



PORTRAIT OF PARACELSUS

[*Frontispiece*]

ALCHEMY: ANCIENT AND MODERN
BEING A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE ALCHEMISTIC DOCTRINES, AND THEIR
RELATIONS, TO MYSTICISM ON THE ONE HAND, AND TO RECENT DISCOVERIES IN
PHYSICAL SCIENCE ON THE OTHER HAND; TOGETHER WITH SOME PARTICULARS
REGARDING THE LIVES AND TEACHINGS OF THE MOST NOTED ALCHEMISTS
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CALCULATION OF THERMO-CHEMICAL CONSTANTS," "MATTER, SPIRIT AND THE
COSMOS," ETC.

WITH 16 FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

It is exceedingly gratifying to me that a second edition of this book should be called for. But still more welcome is the change in the attitude of the educated world towards the old-time alchemists and their theories which has taken place during the past few years.

The theory of the origin of Alchemy put forward in Chapter I has led to considerable discussion; but whilst this theory has met with general acceptance, some of its earlier critics took it as implying far more than is actually the case. As a result of further research my conviction of its truth has become more fully confirmed, and in my recent work entitled *Bygone Beliefs* (Rider, 1920), under the title of "The Quest of the Philosopher's Stone," I have found it possible to adduce further evidence in this connection. At the same time, whilst I became increasingly convinced that the main alchemistic hypotheses were drawn from the domain of mystical theology and applied to physics and chemistry by way of analogy, it also became evident to me that the crude physiology of bygone ages and remnants of the old phallic faith

formed a further and subsidiary source of alchemistic theory. I have barely, if at all, touched on this

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matter in the present work; the reader who is interested will find it dealt with in some detail in "The Phallic Element in Alchemical Doctrine" in my *Bygone Beliefs*. In view of recent research in the domain of Radioactivity and the consequent advance in knowledge that has resulted since this book was first published, I have carefully considered the advisability of rewriting the whole of the last chapter, but came to the conclusion that the time for this was not yet ripe, and that, apart from a few minor emendations, the chapter had better remain very much as it originally stood. My reason for this course was that, whilst considerably more is known to-day, than was the case in 1911, concerning the very complex transmutations undergone spontaneously by the radioactive elements—knowledge helping further to elucidate the problem of the constitution of the so-called "elements" of the chemist—the problem really cognate to my subject, namely that of effecting a transmutation of one element into another at will, remains in almost the same state of indeterminateness as in 1911. In 1913, Sir William Ramsay[1] thought he had obtained evidence for the transmutation of hydrogen into helium by the action of the electric discharge, and Professors Collie and Patterson[2] thought they had obtained evidence of the

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transmutation of hydrogen into neon by similar means. But these observations (as well as Sir William Ramsay's earlier transmutational experiments) failed to be satisfactorily confirmed;[3] and since the death of the latter, little, if anything, appears to have been done to settle the questions raised by his experiments. Reference must, however, be made to a very interesting investigation by Sir Ernest Rutherford on the "Collision of α -Particles with Light Atoms,"[4] from which it appears certain that when bombarded with the swiftly-moving α -particles given off by radium-C, the atoms of nitrogen may be disintegrated, one of the products being hydrogen. The other product is possibly helium,[5] though this has not been proved. In view of Rutherford's results a further repetition of Ramsay's experiments would certainly appear to be advisable.

[1]

See his "The Presence of Helium in the Gas from the Interior of an X-Ray Bulb," *Journal of the Chemical Society*, vol. ciii. (1913), pp. 264 *et seq.*

[2]

See their "The Presence of Neon in Hydrogen after the Passage of the Electric Discharge through the latter at Low Pressures," *ibid.*, pp. 419 *et seq.*; and "The Production of Neon and Helium by the Electric Discharge," *Proceedings of the Royal Society, A*, vol. xci. (1915), pp. 30 *et seq.*

[3]

See especially the report of negative experiments by Mr. A. C. G. Egerton, published in *Proceedings of the Royal Society, A*, vol. xci. (1915), pp. 180 *et seq.*

[4]

See the *Philosophical Magazine* for June, 1919, 6th Series, vol. xxxvii. pp. 537-587.

[5]

Or perhaps an isotope of helium (see below).

As concerns the spontaneous transmutations undergone by the radioactive elements, the facts appear to indicate (or, at least, can be brought into some sort of order by supposing) the atom to consist of a central nucleus and an outer shell, as suggested by Sir Ernest Rutherford. The nucleus may be compared to the sun of a solar system. It is excessively small, but in it the mass of the atom is almost entirely concentrated. It is positively charged, the charge being neutralised by that of the free electrons which revolve like planets about it, and which by their orbits account for the

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volume of the atom. The atomic weight of the element depends upon the central sun; but the chemical properties of the element are determined by the number of electrons in the shell; this number is the same as that representing the position of the element in the periodic system. Radioactive change originates in the atomic nucleus. The expulsion of an α -particle therefrom decreases the atomic weight by 4 units, necessitates (since the α -particle carries two positive charges) the removal of two electrons from the shell in order to maintain electrical neutrality, and hence changes the chemical nature of the body, transmuting the element into one occupying a position two places to the left in the periodic system (for example, the change of radium into niton). But radioactivity sometimes results in the expulsion of a β -particle from the nucleus. This results in the addition of an electron to the shell, and hence changes the chemical character of the element, transmuting it into one occupying a position one place to the right in the periodic system, but *without altering its atomic weight*. Consequently, the expulsion of one α - and two β -particles from the nucleus, whilst decreasing the atomic weight of the element by 4, leaves the number of electrons in the shell, and thus the chemical properties of the element, unaltered. These remarkable conclusions are amply borne out by the facts, and the discovery of elements (called "isobares") having the same atomic weight but different chemical properties, and of those (called "isotopes") having identical chemical characters but different atomic weights, must be regarded as one of the most significant and important discoveries of recent years. Some further reference

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to this theory will be found in §§ 77 and 81: the reader who wishes to follow the matter further should consult the fourth edition of Professor Frederick Soddy's *The Interpretation of Radium* (1920), and the two chapters on the subject in his *Science and Life* (1920), one of which is a popular exposition and the other a more technical one.

These advances in knowledge all point to the possibility of effecting transmutations at will, but so far attempts to achieve this, as I have already indicated, cannot be regarded as altogether satisfactory. Several methods of making gold, or rather elements chemically identical with gold, once the method of controlling radioactive change is discovered (as assuredly it will be) are suggested by Sir Ernest Rutherford's theory of the nuclear atom. Thus, the expulsion of two α -particles from bismuth or one from thallium would yield the required result. Or lead could be

converted into mercury by the expulsion of one α -particle, and this into thallium by the expulsion of one β -particle, yielding gold by the further expulsion of an α -particle. But, as Professor Soddy remarks in his *Science and Life* just referred to, "if man ever achieves this further control over Nature, it is quite certain that the last thing he would want to do would be to turn lead or mercury into gold—for the sake of gold. The energy that would be liberated, if the control of these sub-atomic processes were as possible as is the control of ordinary chemical changes, such as combustion, would far exceed in importance and value the gold. Rather it would pay to transmute gold into silver or some base metal."

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In § 101 of the book I suggest that the question of the effect on the world of finance of the discovery of an inexpensive method of transmuting base metal into gold on a large scale is one that should appeal to a novelist specially gifted with imagination. Since the words were first written a work has appeared in which something approximating to what was suggested has been attempted and very admirably achieved. My reference is to Mr. H. G. Wells's novel, *The World Set Free*, published in 1914.

In conclusion I should like to thank the very many reviewers who found so many good things to say concerning the first edition of this book. For kind assistance in reading the proofs of this edition my best thanks are due also and are hereby tendered to my wife, and my good friend Gerald Druce, Esq., M.Sc.

H. S. R.

191, Camden Road, London, N.W. 1. *October, 1921.*

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PREFACE

The number of books in the English language dealing with the interesting subject of Alchemy is not sufficiently great to render an apology necessary for adding thereto. Indeed, at the present time there is an actual need for a further contribution on this subject. The time is gone when it was regarded as perfectly legitimate to point to Alchemy as an instance of the aberrations of the human mind. Recent experimental research has brought about profound modifications in the scientific notions regarding the chemical elements, and, indeed, in the scientific concept of the physical universe itself; and a certain resemblance can be traced between these later views and the theories of bygone Alchemy. The spontaneous change of one "element" into another has been witnessed, and the recent work of Sir William Ramsay suggests the possibility of realising the old alchemistic dream—the transmutation of the "base" metals into gold.

The basic idea permeating all the alchemistic theories appears to have been this: All the metals (and, indeed, all forms of matter) are one in origin, and are produced by an evolutionary process. The Soul of them all is one and the same; it is only the

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Soul that is permanent; the body or outward form, *i.e.*, the mode of manifestation of the Soul, is transitory, and one form may be transmuted into another. The similarity, indeed it might be said, the identity, between this view and the modern etheric theory of matter is at once apparent.

The old alchemists reached the above conclusion by a theoretical method, and attempted to demonstrate the validity of their theory by means of experiment; in which, it appears, they failed. Modern science, adopting the reverse process, for a time lost hold of the idea of the unity of the physical universe, to gain it once again by the experimental method. It was in the elaboration of this grand fundamental idea that Alchemy failed. If I were asked to contrast Alchemy with the chemical and physical science of the nineteenth century I would say that, whereas the latter abounded in a wealth of much accurate detail and much relative truth, it lacked philosophical depth and insight; whilst Alchemy, deficient in such accurate detail, was characterised by a greater degree of philosophical depth and insight; for the alchemists did grasp the fundamental truth of the Cosmos, although they distorted it and made it appear grotesque. The alchemists cast their theories in a mould entirely fantastic, even ridiculous—they drew unwarrantable analogies—and hence their views cannot be accepted in these days of modern science. But if we cannot approve of their theories *in toto*, we can nevertheless appreciate the fundamental ideas at the root of them. And it is primarily with the object of pointing out this similarity between these ancient ideas regarding the physical

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universe and the latest products of scientific thought, that this book has been written.

It is a regrettable fact that the majority of works dealing with the subject of Alchemy take a one-sided point of view. The chemists generally take a purely physical view of the subject, and instead of trying to understand its mystical language, often (I do not say always) prefer to label it nonsense and the alchemist a fool. On the other hand, the mystics, in many cases, take a purely transcendental view of the subject, forgetting the fact that the alchemists were, for the most part, concerned with operations of a physical nature. For a proper understanding of Alchemy, as I hope to make plain in the first chapter of this work, a synthesis of both points of view is essential; and, since these two aspects are so intimately and essentially connected with one another, this is necessary even when, as in the following work, one is concerned primarily with the physical, rather than the purely mystical, aspect of the subject.

Now, the author of this book may lay claim to being a humble student of both Chemistry and what may be generalised under the terms Mysticism and Transcendentalism; and he hopes that this perhaps rather unusual combination of studies has enabled him to take a broad-minded view of the theories of the alchemists, and to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards them.

With regard to the illustrations, the author must express his thanks to the authorities of the British Museum for permission to photograph engraved portraits and illustrations from old works in the

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British Museum Collections, and to G. H. Gabb, Esq., F.C.S., for permission to photograph engraved portraits in his possession.

The author's heartiest thanks are also due to Frank E. Weston, Esq., B.Sc., F.C.S., and W. G. Llewellyn, Esq., for their kind help in reading the proofs, &c.

H. S. R.

The Polytechnic, London, W. *October, 1910.*

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ALCHEMY: ANCIENT AND MODERN
CHAPTER I THE MEANING OF ALCHEMY

The Aim of Alchemy.

§ 1. Alchemy is generally understood to have been that art whose end was the transmutation of the so-called base metals into gold by means of an ill-defined something called the Philosopher’s Stone; but even from a purely physical standpoint, this is a somewhat superficial view. Alchemy was both a philosophy and an experimental science, and the transmutation of the metals was its end only in that this would give the final proof of the alchemistic hypotheses; in other words, Alchemy, considered from the physical standpoint, was the attempt to demonstrate experimentally on the material plane the validity of a certain philosophical view of the Cosmos. We see the genuine scientific spirit in the saying of one of the alchemists: “Would to God . . . all men might become adepts in our Art—for then gold, the great idol of mankind, would lose its value, and we should prize it only

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for its scientific teaching.”[6] Unfortunately, however, not many alchemists came up to this ideal; and for the majority of them, Alchemy did mean merely the possibility of making gold cheaply and gaining untold wealth.

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“Eirenæus Philalethes”: *An Open Entrance to the Closed Palace of the King* (see *The Hermetic Museum, Restored and Enlarged*, edited by A. E. Waite, 1893, vol. ii. p. 178).

The Transcendental Theory of Alchemy.

§ 2. By some mystics, however, the opinion has been expressed that Alchemy was not a physical art or science at all, that in no sense was its object the manufacture of material gold, and that its processes were not carried out on the physical plane. According to this transcendental theory, Alchemy was concerned with man’s soul, its object was the perfection, not of material substances, but of man in a spiritual sense. Those who hold this view identify Alchemy with, or at least regard it as a branch of, Mysticism, from which it is supposed to differ merely by the employment

of a special language; and they hold that the writings of the alchemists must not be understood literally as dealing with chemical operations, with furnaces, retorts, alembics, pelicans and the like, with salt, sulphur, mercury, gold and other material substances, but must be understood as grand allegories dealing with spiritual truths. According to this view, the figure of the transmutation of the “base” metals into gold symbolised the salvation of man—the transmutation of his soul into spiritual gold—which was to be obtained by the elimination of evil and the development of good by the grace of God; and the realisation of which salvation or spiritual transmutation [3]

may be described as the New Birth, or that condition of being known as union with the Divine. It would follow, of course, if this theory were true, that the genuine alchemists were pure mystics, and hence, that the development of chemical science was not due to their labours, but to pseudo-alchemists who so far misunderstood their writings as to have interpreted them in a literal sense.

Failure of the Transcendental Theory.

§ 3. This theory, however, has been effectively disposed of by Mr. Arthur Edward Waite, who points to the lives of the alchemists themselves in refutation of it. For their lives indisputably prove that the alchemists were occupied with chemical operations on the physical plane, and that for whatever motive, they toiled to discover a method for transmuting the commoner metals into actual, material gold. As Paracelsus himself says of the true “spagyric physicians,” who were the alchemists of his period: “These do not give themselves up to ease and idleness . . . But they devote themselves diligently to their labours, sweating whole nights over fiery furnaces. These do not kill the time with empty talk, but find their delight in their laboratory.” [7] The writings of the alchemists contain (mixed, however, with much that from the physical standpoint appears merely fantastic) accurate accounts of many chemical processes and discoveries, which cannot be explained away by any method of transcendental interpretation. There is not the slightest doubt that chemistry owes its origin

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to the direct labours of the alchemists themselves, and not to any who misread their writings.

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Paracelsus: “Concerning the Nature of Things” (see *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus*, edited by A. E. Waite, 1894, vol. i. p. 167).

The Qualifications of the Adept.

§ 4. At the same time, it is quite evident that there is a considerable element of Mysticism in the alchemistic doctrines; this has always been recognised; but, as a general rule, those who have approached the subject from the scientific point of view have considered this mystical element as of little or no importance. However, there are certain curious facts which are not satisfactorily explained by a purely physical theory of Alchemy, and, in our opinion, the recognition of the importance of this mystical element and of the true relation which existed between Alchemy and Mysticism is essential for the right understanding of the subject. We may notice, in

the first place, that the alchemists always speak of their Art as a Divine Gift, the highest secrets of which are not to be learnt from any books on the subject; and they invariably teach that the right mental attitude with regard to God is the first step necessary for the achievement of the *magnum opus*. As says one alchemist: "In the first place, let every devout and God-fearing chemist and student of this Art consider that this arcanum should be regarded, not only as a truly great, but as a most holy Art (seeing that it typifies and shadows out the highest heavenly good). Therefore, if any man desire to reach this great and unspeakable Mystery, he must remember that it is obtained not by the might of man, but by the grace of God, and that not our will or desire, but only the mercy of the Most High, can bestow it upon us. For this reason you must first of all cleanse your

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heart, lift it up to Him alone, and ask of Him this gift in true, earnest, and undoubting prayer. He alone can give and bestow it." [8] And "Basil Valentine": "First, there should be the invocation of God, flowing from the depth of a pure and sincere heart, and a conscience which should be free from all ambition, hypocrisy, and vice, as also from all cognate faults, such as arrogance, boldness, pride, luxury, worldly vanity, oppression of the poor, and similar iniquities, which should all be rooted up out of the heart—that when a man appears before the Throne of Grace, to regain the health of his body, he may come with a conscience weeded of all tares, and be changed into a pure temple of God cleansed of all that defiles." [9]

[8]

The Sophic Hydrolith; or, Water Stone of the Wise (see *The Hermetic Museum*, vol. i. p. 74).

[9]

The Triumphal Chariot of Antimony (Mr. A. E. Waite's translation, p. 13). See § 41.

Alchemistic Language.

§ 5. In the second place, we must notice the nature of alchemistic language. As we have hinted above, and as is at once apparent on opening any alchemistic book, the language of Alchemy is very highly mystical, and there is much that is perfectly unintelligible in a physical sense. Indeed, the alchemists habitually apologise for their vagueness on the plea that such mighty secrets may not be made more fully manifest. It is true, of course, that in the days of Alchemy's degeneracy a good deal of pseudo-mystical nonsense was written by the many impostors then abounding, but the mystical style of language is by no means confined to the later alchemistic writings. It is also

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true that the alchemists, no doubt, desired to shield their secrets from vulgar and profane eyes, and hence would necessarily adopt a symbolic language. But it is past belief that the language of the alchemist was due to some arbitrary plan; whatever it is to us, it was very real to him. Moreover, this argument cuts both ways, for those, also, who take a transcendental view of Alchemy regard its language as symbolical, although after a different manner. It is also, to say the least, curious, as Mr. A. E. Waite points out, that this mystical element should be found in the writings of the

earlier alchemists, whose manuscripts were not written for publication, and therefore ran no risk of informing the vulgar of the precious secrets of Alchemy. On the other hand, the transcendental method of translation does often succeed in making sense out of what is otherwise unintelligible in the writings of the alchemists. The above-mentioned writer remarks on this point: "Without in any way pretending to assert that this hypothesis reduces the literary chaos of the philosophers into a regular order, it may be affirmed that it materially elucidates their writings, and that it is wonderful how contradictions, absurdities, and difficulties seem to dissolve wherever it is applied." [10]

[10]

Arthur Edward Waite: *The Occult Sciences* (1891), p. 91.

The alchemists' love of symbolism is also conspicuously displayed in the curious designs with which certain of their books are embellished. We are not here referring to the illustrations of actual apparatus employed in carrying out the various operations of physical Alchemy, which are not infrequently found in the works of those alchemists who at the same time

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were practical chemists (Glauber, for example), but to pictures whose meaning plainly lies not upon the surface and whose import is clearly symbolical, whether their symbolism has reference to physical or to spiritual processes. Examples of such symbolic illustrations, many of which are highly fantastic, will be found in plates 2, 3, and 4. We shall refer to them again in the course of the present and following chapters.

Alchemists of a Mystical Type.

§ 6. We must also notice that, although there cannot be the slightest doubt that the great majority of alchemists were engaged in problems and experiments of a physical nature, yet there were a few men included within the alchemistic ranks who were entirely, or almost entirely, concerned with problems of a spiritual nature; Thomas Vaughan, for example, and Jacob Boehme, who boldly employed the language of Alchemy in the elaboration of his system of mystical philosophy. And particularly must we notice, as Mr. A. E. Waite has also indicated, the significant fact that the Western alchemists make unanimous appeal to Hermes Trismegistos as the greatest authority on the art of Alchemy, whose alleged writings are of an undoubtedly mystical character (see § 29). It is clear, that in spite of its apparently physical nature, Alchemy must have been in some way closely connected with Mysticism.

The Meaning of Alchemy.

§ 7. If we are ever to understand the meaning of Alchemy aright we must look at the subject from the alchemistic point of view. In modern times there has come about a divorce between Religion and Science in men's minds (though more recently a unifying

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tendency has set in); but it was otherwise with the alchemists, their religion and their science were closely united. We have said that "Alchemy was the attempt to

demonstrate experimentally on the material plane the validity of a certain philosophical view of the Cosmos”; now, this “philosophical view of the Cosmos” was Mysticism. **Alchemy had its origin in the attempt to apply, in a certain manner, the principles of Mysticism to the things of the physical plane**, and was, therefore, of a dual nature, on the one hand spiritual and religious, on the other, physical and material. As the anonymous author of *Lives of Alchemistical Philosophers* (1815) remarks, “The universal chemistry, by which the science of alchemy opens the knowledge of all nature, being founded on *first principles* forms analogy with whatever knowledge is founded on the *same first principles*. . . . Saint John describes the redemption, or the new creation of the fallen soul, on the *same first principles*, until the consummation of the work, in which the Divine tincture transmutes the base metal of the soul into a perfection, that will pass the fire of eternity;”[11] that is to say, Alchemy and the mystical regeneration of man (in this writer’s opinion) are analogous processes on different planes of being, because they are founded on the same first principles.

[11]

F. B.: *Lives of Alchemistical Philosophers* (1815), Preface, p. 3.

Opinions of other Writers.

§ 8. We shall here quote the opinions of two modern writers, as to the significance of Alchemy; one a mystic, the other a man of science. Says Mr. A. E. Waite, “If the authors of the ‘Suggestive Inquiry’ and of ‘Remarks on Alchemy and the

[9] Alchemists’ [two books putting forward the transcendental theory] had considered the lives of the symbolists, as well as the nature of the symbols, their views would have been very much modified; they would have found that the true method of Hermetic interpretation lies in a middle course; but the errors which originated with merely typographical investigations were intensified by a consideration of the great alchemical theorem, which, *par excellence*, is one of universal development, which acknowledges that every substance contains undeveloped resources and potentialities, and can be brought outward and forward into perfection. They [the generality of alchemists] applied their theory only to the development of metallic substances from a lower to a higher order, but we see by their writings that the grand hierophants of Oriental and Western alchemy alike were continually haunted by brief and imperfect glimpses of glorious possibilities for man, if the evolution of his nature were accomplished along the lines of their theory.”[12] Mr. M. M. Pattison Muir, M.A.,

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says: “. . . alchemy aimed at giving experimental proof of a certain theory of the whole system of nature, including humanity. The practical culmination of the alchemical quest presented a threefold aspect; the alchemists sought the stone of wisdom, for by gaining that they gained the control of wealth; they sought the universal panacea, for that would give them the power of enjoying wealth and life; they sought the soul of the world, for thereby they could hold communion with spiritual existences, and enjoy the fruition of spiritual life. The object of their search

was to satisfy their material needs, their intellectual capacities, and their spiritual yearnings. The alchemists of the nobler sort always made the first of these objects subsidiary to the other two. . . ."[13]

[12]

Arthur Edward Waite: *Lives of Alchemystical Philosophers* (1888), pp. 30, 31. As says another writer of the mystical school of thought: "If we look upon the subject [of Alchemy] from the point which affords the widest view, it may be said that Alchemy has two aspects: the simply material, and the religious. The dogma that Alchemy was only a form of chemistry is untenable by any one who has read the works of its chief professors. The doctrine that Alchemy was religion only, and that its chemical references were all blinds, is equally untenable in the face of history, which shows that many of its most noted professors were men who had made important discoveries in the domain of common chemistry, and were in no way notable as teachers either of ethics or religion" ("Sapere Aude," *The Science of Alchemy, Spiritual and Material* (1893), pp. 3 and 4).

[13]

M. M. Pattison Muir, M.A.: *The Story of Alchemy and the Beginnings of Chemistry* (1902), pp. 105 and 106.

The Basic Idea of Alchemy.

§ 9. The famous axiom beloved by every alchemist—"What is above is as that which is below, and what is below is as that which is above"—although of questionable origin, tersely expresses the basic idea of Alchemy. The alchemists postulated and believed in a very real sense in the essential unity of the Cosmos. Hence, they held that there is a correspondence or analogy existing between things spiritual and things physical, the same laws operating in each realm. As writes Sendivogius ". . . the Sages have been taught of God that this natural world is only an image and material copy of a heavenly and spiritual pattern; that the very existence of this world is based upon the reality of its celestial archetype; and that God has created it in imitation of the spiritual and invisible universe, in order that men

[11]

might be the better enabled to comprehend His heavenly teaching, and the wonders of His absolute and ineffable power and wisdom. Thus the Sage sees heaven reflected in Nature as in a mirror; and he pursues this Art, not for the sake of gold or silver, but for the love of the knowledge which it reveals; he jealously conceals it from the sinner and the scornful, lest the mysteries of heaven should be laid bare to the vulgar gaze." [14]

[14]

Michael Sendivogius: *The New Chemical Light, Pt. II., Concerning Sulphur (The Hermetic Museum, vol. ii. p. 138).*

The alchemists held that the metals are one in essence, and spring from the same seed in the womb of nature, but are not all equally matured and perfect, gold being the highest product of Nature's powers. In gold, the alchemist saw a picture of the

regenerate man, resplendent with spiritual beauty, overcoming all temptations and proof against evil; whilst he regarded lead—the basest of the metals—as typical of the sinful and unregenerate man, stamped with the hideousness of sin and easily overcome by temptation and evil; for whilst gold withstood the action of fire and all known corrosive liquids (save *aqua regia* alone), lead was most easily acted upon. We are told that the Philosopher's Stone, which would bring about the desired grand transmutation, is of a species with gold itself and purer than the purest; understood in the mystical sense this means that the regeneration of man can be effected only by Goodness itself—in terms of Christian theology, by the Power of the Spirit of Christ. The Philosopher's Stone was regarded as symbolical of Christ Jesus, and in this sense we can understand the otherwise incredible powers attributed to it.

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The Law of Analogy.

§ 10. With the theories of physical Alchemy we shall deal at length in the following chapter, but enough has been said to indicate the analogy existing, according to the alchemistic view, between the problem of the perfection of the metals, *i.e.*, the transmutation of the “base” metals into gold, and the perfection or transfiguration of spiritual man; and it might also be added, between these problems and that of the perfection of man considered physiologically. To the alchemistic philosopher these three problems were one: the same problem on different planes of being; and the solution was likewise one. He who held the key to one problem held the key to all three, provided he understood the analogy between matter and spirit. The point is not, be it noted, whether these problems are in reality one and the same; the main doctrine of analogy, which is, indeed, an essential element in all true mystical philosophy, will, we suppose, meet with general consent; but it will be contended (and rightly, we think) that the analogies drawn by the alchemists are fantastic and by no means always correct, though possibly there may be more truth in them than appears at first sight. The point is not that these analogies are correct, but that they were regarded as such by all true alchemists. Says the author of *The Sophic Hydrolith*: “. . . the practice of this Art enables us to understand, not merely the marvels of Nature, but the nature of God Himself, in all its unspeakable glory. It shadows forth, in a wonderful manner . . . all the articles of the Christian faith, and the reason why man must pass through much tribulation and anguish, and fall

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a prey to death, before he can rise again to a new life.”[15] A considerable portion of this curious alchemistic work is taken up in expounding the analogy believed to exist between the Philosopher's Stone and “the Stone which the builders rejected,” Christ Jesus; and the writer concludes: “Thus . . . I have briefly and simply set forth to you the perfect analogy which exists between our earthly and chemical and the true and heavenly Stone, Jesus Christ, whereby we may attain unto certain beatitude and perfection, not only in earthly but also in eternal life.”[16] And likewise says Peter Bonus: “I am firmly persuaded that any unbeliever who got truly to know this Art, would straightway confess the truth of our Blessed Religion, and believe in the Trinity and in our Lord Jesus Christ.”[17]

[15]

The Sophic Hydrolith; or, Water Stone of the Wise (see *The Hermetic Museum*, vol. i. p. 88).

[16]

Ibid. p. 114.

[17]

Peter Bonus: *The New Pearl of Great Price* (Mr. A. E. Waite's translation, p. 275).

The Dual Nature of Alchemy.

§ 11. For the most part, the alchemists were chiefly engaged with the carrying out of the alchemistic theory on the physical plane, *i.e.*, with the attempt to transmute the "base" metals into the "noble" ones; some for the love of knowledge, but alas! the vast majority for the love of mere wealth. But all who were worthy of the title of "alchemist" realised at times, more or less dimly, the possibility of the application of the same methods to man and the glorious result of the transmutation of man's soul into spiritual gold. There were a few who had a

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clearer vision of this ideal, those who devoted their activities entirely, or almost so, to the attainment of this highest goal of alchemistic philosophy, and concerned themselves little if at all with the analogous problem on the physical plane. The theory that Alchemy originated in the attempt to demonstrate the applicability of the principles of Mysticism to the things of the physical realm brings into harmony the physical and transcendental theories of Alchemy and the various conflicting facts advanced in favour of each. It explains the existence of the above-mentioned, two very different types of alchemists. It explains the appeal to the works attributed to Hermes, and the presence in the writings of the alchemists of much that is clearly mystical. And finally, it is in agreement with such statements as we have quoted above from *The Sophic Hydrolith* and elsewhere, and the general religious tone of the alchemistic writings.

PLATE 2.



SYMBOLICAL ILLUSTRATION Representing the Trinity of Body, Soul and Spirit.

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“Body, Soul and Spirit.”

§ 12. In accordance with our primary object as stated in the preface, we shall confine our attention mainly to the physical aspect of Alchemy; but in order to understand its theories, it appears to us to be essential to realise the fact that Alchemy was an attempted application of the principles of Mysticism to the things of the physical world. The supposed analogy between man and the metals sheds light on what otherwise would be very difficult to understand. It helps to make plain why the alchemists attributed moral qualities to the metals—some are called “imperfect,” “base”; others are said to be “perfect,” “noble.” And especially does it help to explain the alchemistic

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notions regarding the nature of the metals. The alchemists believed that the metals were constructed after the manner of man, into whose constitution three factors were regarded as entering: body, soul, and spirit. As regards man, mystical philosophers generally use these terms as follows: “body” is the outward

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