a way of "healing" human souls.

It was the above mentioned notion of "inward transmutation" that played a central role within this form of alchemy, giving birth to what is usually called "mystical alchemy". This is an interesting notion, as it describes in detail the entire alchemical apparatus and of all the successive operations required by the performance of the alchemical *magisterium*, but not necessarily implying their actual occurrence. The *operatio* was now seen as a purely inner process occurring within the alchemist's spirit, without supposing the real existence of the alchemical substances, laboratory, devices, etc.⁶ To put it simply, "mystical alchemy"

«gradually developed into a devotional system where the mundane transmutation of metals became merely symbolic of the transformation of sinful man into a perfect being through prayer and submission to the will of God. [...] in some of the mystical treatises it is clear that the authors are not concerned with material substances but are employing the language of exoteric alchemy for the sole purpose of expressing theological, philosophical, or mystical beliefs and aspirations. (Holmyard 1990: 15-16)».

As a result, based on the profound knowledge and assimilation of the Christian theology, there have been established a set of fundamental symbolic

⁶ «In this aspect of the alchemical enterprise (sometimes referred to as 'esoteric' alchemy), the would-be adept considered his materials and apparatus as elements in a spiritual metaphor, an inner process brought to a successful fruition only by those with no crass motive such as personal gain» (Kren 1990: vii).

equivalencies: “philosophers’ stone” = Jesus Christ, “prime matter” = sinful and corrupted man to be saved through the *magisterium*, “alchemical gold” = state of salvation, and so on and so forth.

The most important and spectacular of all these symbolical equivalencies was from far the *lapis*-Christ parallel. Once this paralleling took place, the “marriage” between alchemy and Christianity was completed: the main figure in Christianity, Jesus Christ himself, came to be associated with the most important element of any alchemical system: *lapis philosophorum*. Moreover, this parallel was not a circumstantial one or merely some rhetorical device: it was essentially based on fundamental similitudes and common patterns of thinking. For example, the very sacrifice of Jesus Christ, along with His resurrection (the central points of the Christian doctrine), were to be rigorously mirrored within the alchemical process: «the death of our Lord Jesus Christ and His resurrection in a glorified body was to the alchemist to be compared to the death of the metals and their rebirth as the glorious stone» (Taylor 1951: 152-153). In the English alchemical poetry, to take only a random example, one could find such convincing evidence of the Christ-*lapis* parallel as this one offered by the poem of John Donne (1527-1608): «For these three daies become a minerall; / Hee was all gold when he lay downe, but rose / All tincture...» (Donne 1952: 28).

The parallel Christ-*lapis* plays a quite prominent role in C. G. Jung’s fascinating book *Psychology and Alchemy* (Jung 1953). Jung was one of the main modern promoters (or re-discoverers) of this interpretation. As for the nowadays alchemical commentaries, the parallel enjoys a broad acceptance among important experts on medieval Christian alchemy. Claudia Kren’s and Lee Stavenhagen’s considerations on the subject were quoted above. Chiara Crisciani and Claude Gagnon (Crisciani & Gagnon 1980), to take some other examples, offer a highly synthetic and finely systematized image of the *lapis philosophorum* in view of its mystical association with Jesus Christ. Their view is that the Stone:

«est presque la déification du projet de salut, au point que dans de nombreux textes de l’alchimie latine il est présenté comme l’analogie du Christ. Le *lapis* est aussi le lieu où s’apaisent les hiérarchies (il est unique, indépendant, sans généalogie); il ne rentre pas dans les hiérarchies et les efface. La fonction du *lapis* apparaît claire si l’on observe le langage qu’il produit: il est sans nom et par conséquent il peut prendre tous les noms possibles: il supporte toute prédication parce qu’aucune ne la referme dans une définition univoque; il est le seul possible prédicat de soi-même dans une tautologie représentative de son être universel et particulier à la fois, étant parole de Dieu incarnée. (Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 50)».

4. ALCHEMY AS ECOLOGY

Based on the arguments, bibliographical and historical evidence brought forth above, I believe that some broader, more far-reaching considerations on al-

chemistry could also be made. Alchemy betrays a certain “therapeutic” view of the world: not only of the natural world, but also of the human world, and, within it, not only in bodily terms, but also in terms of intellectual renewal, moral betterment, and ultimately in soteriological terms (alchemy seen as a quest for “salvation”).

First of all, in a certain sense, the alchemists could be said to have been the first “ecologists” as they heartily cared about the state of the material world around, and tried as it were to “heal” it. In their approaches to the natural world, the alchemists were led by an ideal of perfection, by a certain standard of “sanity” and well-being by which they considered the materials on which they acted: «In alchemy imperfect metals, often considered as ill, were helped to perfection and an ideal internal balance by the medicine of the elixir. Alchemy teaches ‘the restoral (*restituere*) of all fallen and inform bodies and how to bring them back to a true balance (*temperamentum*) and the best of health’» (Roberts 1994: 37). Considering some components of nature “ill,” making them work in their own benefit, and searching for medicines to cure them, is indeed a very ecological attitude. And it is precisely this vivid sense of *tenderness* and *attentiveness* towards the surrounding world that, from our retrospective point of view, makes alchemy so curiously interesting today. In their enterprises the alchemists were consistently driven by a set of considerations that could be rightly seen as “environmental” in a serious way. They held a generous view of the natural world, and conceived it as driven by a perpetual quest for equilibrium, perfection and “salvation”. Everything is nature tended for them towards a superior state, a state of purity and optimum equilibrium. And gold symbolized this perfection most appropriately. As one anonymous English alchemical writer said: «I must tel you, that nature alwaies intendeth and striveth to the perfection of Gold» (*Qtd. in* Read 1947: 6).

On the other hand, it is true that the alchemists’ relationships to their immediate physical environment (*natura*) were marked by a certain form of *anthropomorphosis*. As it is proved by numerous pieces of evidence, the alchemists did not consider nature in terms of a radical ontological *alteritas*, as something completely different from the human world, but they saw nature as being constituted, structured, and made operational somehow in human terms. For example, when talking about the relationships between chemical elements to be combined they used terms that ordinarily describe human relationships. And this was definitely a way of humanizing nature: «To give to the combination of the two substances to make a third the name or symbol of ‘a marriage and birth’ was to fit the phenomenon into his world and so to make sense of it. He would then act on the principle that the phenomenon *was* a marriage and birth» (Taylor 1951: 158). But this anthropomorphization of *natura* did not mean that alchemists were using (the less so abusing) the natural world in their own benefit. For this process of humanization was in general regarded only as a first step of a more complex soteriological enterprise in which both *natura* and

anthropon were considered in terms of divine scenarios (sacrifice, redemption, rebirth, and so forth), scenarios in which nature and man were on an equal footing, and eventually overcome. As I showed above when I discussed the theology of the lapis-Christ analogy, Jesus Christ emerged into the alchemists' world to save both man and nature, to overcome them and eventually give them a new meaning. As such, in view of these grand scenarios of salvation and transfiguration, a subordination of nature by man did not make any sense.

Secondly, and as a consequence of what has just been said, alchemy presupposes a *unified* conception on nature, man, and God. This is also known as the conception of the "Great Chain of Being", a theory according to which everything «on earth and in Heaven» is closely interconnected and governed by a perfect harmony. It is a theory stating that there is an unseen cosmic "chain" penetrating and supporting everything, and conferring on the entire existence unity, homogeneity, and ultimately meaning. Such a theory was fundamental to alchemy. It was, as a scholar of alchemy has put it, "the idea of the harmony and unity of the universe, 'One is All, and All is One,' [that] led to the belief that the universal spirit could somehow be pressed into service either through the stars or by concentrating it, so to speak, in a particular piece of matter – the philosophers' stone» (Holmyard 1990: 23). From an epistemological standpoint, the most important consequence of this idea is that the entire knowledge of reality is unified and homogeneous, that basically there is only one *scientia mundi* making possible and explaining every particular science, every piece of "local knowledge", and guaranteeing its validity. As such, the alchemists' knowledge is, strictly speaking, not something specialized, belonging, say, to "natural science", or to "theology", but it is a knowledge that, in a comprehensive way, encompasses all specialized discourses, at the same time transcending them and placing them into a larger context dominated by divine scenarios of redemption and eternal salvation.

Finally, however outdated or even un-serious it might seem today, alchemy ultimately betrays a serious need for transcendence, a drive towards human perfection and moral betterment, which makes it, to some extent, perennial. True, alchemy is utopian, but so are the most fundamental drives of the human mind. Alchemy is a project that transcends history, and so are our most essential dreams: «l'alchimie se désigne immémorialement: art royal et sacerdotal. Elle n'a pas d'histoire, son histoire étant celle de la vie, de la mort, de la résurrection de l'univers en chaque homme» (Robert Marteau qtd. in Crisciani & Gagnon 1980: 23). Beyond any sophisticated practicalities involved, beyond the numerous arcane technicalities one encounters when reading an alchemical text, alchemy may be ultimately seen as a discourse about the eternal human quest for a conciliation between the many (often divergent) forms of being in history. There is a clear sense in which the human being becomes dissatisfied with pursuing such divergent specialized projects as science, religion, philosophy, practical life, and comes to dream about pursuing

only one single super-project, something able to unify and give a superior meaning to all these fragmented practices. It is dream of meaningful life and redemption, an utopia of totality and totalizing experiences. In this way, the alchemist, as one whose main objective is to propose precisely this synthesis of science, religion, philosophy and practical live, comes to be seen an exemplary person. As has been remarked, the alchemist's approaches to life acquire a *paradigmatic* character: «Il y a dans l'alchimie une représentation du Moi qui est exactement et précisément l'image d'une certaine façon de connaître et de travailler que nous avons subconsciemment mais pas moins rationnellement écartée. Cette façon n'est qu'une interférence et cette interférence n'est audible que dans l'histoire» (Crisiani & Gagnon 1980: 79). In its strict details, an alchemical approach might be wrong and even seem "funny," especially if judged in the light of modern science, but – considered in its spirit, and in a broader cultural and epistemic context – it proves to be a quite impressive attempt at offering a complex and integrated image of the human condition. There is something generous, far-reaching, and positively utopian about the alchemists's enterprises. For – and this is very important – what the alchemists – through all their writings, speculations and curious undertakings – did was nothing other than attempting to offer a bold and refreshing synthesis of science, religion and philosophy. They based their approach on the supposition that there always has to be a harmony, a good balance, between the objectives of science, man's needs for understanding the world in which he found himself, on the one hand, and man's needs for self-transcending, his religious drives, on the other had. Leading a good life means precisely striving to keep this balance. As one scholar rightly said:

«Alchemy has suffered the misfortune of being classed as a science from a modern point of view [...]. Scientific it certainly was when it first reached the West sometime late in the twelfth century, but in thoroughly medieval sense, in which nothing, science least of all, could be separated from ethics, morals, and religion. For if science could not substantiate man's claim on immortality, what use was it? (Lee Stavenhagen in Morienus 1974: 66)».

As such, the most important thing about reading an alchemical text today is not to take it in its letter, but to read it between the lines. If taken in its letter, any alchemic text is certainly "wrong." One cannot turn base metals into gold, or produce wonder panacea. But if we read the alchemists' work between the lines we have a chance to come across the wonderful richness of alchemy and its perennial significance: that is, a never-ending quest for moral transformation, inward transmutation and self-transcendence.

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