



The Eagle Chained to the Toad, from *Symbola Aureae Mensae Duodecim Nationum* (*The Symbols of the Golden Table of the Twelve Nations*) by Michael Maier (1568–1622)ⁱ

Alchemy

August J. Cwik

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The perennial question regarding Jung's fascination with the arcane art of alchemy has, and probably always will be--why alchemy? Zabriskie (1995) stated, "If analytical psychology definitively left the discipline of psychoanalysis with Jung's assertions of the collective unconscious, psychoanalysis believed Jung left the world of sanity when he turned to alchemy as an earlier road to the unconscious" (p. 9). When Jung was being pressed to say something about the role and importance of transference, he chose to elaborate the intricacies of the analytic relationship using an alchemical series, *The Rosarium Philosophorum*. He stated, "...the reader will not find an account of the clinical phenomena of transference in this book...it is only possible to come to a right understanding and appreciation of a contemporary psychological problem when we can reach a point outside our own time from which to observe it" (Jung, 1946, Foreword). Once again, this commentary was perceived as madness, especially by not including any clinical material, but in alchemy he saw something larger, a template, for understanding the arc and goal of the total transference situation.

Jung's fundamental insight was that the alchemists were projecting unconscious psychic processes onto the transformation of matter in the laboratory. In alchemy he saw the bridge between analytical psychology and early forms of thought, such as Gnosticism – to reach 'a point outside our own time' in order to understand how deep change occurs. Alchemy secretly operated in the background of collective consciousness for hundreds, if not thousands of years, without ever reaching its goal of creating gold from lead -- this fact underlies its powerful psychological draw.

Jung (1946) stated "Alchemy describes, not merely in general outline but often in the most astonishing detail, the same psychological phenomenology which can be observed in the analysis of unconscious processes" (para. 399). Edinger (1985) noted that alchemy provided a "treasury of analogies that corporify or embody the objective psyche—analogy is a process of relationship, a making of connections by *as if*" (p. 100). The potency of the imagery depicted in alchemical plates can be discerned in the following: William Blake noted that all things acted on earth are seen in them; these are exemplary images that govern our understanding of the world; and, Michael Maier, the renowned alchemist, described them as "thought pictures to reach the intellect via the senses" (Roob, 1997, pp. 8-12).

Hillman (2010) made the point that the importance of studying alchemy lies, first of all, to understand our theory, secondly, to understand our patients, and thirdly, "Besides the general theory of alchemical transformation and besides the particular parallels of alchemical imagery with the individuation process, it is alchemical language that may be most valuable for Jungian therapy. **Alchemical language is a mode of therapy; it is therapeutic**" (p.10, emphasis added). It is this *languaging* that allows mythopoetic imagination about the transformative process rather than nothing but rational thinking in our clinical approach. As such it should be noted: "It would seem that the alchemists are actually intending to undermine the logical understanding which is the hallmark of ego-consciousness. Cause and effect, subject vs. object, inductive reasoning: these are

all frustrated by alchemical understanding” (Saban, web page). Alchemical language provides access to content analysis, but also to process analysis.

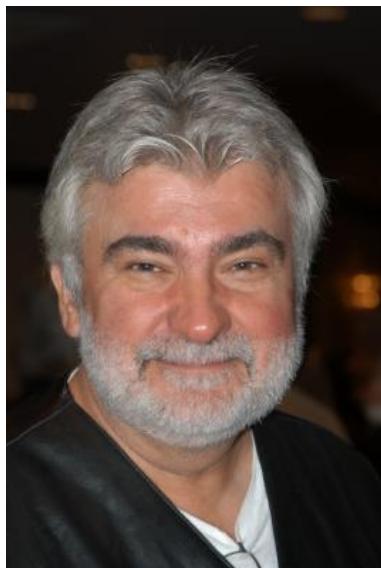
Regarding content analysis, alchemy provides rich imagery and language regarding an ‘elemental psychology’: fire (*calcinatio*), water (*solutio*), earth (*coagulatio*), air (*sublimatio*), separation (*separatio*), unification or combination (*coniunctio*). We could imagine that the Self operates through these principles in both an introverted and extraverted manner. In an introverted manner, the ‘Alchemical Self’ is dreammaker -- we can approach dreams as recipes attempting to move the individual towards individuation. In an extraverted manner, outer events can be approached symbolically leading to the ability to live a ‘symbolic life’ (Jung,). We can use current events with the coronavirus and social unrest as an example. The rage and anger of racial protests can be seen as a *calcinatio* process literally burning down old structures in order to create new ways of being. The virus itself carries *solutio* properties as it is described as ‘washing’ through the population dissolving hidden stratifications and inequalities as the poor and racial groups are unequally affected. Social distancing has provided a *separatio* in order to allow a new *sublimatio* as patients are having to find to new values and spiritual approaches to make sense of this devastating experience. Coagulations are appearing as new laws and rules are being created and as people are needing to live differently. We are still awaiting a *coniunctio* as society and the world are being reordered.

Regarding process analysis, alchemical language has proven to be particularly useful in describing the analytic situation. As Samuels (1979) noted, “The thesis is that alchemical imagery is very well suited indeed to capture the almost impossible essence of analysis or any other deep, human connection: the play between interpersonal relatedness on the one hand and imaginal, intrapsychic activity on the other. Alchemical imagery not only permits the paradoxical nature of the interpersonal/intrapsychic seesaw to be grasped but does so in a way that acknowledges simultaneity, doing away with distracting substructure/superstructure division (pp. 176-7). The *quarternio* diagram, first introduced in “The Psychology of the Transference” (Jung, 1946), demonstrating all of the possible interactions between analyst and patient and their conscious and unconscious minds has proven to be one of the most useful emblems for clinical work. It still speaks to clinicians today opening the imagination and allowing integration with the intersubjective and relational schools (Cwik, 2017; West, 2020). We can even imagine that alchemical images functioned as Jung’s countertransferential information as they came into his mind during work with patients, ‘alchemical reveries’, providing material for insights, interpretations, and amplifications (Cwik, 2011).

All said and done, there is absolutely no doubt that Jung (1977) had the greatest admiration for what the study of alchemy provided, “The *opus magnum* [the great work of alchemy] had two aims: the rescue of the human soul and the salvation of the cosmos” (p. 228). It does not get more important than that.

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¹ Color plate courtesy of Adam McLean, alchemywebsite.com. Demonstrating the completion of the stone through the conjunction of the opposites—*spiritus* and *corpus*, intellect and instinct, mind and matter.