

Archetypal Alchemy: The Transformation of the Psyche-Matter Continuum

by Stanton Marlan

Presented to the International Alchemy Conference in Las Vegas on Oct. 5-7, 2007
www.AlchemyConference.com

I'd like to begin with an Invocation since alchemical work requires assistance, if not from others from an other and from nature – in this instance a *soror mystica*:

Oh soror, assist me with the work, for it is not for the sake of "I" but for the stone, and though I am unworthy of the art, I am also foolish, and so I go again to the prima materia dark and laden in mist and of unknown origin. Help me to transform you unknown one to achieve the stone and to be transformed by it.







Fig. 254. The alchemical laboratory illuminated by Sol and Luna uniting in the sign of ten.

Virgin's Milk

For me, alchemy began in an innocent love of nature. Its roots emerged in my childhood wonder in an elementary sensate engagement with "matter," with stones, color transformations, and the excitement of living nature. I loved to play in the dirt and saw the dark earth as a cosmos teeming with life. The discovery of stones filled me with pleasure and I reveled in their variety of size, shape, texture, and color. I collected them and returned to this play daily. There was something mysterious about them, foreign yet more intimate in some ways than the world of human discourse around me. They held a secret and my secret was with them.

I discovered another root when I received a chemistry set and performed those now classic experiments of changing a colorless solution to one of brilliant colors. These color transformations fascinated me. One drop of a clear fluid into a test tube of another clear fluid and it turned a stunning blue or red. Then add another solution (I can still smell the phenolphthalein) and it would become colorless again. These experiences were enhanced by the texts which described them.

An old Skill-Craft chemistry manual stated that a "good magician must be well prepared," and described these color experiments in provocative ways. Here are a few of the descriptions: magic breath turning wine to water (p. 4), "stealing the blue of the sky," "turning the night to sunrise" (p. 5), "capturing the green of grass" (p. 7), "magic water" (p. 9), "secret messages" (p. 11), "the red witch" (p. 11), "change by heating" (p. 13), and so on.

Beyond my Skill-Craft manual, I learned about textures and smells, of black powders, yellow sulfur, deep red explosive phosphorous, green crystals, the pleasures of fire, heating, boiling, evaporating, distilling. The making of gun powder, and the thrill of spontaneous combustion by throwing sodium in water, or placing a drop of glycerin on potassium permanganate and watching it burst into flame. This world was an alive, organic world of living substances, changing shapes, forms, and appearances.

My grandfather built a laboratory room for me in my basement and on counters and shelves I amassed chemicals and glassware, test tubes, flasks, and beakers of every shape, graduated cylinders, funnels, condensers, and retorts, alcohol lamps and bunsen burners ready to make and hold the magic of further adventures. These were my alembics and I spent many an hour in this corner of my cellar and psyche. It is clear now that the Skill-Craft descriptions were meant to interest young children in the natural science of chemistry, and for me it worked, as I looked forward to high school where I thought you could actually study this wonderful world of Al-chemistry.

As you might imagine, as I sat in a typical high school chemistry class, the only experiment I now remember was one I lamented: the evaporation of the magic I had anticipated. The deep enjoyment I had in my early exploration was shared with another friend who, like me, had a lab in his basement, but I soon discovered that he, too, lived on another wavelength as his interests led him to chemical equations and mathematics. His interests were more abstract and natural scientific, mine in the aesthetics of transformation and a mystery I still knew little about. He found a home in high school chemistry and ultimately became a physician. After the first part of my high school chemistry semester, I had lost interest and had not yet found alchemy.

As I look back now at that old Skill-Craft chemistry manual, I see I had not noticed this telling passage: "There is really no magic" about chemistry. "Everything that happens when elements or compounds react in chemical changes can be explained scientifically." (p. 3) This pronouncement proved true. The magic was gone, but for me the vessels of natural science did not exhaust my love of color and change, of stone and the magic that was there in my early laboratory. I still lament the fact that as kids move through school, the richness of early classrooms, sounds, sights, tastes, and images are quickly exchanged for upper level abstractions and the grayness that signifies we made it into the higher grades. For me, it is no wonder that today we are so interested in the inner child and the lost objects of desire of psychoanalytic theory. Modernity has gone through a radical secularization of life and the instinct for the sacred is suppressed, sublimated, or banalized to the extent that the body and its sensate and magical connection to life is often lost, and numbers and formulas have lost their symbolic Pythagorean and ritual references.

When I was reflecting on a number of these themes many years ago, I received a flyer in the mail for a program entitled "In Desperate Need of Beauty: First steps toward a therapy inviting Aphrodite." It was given by James Hillman, who stated "that the deepest suffering in the human psyche derives from exile from the world soul." He goes on to stress the importance of a deep ecology and notes that in order for our concerns about the planet to move our souls, "we must rediscover the love of the world ... to be drawn by its allures, to delight in it, wanting it to stay, like a lover, forever close." This requires the awakening of the senses to its beauty. It is my conviction that alchemy has such a love of the world. It is expressed in its care of matter and nature, helping it to grow and achieve its destiny. It is expressed in its sensibility to metals, lead, silver, and gold, and it appreciates the colors of transformations, black, white, yellow, and red. It holds matter in its vessels, distilling, coagulating, tincturing, and, yes, torturing, for the sake of its soul and it sees into its structures and describes its spirit in a concrete living language:

"...red and green lions, kings and queens, salamanders roasting in a fire, fishes eyes, inverted philosophical trees, hermaphrodites, black suns, and

white earths, all the above the best possible expressions of a mystery yet known."

For some contemporary historians of alchemy of a positivist bent, this rich symbolic world is seen simply in terms of code names (Decknamen) for literal chemical processes that bear little or no relationship to spiritual or psychological transformation. While there is some evidence for the use of metaphoric codes, to reduce alchemical symbolism to them is to rob it of its visionary dimension. Such accounts bring back the spirit of my high school chemistry classes and lose the richness that has animated alchemy over the centuries. Its elemental, sensate, and concrete language matters, and points beyond the literalism of chemical substance in any positivist sense. Alchemical language points beyond what we have come to imagine as "subject" and "object" and points to a mysterious and subtle dimension we are still trying to understand and have called many names. Alchemical language is filled as well with both the soul's ambiguity and its concreteness.

James Hillman writes: "The work of soul-making requires corrosive acids, heavy earth, ascending birds; there are sweating kings, dogs and bitches, stench, urine and blood ... I know that I am not composed of sulfur and salt, burned in horse dung, putrefying or congealing, turning white or green or yellow, encircled by a tail biting serpent rising on wings. And yet I am! I cannot take any of this literally, even if it is all accurate, descriptively true."¹ What can it mean that I can't take this literally and yet claim it is all accurate and descriptively true?

For the moment, let me say that I don't find it adequate to reduce all alchemical realities either to literal "material chemical processes" or to see them as simply metaphors for "subjective psychological" or even "spiritual states." Nor do I think this was what Jung or Hillman intended. Often Jung's alchemical work is relegated to the psychological and spiritual side of alchemy. This is only partially true and I don't believe this does justice to Jung and nor do I believe that defining alchemy in these terms of 'subject and object,' inner and outer, material and real, versus psychological and spiritual is accurate enough.

¹ Hillman, 1978, pp. 37-39.

The Eye of the Winged Serpent: Mercurius and the Split in the Alchemical Imagination

I'd like to begin this section of my paper with an alchemical image, the frontispiece of Michael Maier's *Tripus aureus*.



It is an image of what Jung called "the double face of alchemy."² The image is divided into two parts. On the right is a representation of an alchemical laboratory with many alembics and laboratory instruments hanging on the wall. Just below we can see a distilling apparatus, a table, a shelf, and in the foreground a man partially clad in a short wrap, kneeling on one knee. He appears to be tending the fire inside a circular athanor or furnace. In his right hand is a hammer or ax-like instrument. There appears to be chopped wood, perhaps kindling, and leaning against the furnace is a pair of tongs and a bellows on its base, instruments of the laboratory. On the left is what appears to be a library with walls lined with books. In the foreground are three figures. Jung, following Maier, identified the men as the abbot John Cremer, the monk Basilius Valentinus (a legendary figure, possibly fictitious),

² *Psychology and Alchemy*, p. 278.

and a layman, Thomas Norton. One of the men appears to be pointing to the laboratory and possibly what is going on in the long-necked flask on a tripod sitting on top of the round furnace that is central to the image. Inside the flask is the winged serpent or dragon who is the inspiration for this reflection and whose perspective we will consider shortly.

For the moment, let us notice a divide that has entered our contemporary alchemical imagination. As some of us look at this illustration we tend to identify with one side of the divide or the other. Some of us retreat to our libraries, studies, or consulting rooms and others to our labs and spygeric and chemical experiments. We come like the two serpents perhaps instinctively emerging from one side or another, from library or laboratory, sometimes hissing at one another about who is the real alchemist and what constitutes real alchemy.

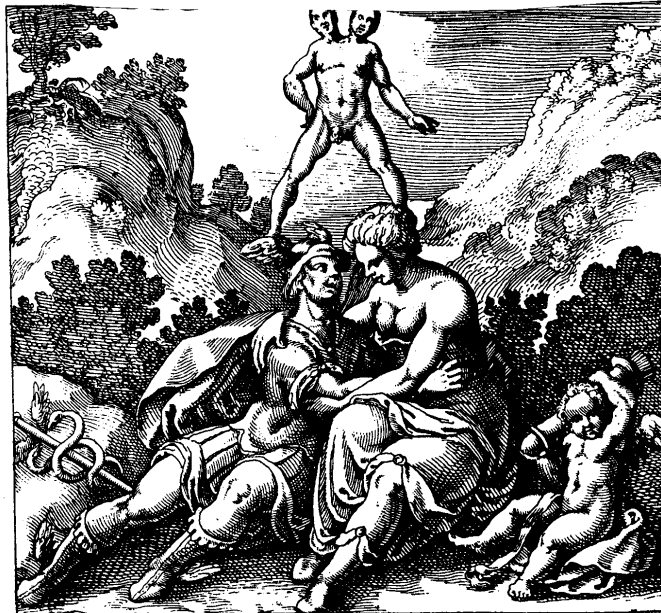
From the point of view of what is now called spiritual or psychological alchemy those who work on the practical level are often seen as retro chemists or protopharmacists hopelessly trying to practice the art often without a clue about its subtle nature and without psychological or spiritual insight, while from the point of view of the practical laboratory alchemist, spiritual/psychological alchemists are merely abstract thinkers who reduce the real engagement with nature to facile ideas. They are seen as disembodied spirits projecting psychological principles back onto the real work of engaging and transforming matter. It is nothing really new for alchemists to both berate and undermine one another. Jung cites the examples of Bernard of Treviso, a famous alchemist, as calling the great Gerber (Jabir) an obscurantist and "a Proteus who promises kernels and gives husks."³

From a Jungian point of view, one might imagine both the spiritual and laboratory alchemists as projecting the shadow on each other. For the spiritual alchemist who is not deeply grounded in the substance of the work, he or she disparages and/or secretly idealizes the practical alchemist who appears to literally be engaged with what is absent in his or her own work. On the other hand, the practical alchemist may be defended against psychological/spiritual transformation and avoids it by focusing on literal matter to the exclusion of its deep mystery. He or she disparages and/or idealizes the spiritual alchemist who appears to have a

³ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

real inner knowledge of transformation. In both cases, a lack precedes the shadow projection. There is no sense of *Mercurius duplex*—and the hermetic complexity s/he embodies. The dual face of alchemy is literalized and split into spiritual versus material, and there is no insight into the one body of alchemy, which appears with two heads and multiple facets.





165. 'Take therefore from the stone, wherever it may be found, the one who is named rebis and is born in two mountains . . . , that is, from Venus and Mercurius.' (1)

A literary work by Franz Hartman amusingly describes this tendency to split the alchemical imagination as well as to envision a way beyond the split. I'd like to read you a section or two from Chapter Six entitled "The Alchemical Laboratory."

The initiate enters a hall and notices a symbol, a double triangle made of gold surrounded by a snake biting its tail.

The walls were ornamented with bookcases, in which were a great number of books on alchemy. At one side of the room there was a kind of altar upon which stood a burning lamp. A couple of crucibles, a few bottles upon a side-table, and some armchairs completed the furniture of the room.

I looked around, expecting to see some furnaces, stoves, retorts, and other implements, such as are described in books on alchemy, but could see none. My instructor, reading my thoughts, laughingly said: "Did you expect to find here an apothecary's shop? You mistake, my friend. All this array of bottles and pots, of furnaces, stoves, retorts, mortars, filters, strainers, distilling, purifying, and refining apparatus, &c., described in books on alchemy, is nothing but nonsense, written to mislead the selfish and vicious, and to prevent them from prying into mysteries which they are not fit to receive. The true alchemist requires no ingredients for his processes, such as he could buy in a chemist's shop. He finds the materials which he needs within his own organisation. The highest processes of alchemy require no mechanical labour; they consist in the purification of the soul, and in transforming animal man into a divine being."⁴

At this point, we find a one-sided view of the psychological/spiritual alchemist. But the initiate is confused by this explanation. He continues:

"But," said I, "did not the ancient alchemists treat real metals and transform them into others of a higher order?"

To this Theodorus [the adept] replied:

⁴ P. 103-104.

"The invisible principles of which the constitution of man is made up are called his *metals*, because they are more lasting and enduring than flesh and blood. The metals which are formed by his thoughts and desires will continue to exist after the perishing elements constituting his physical body have been dissolved. Man's animal principles are the base metals of which his animal organization consists; they must be changed into nobler metals by transforming his vices into virtue, until they pass through *all* colours and turn into the gold of pure spirituality.

Still a spiritual position, but it is grows more sophisticated. He continues:

To accomplish this it is necessary that the grossest elements in his astral form should die and putrefy, so that the light of the spirit penetrate through the hard shell and call the inner man into life and activity."

Then the initiate says, "All those alchemical prescriptions which we find in the books are only to be taken in a figurative sense, and have nothing to do with material substances, such as salt, sulphur, mercury, &c."

Here the initiate is still spiritualizing the mystery but the adept corrects him:

"Not exactly so," answered the Adept. "There are no hard lines separating the various kingdoms in nature, and the actions of laws manifested in one kingdom find their analogies in other kingdoms. The processes taking place in the spiritual planes are also taking place in the astral and material planes, subject, of course, to such modifications as are imposed by the conditions existing upon these planes. Nature is not, as your scientists seem to believe, an agglomeration of fundamentally different objects and elements; nature is a whole, and everything in the organism acts and is acted on by every other thing contained therein.

....; for we find already in the book of *Sohar* the following passage, which I advise you to note down in your book. so that you will not forget it: *Everything that exists upon the Earth has its ethereal*

counterpart above the Earth (that is to say, in the inner realm), and there is nothing, however insignificant it may appear in the world, which is not depending on something higher (or more interior), so that if the lower part acts, its presiding higher part reacts upon it."

.... In each human being are contained germinally the essences which constitute the mineral, vegetable, animal, or human kingdom; in each man are contained powers which may be developed into a tiger, a snake, a hog, a dragon, into a sage or a villain, into an angel or devil, into an Adept or a God. Those elements which are made to grow and to be developed will become the man's *alter ego* and constitute his "self."

Here we might imagine the adept moving toward a depth psychological, archetypal, and perhaps Thurgic view that can no longer simply be imagined as subjective or psychological, as I noted earlier, sometimes attributed to Jung. Jung's alchemical view has been often understood in a Cartesian way, as splitting the subjective and psychological reality from the matter onto which it is projected.

But if Jung was right that the alchemist did indeed project psyche onto matter, I think it is also important to see that for Jung "psyche" is not simply subjective, not simply in us and is ultimately an unknown, a mystery, as is the "matter" upon which so-called psyche is projected and which is not simply out there, a totally independent psyche that is "in itself." "Projection, then, is a movement from mystery to mystery, and yet this mystery leaves its mark on our ideas and fantasies and upon what we imagine as 'matter' itself."

The matter we are talking about is what Hartman describes as a "universal process, by which all the processes of life take place. It is the unfoldment of Life. He who can guide and control the power of life is an alchemist. He can create new forms and increase the substance of those forms." In these passages there is an attempt to point toward an integrated view of life as a matrix of psychological/spiritual, magical, and material energies. We often speak of this integration but as the adept noted above, it must go beyond theory, it must be realized, and the power of this realization affects not only the subject but also the world. Alchemically the so-called two worlds are subtly related.

Returning to our image, let's notice how the athanor or furnace stands between the two rooms, library and laboratory, as if to link them. And as the flask is heated up, an odd creature appears, a winged serpent or dragon within it. I imagine this creature as a *monstrum*, a premature conjunction on the way toward a *coniunctio* of spirit and matter. The wings indicate the spiritual aspect that raises up the instinctual, material dimension illustrated by the serpent, and the material, instinctual serpent grounds the winged energies. This circular and uroboric play is a hint that we are approaching the subtle body of *Mercurius duplex*. It signals a more primary unified field. The image of Mercurius sits on a tripod and is as well a third possibility sitting in the flask between the split world, cooking and awaiting realization.

Mercurius duplex

Abraham describes Mercurius as the central symbol in alchemy who is "also known by the equivalent Greek name Hermes, symbolizing the universal agent of transformation. Mercurius is a symbol for the alchemist ... the transformational substance without which the opus cannot be performed. Mercurius is also the name of the divine spirit hidden in the depths of matter, the light of nature, anima mundi, the very spirit of life which must be released in order to make the philosophers' stone"⁵ For Jung, the dragon combines "the chthonic principle of the serpent and the ariel principle of the bird." The dragon is "a variant of Mercurius" as "the divine winged Hermes manifest in matter."⁶

⁵ Abraham

⁶ Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, p. 280.



Fig. 146. Mercurius as "uniting symbol."-From Valentinus, "Duodecim claves," 6, **ix**, p. 396.
[IMAGE from Psych.&Alc., p. 280]

In metallic terms, Mercury or "living silver, quicksilver, perfectly expressed"⁷ the dual reality of Mercurius, outwardly metal, inwardly as "the world creating spirit."⁸ Jung notes that "the dragon is probably the oldest pictorial symbol in alchemy of which we have documentary evidence. It appears as the *Uroboros*; the tail-eater, in the Codex Marcianus, which dates from the tenth or eleventh century, together with the legend."⁹

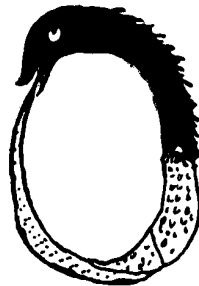


Fig. 147. Uroboros —From Codex Marcianus, 20, **liv**, fol. 188v; in Berthelot, 335, Introduction, p. 132.
[Psych.&Alc., p. 281]

"Time and again the alchemists reiterate that the *opus* proceeds from the one and leads back to the one, that it is a sort of circle like a dragon biting its own tail."¹⁰

In a footnote based on the *Rosarium*, in *Artis auriferae*, Jung notes (following Maier): "Therefore you must be single-minded in the work of nature, ... For however

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

much its names may differ, yet it is ever one thing alone, and from the *same* thing. (One is the stone, one the medicine, one the vessel, one the method and one the disposition).

And again: "This magistry proceeds first from one root, which [root] then expands into more things, and then reverts to the one."

For this reason, Jung states the 'opus' was often called *circulore* (circular) or else *rota* (the wheel).

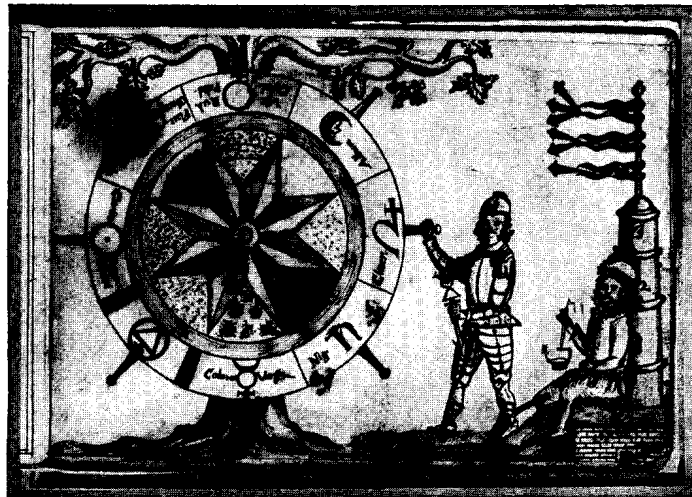


Fig. 80. Mercurius turning the eight-spoked wheel which symbolizes the process. In one hand he holds the *telum passionis*.—From the "Speculum veritatis" (MS., 17th century), 20, **liii**.
[Psych. and Alchemy, p. 156]

Here we see Mercurius turning the wheel symbolizing the alchemical process. Mercurius "is metallic yet liquid, matter yet spirit, cold yet fiery, poison yet healing draught,"¹¹ a pharmacon as Plato and French philosopher Jacques Derrida would contend. In this circular process, what were the hissing serpents unite in a healing images symbolized by Mercurius and the caduceus, uniting pairs of opposites.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 282.



Fig. 148. Mercurius as caduceus, uniting the paired opposites.—From an 18th-century MS., "Figurarii in Aegyptiorum secretarum," 30(b), p. 14. [Psych and Alchemy, p. 156]

For me, what is important is that in alchemy there is a recognition of these primordial conjunctions, difficult to achieve but an impetus in all alchemical work.

In this way, for Jung, "Mercurius stands at the beginning and end of the work: he is the *prima materia*, the *caput corvi*, the *nigredo*; as dragon he devours himself and as dragon he dies, to rise again as the *lapis*. He is the play of colors in the *cauda pavonis* [peacock's tail] and the division into four elements. He is the hermaphrodite that was in the beginning, ... and is reunited in the *coniunctio* to appear once again at the end in the radiant form of the *lumen novum*, the stone."¹²

From this viewpoint, we get a bird's eye – or better a dragon's eye – view of the whole alchemical process. But here it is wise to remember the admonition of the adept Theodorus noted above: that you should not know simply this in theory, but must realize it deeply within yourself.

Alchemical Descent:

¹² Ibid., pp. 281-282.

The Black Sun, the Subtle Body of the Nigredo, and the Philosophers' Stone

As a Jungian analyst, my concerns resonate with Theodorus. It is not enough to simply understand alchemical process at the level of the ego, to tinker in the laboratory, or to stop with a whitened *albedo* psychology of light. Insight alone, no matter how broad, erudite, or esoteric does not heal or transform. Descent into the depths of the *nigredo* is required. My deepest exploration of this descent has been documented in my book, *The Black Sun*, and I will follow some of that material here, beginning with Dante, who said in the *Inferno*: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."



Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 3

But it is only by a descent into darkness and sitting with it as the light recedes that we can begin to understand the depths of the alchemical process.



182. Leaden depression of a Benedictine suffering death in a valley of fading stars.

My work on the black sun was an exploration of this “blackest than black” realm of the nigredo, beginning with an encounter, with an experience of intellectual and emotional impasse, with what would not go away, dissolve, or be lifted up into the light. It is a process not unlike that described by Goethe in his alchemical masterpiece, *Faust*.

Goethe begins his magnum opus, *Faust*, with a reflection on the nigredo of Night:

I've studied now, to my regret,
Philosophy, Law, Medicine,
and - what is worst - Theology.
from end to end with diligence.
Yet here I am, a wretched fool
and still no wiser than before.
I've become master, and Doctor as well,
and for nearly ten years I have led
my young students a merry chase.
up, down, and every which way -
and find we can't have certitude
This is too much for heart to bear!
I well may know more than all those dullards,
those doctors, teachers, officials and priests,
be unbothered by scruples or doubts,
and fear neither hell nor its devils -
but I get no joy from anything either,
know nothing that I think worthwhile,
and don't imagine that what I teach
could better mankind or make it godly....
No dog would want to linger on like this!...

Alas! I'm still confined to prison
Accursed, musty hole of stone
to which the sun's fair light itself
dimly penetrates through the painted glass.



Restricted by this great mass of books
that worms consume, that dust has covered,
and that up to the ceiling-vault
are interspersed with grimy papers....

And still you wonder why your heart
is anxious and your breast constricted,
why a pain you cannot account for
inhibits your vitality completely!
You are surrounded, not by the living world
in which God placed mankind,
but, amid smoke and mustiness,
only by bones of beasts and of the dead ...

Sustained by hope, Imagination once
soared boldly on her boundless flights;
now that our joys are wrecked in time's abyss,
she is content to have a narrow scope.
Deep in our heart Care quickly makes her nest,
there she engenders secret sorrows
and, in that cradle restless, destroys all quiet joy;...

You empty skull, why bare your teeth at me,
unless to say that once, like mine, your addled brain
sought buoyant light but, in its eagerness for truth,
went wretchedly astray beneath the weight of darkness.

It is only by entering into such darkness, into the nigredo, that 'real' alchemical transformation can take place.

Transmutation takes time and patience. I'd like to give you an example from my clinical practice of what I consider to be the beginnings of the transformation of the nigredo and the birth of the *fillius* leading toward the philosophers' stone. I have published this material elsewhere, and have continued to develop it.

A patient had entered analysis and was quite troubled and concerned about how long the analysis would take. With questions like this, it is the work of the analyst to refer the patient more deeply to their own resources, out of which an answer may be forged, or more typically to the concern which, when seen, may allow the question to deepen or change form. Such revisioning sometimes occurs as a patient engages his or her dream life. In the above case, the following dream was reported directly after my patient asked me about the length of treatment and I deferred the question.

First Dream:

I have been looking for my car for some time and then I realized I am in it. I want to get back on the highway. I discover that I have turned off on a detour. I have to go down and around, since the road back to the highway is blocked. I am now walking and there are some old men and women in the clearing. An old woman comes toward me. She looks like a bag lady. She is picking up bits of paper and other scraps and putting them into her bag. I am helping her. The old woman looks me in the eye and says, "It's going to be a long winter."

Perhaps the response of the old woman is the best answer to my patient's question about the length of analysis. The "winter" did in fact come to express the misery, barrenness, and inner frigidity of cold rage that had burned in her since childhood. As the analysis continued, a history of bare survival and the tortures she endured were imaged in a series of dreams where armies had ravaged and brutally beaten women, leaving them bloody and broken on the ground, helplessly dying and massacred.

My patient did remain in analysis, as if compelled by the knowledge of the old woman, and seemed to know—as Hillman has stated—"that analysis remains

incomplete if it has not ventured into the frozen depths ... that in depth psychology are areas of archetypal crystallizations, the immovable depressions and mutisms."

Often my patient could not express feelings that were obviously very powerful and she remained frozen, and unable to speak or express herself for long periods of time. Below the surface there seemed to be a place that remained utterly inaccessible except for a distant stare and a death-like pallor on her face.

Second Dream: (four years later)

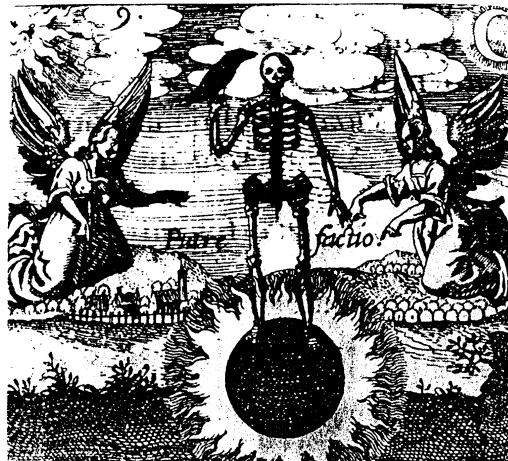
I see a Chinese family sitting around in a circle cooking a frog in an odd shaped primitive double boiler. When the whole thing is done it would weigh one pound. The idea was that the cold-blooded frog was being boiled down.

Some relevant elaborations include that my patient feels close to the frog and describes how it sits removed, still and lifeless in a cold frozen position. In her identification with the image, she described how, growing up, she had felt ugly and toad-like and had memories of how her father ridiculed her and her mother's femininity, of how she had withdrawn and watched in a somewhat schizoid manner. The "frog ... was now in the vessel being heated up, activated and boiled down to a smaller size. She comments on how the small size reminds her of a child. It is interesting that Jung has noted that the frog, more than any other cold-blooded animal, anticipates man.s In short, she can be human, have new life. In this regard it is not without interest that in my patient's next dream she was pregnant. She is looking into her womb; she reaches in and takes out what looks like a pyramid in the center of which is a tiny child. She decides that it is not ready and puts it back in for further incubation. (Marlan 1994, pp. 39-48).

And the analysis continued.

One of the great images of the nigredo, like the serpent and the dragon, is the frog or toad, which in alchemy is often connected to the darkness of the prima material, and which—though poisonous—contains the precious philosophers' stone within it. Philalethes wrote that this toad is most venomous, yet highly prized (Abraham, p. 200) and for this woman, the poisonous aspects of her life she was facing were directly related to the transformations going on in her womb or inner vessel. A birth was in process, but further incubation, containment and healing were required for the *filius* to emerge.

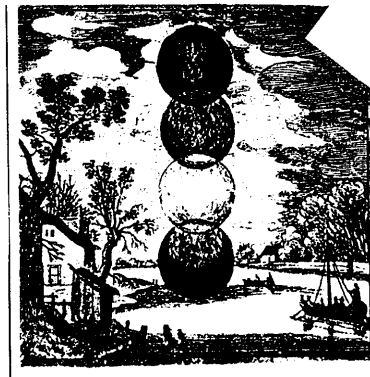
In alchemy the *filius philosophorum* is said to be “born from the union of Sol and Luna at the Chemical Wedding. The Emerald (Tablet) states of this child that ‘the father thereof is the Sun, the mother the Moon.’ Isaac Newton wrote in his commentary on The Emerald (Tablet): ‘(that) this generation is similar to the human, truly from a father and a mother, which are the Sun and the Moon. (ibid, p. 148) “And when the infant is conceived...he is born continuously in the belly of the wind until the hour of birth, and after birth he is nourished at the breasts of foliated Earth until he grows up (Dobbs, *Janus*, 276).” (Ibid, p. 148) The birth of this child, the *filius*, is frequently likened to the generation of the philosophers’ stone, and such a stone is born in the darkness of the womb and only after having undergone the difficult processes of the nigredo, mortificatio, putrefactio, poisoning, torture, killing, decomposition, rotting and death. It is only in death and working through narcissistic offense that we find a new life. All these processes form a complex web of interrelationships that describe a terrifying eclipse of consciousness as we know it. I’d like to impress upon you the extent and importance of the nigredo so here I borrow from *The Black Sun*.



Hillman recognizes that “blackness too has purpose; it teaches endurance, warns, dissolves attachments, sophisticates the eye, so that we may not only see blackness but by means of it.” To see through blackness is to understand its continuous deconstructive activity necessary for transfiguration. Jung too finds in the image of blackness and *Sol niger* a non-manifest latency, an Other Sun linked not only to Saturn but also to Yahweh, the Primus Anthropos. One must be careful,

however, not to simply expect a return to the beauty of the colored world, as simple as the high school transformations of color in a test tube. Color change signifies a profound transformation and an enriched understanding of darkness. For the most part *Sol niger* is equated with and understood only in its nigredo aspect, but staying within the darkness, one can develop an eye to its more sublime dimension—to the shine of *Sol niger* itself, to its dark illumination, to its eros and wisdom.

This aspect of *Sol niger* is often imaged elsewhere, in different operations, images and colors—in black, white, yellow, red or gold.



So one way of imagining alchemical and psychological work is to move out of and away from blackness, as a development from black to white, from nigredo to albedo, the classic alchemical formula. But to focus on movement and transition from one stage or color to another, as useful as this might be, runs the risk of not seeing with that dark eye which sees into blackness for itself and not simply as a passage to whiteness, to change, new generation, and to the sweetness of renewal. But this developmental view is often a defense against the radicality of black, the harshness of the raven's call, drawing attention to the 'blacker than black' aspect of the soul. Yet within this blacker than black dimension of the soul, we can learn to see, to become seers. In the blackness, "there are blacks that recede and absorb, those that dampen and soften, those that etch and sharpen, and others that shine almost with the effulgence of *Sol niger*." (Hillman, p. 51.) In short, the alchemical blacker than black is not simply black. The famous Japanese painter and printmaker, Hokusai has noted:

There is a black which is old and a black which is fresh. Lustrous (brilliant) black and matte black, black in sunlight, and black in shadow. For the old black, one must use an admixture of blue, for the matte black, an admixture of white, for the lustrous black, gum (colle) must be added. Black in sunlight must have a gray reflection. (John Gage, *Color and Meaning*, p. 239)

In her book, *The Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison states:

There are five or six kinds of black, some silky, some wooly, some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Well night black is the same way. May as well be a rainbow (p. 40).

Perhaps here we can imagine the rainbow as the *cauda pavonis*, the peacock's tail, and in the final stage of the rubedo, in the reddening birth, we witness the dissolution of sunlit consciousness. Instead, we begin to notice that the blackness itself has a shine, what the alchemists called the "shine of darkness itself"—the lumen naturae, the light of nature. The image of *Sol niger*, the Black Sun, contains this odd mixture of profound darkness and luminosity, a shine that engages the embodied imagination. Just as this light is not separate from darkness, the philosophers' stone is not separate from *Sol niger* but intrinsic to it—a most enigmatic confluence of presence and absence—and this constitutes the gold we seek. This gold cannot be grasped by an ego, but requires an ego death, the transformation we have been describing. It requires seeing something that the ego cannot grasp.

Robert Frost puts it well in a poem entitled "Nothing Gold Can Stay":

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
but only for an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf,
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.¹³

Like the traditional alchemist, the alchemical psychologist is likewise interested in transformation and he or she works not only with the understanding mind, but also with the matter and substance of his patients, with what matters and what is of substance. The work is not alchemical if it derives from a disembodied imagination. If we take *Mercurius duplex* seriously, we know that psyche also matters, not just in the sense that it is important, but that it has substance, body. The same must be true for the laboratory alchemist.

Dennis Hauck has noted that lasting transformation takes place where the work is accomplished on all levels of reality. The material, the spiritual, and the physical” and I would only emphasize that these levels are all mysteriously intertwined in the subtle essence of Mercurius. Laboratory alchemist, alchemical psychologist, and mystical adept are all involved in the transformation of the psyche-matter continuum where I believe the goal is to see that the blacker than black nigredo and philosophers’ stone, sol and luna, shine together in a mysterious union at the still point of the turning world.

¹³ *Collected Poems of Robert Frost*, p. 272.



305. Sol and Luna chained to the stone between unbeing and being: mystical union at the still point of the turning world.