NATURE AND LANGUAGE OF ALCHEMY

In my book on the principles and methods of sacred art[1] I more than once had occasion to refer to alchemy, by way of comparison, when considering artistic creation as it appears within a sacred tradition, not from the point of view of its outward aesthetic aspect, but as an inward process whose goal is the ripening, 'transmutation', or rebirth of the soul of the artist himself. Alchemy too was called an art – even the 'royal art' (*ars regia*) – by its masters, and, with its image of the transmutation of base metals into the noble metals gold and silver, serves as a highly evocative symbol of the inward process referred to. In fact alchemy may be called the art of the transmutations of the soul. In saying this I am not seeking to deny that alchemists also knew and practised metallurgical procedures such as the purification and alloying of metals; their real work, however, for which all these procedures were merely the outward supports or 'operational' symbols, was the transmutation of the soul. The testimony of the alchemists on this point is unanimous. For example, in *The Book of Seven Chapters*, which has been attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, the father of Near-Eastern and Western alchemy, we read: 'See, I have opened unto you what was hid: The [alchemical] work is with you and amongst you; in that it is to be found within you and is enduring; you will always have it present, wherever you are, on land or on sea . . .'[2] And in the famous dialogue between the Arab king Khalid and the

[1] *Sacred Art of East and West*, Perennial Books, London 1967.
[2] *Bibliothèque des philosophes chimiques*, published by G. Salmon, Paris, 1741.

sage Morienus (or Marianus) it is told how the king asked the sage where one could find the thing with which one could accomplish the Hermetic work. At this Morienus was silent, and it was only after much hesitation that he answered: 'O King, I declare the truth to you, that God in His mercy has created this extraordinary thing in yourself; wherever you may be, it is always in you, and cannot be separated from you . . .'[3]

From all this it will be seen that the difference between alchemy and any other sacred art is that in alchemy mastery is attained, not visibly on the outward artisanal plane as in architecture and painting, but only inwardly; for the transmutation of lead into gold which constitutes the alchemical work far exceeds the possibilities of artisanal skill. The miraculousness of this process, effecting a 'leap' which, according to the alchemists, nature by herself can only accomplish in an unforeseeably long time highlights the difference between corporeal possibilities and those of the soul. While a mineral substance, whose solutions, crystallizations, smeltings, and burnings can reflect up to a point the changes within the soul, must remain confined within definite limits, the soul, for its part, can overcome the corresponding 'psychic' limits, thanks to its meeting with the Spirit, which is bound by no form. Lead represents the chaotic, 'heavy', and sick condition of metal or of the inward man, while gold – 'congealed light' and 'earthy sun' – expresses the perfection of both metallic and human existence. According to the alchemists' way of looking at things, gold is the real goal of the metallic nature; all other metals are either preparatory steps or experiments to that end. Gold alone possesses in itself a harmonious equilibrium of all metallic properties, and therefore also possesses durability. 'Copper is restless until it becomes gold', said Meister Eckhart, referring in reality to the soul, which longs for its own eternal being. Thus, in contradistinction from the usual reproach against them, the alchemists did not seek, by means of secretly conserved formulas in which only they believed, to make gold from ordinary metals. Whoever really wished to attempt this belonged to the so-called 'charcoal burners' who, without any connection with the living alchemical tradition, and purely on the basis of a study of the texts which they could only understand in a literal sense, sought to achieve the 'great work'.

As a way which can lead man to a knowledge of his own eternal being, alchemy can be compared with mysticism. This is already indicated by the fact that alchemical expressions were adopted by Christian, and even more so by Islamic, mysticism. The alchemical symbols of perfection refer to the spiritual mastery of the human state, to the return to the centre or mean, to what the three monotheistic religions call the regaining of the earthly paradise. Nicolas Flamel (1330-1417), who as an alchemist has recourse to the language of his Christian faith, writes of the completion of the work, that it 'makes man good by effacing from him the root of all sins, namely covetousness, so that he becomes generous, mild, pious, believing, and God-fearing, however bad he may have been previously; because from now on he is continually filled with the great grace and mercy which he has received from God, and with the depth of His wonderful works'.[4]

The essence and aim of mysticism is union with God. Alchemy does not speak of this. What is related to the mystical way, however, is the alchemical aim to regain

[3] *ibid*, II. The dialogue of the Arab king Khalid with the monk Morienus or Marianus was probably the first alchemical treatise to be translated from Arabic into Latin.

[4] *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

the original 'nobility' of human nature and its symbolism; for union with God is possible only by virtue of that which, in spite of the incommensurable gulf between the creature and God, unites the former to the latter – and this is the 'theomorphism' of Adam, which was 'displaced' or rendered ineffective by the Fall. The purity of the symbol man must be regained, before the human form can be reassumed into its infinite and divine Archetype. Spiritually understood, the transmutation of lead into gold is nothing other than the regaining of the original nobility of human nature. Just as the inimitable quality of gold cannot be produced by the outward summation of metallic properties such as mass, hardness, colour, etc., so 'Adamic' perfection is no mere assemblage of virtues. It is as inimitable as gold, and the man who has 'realized' this perfection cannot be compared with others. Everything in him is 'original', in the sense that his being is fully awakened and united with its origin. As the realization of this state necessarily belongs to the mystical way, alchemy can in fact be regarded as a branch of mysticism.

And yet, the 'style' of alchemy is so different from that of mysticism, which is directly based on a religious faith, that some have been tempted to call it a 'mysticism without God'. This expression, however, is perfectly inept, not to say completely false, for alchemy presupposes a belief in God, and almost all its masters place great importance on the practice of prayer. The expression is true only to the extent that alchemy as such possesses no theological framework. Thus the theological perspective so characteristic of mysticism does not delimit the spiritual horizon of alchemy. Jewish, Christian, or Islamic mysticism is centred on the contemplation of a revealed truth, an aspect of God, or an 'idea' in the deepest sense of the word; it is the spiritual realization of this idea. Alchemy, for its part, is primarily neither theological (or metaphysical) nor ethical; it looks on the play of the powers of the soul from a purely cosmological point of view, and treats the soul as a 'substance' which has to be purified, dissolved, and crystallized anew. Alchemy acts like a science or art of nature, because for it all states of inward consciousness are but ways of the one and only 'Nature', which encompasses both the outward, visible and corporeal forms, and the inward and invisible forms of the soul.

For all that, alchemy is not without a contemplative aspect. It by no means consists of mere pragmatism void of spiritual insight. Its spiritual, and in a certain sense contemplative, nature resides directly in its concrete form, in the analogy between the mineral realm and that of the soul; for this similarity can only be perceived by a vision which can look on material things qualitatively – inwardly, in a certain sense – and which grasps the things of the soul 'materially' – that is to say objectively and concretely. In other words, alchemical cosmology is essentially a doctrine of being, an ontology. The metallurgical symbol is not merely a makeshift, an approximate description of inward processes; like every true symbol, it is a kind of revelation.

With its 'impersonal' way of looking at the world of the soul, alchemy stands in closer relation to the 'way of knowledge' (gnosis) than to the 'way of love'. For it is the prerogative of gnosis – in the true and not the heretical sense of the expression – to regard the 'I'-bound soul 'objectively', instead of merely experiencing it subjectively. This is why it was a mysticism founded on the 'way of knowledge' that on occasion used alchemical modes of expression, if in fact it did not actually assimilate the forms of alchemy with the degrees and modes of its own 'way'.

The expression 'mysticism' comes from 'secret' or 'to

withdraw' (Greek *myein*); the essence of mysticism eludes a merely rational interpretation, and the same holds good in the case of alchemy.

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Another reason why alchemical doctrine hides itself in riddles is because it is not meant for everyone. The 'royal art' presupposes a more than ordinary understanding, and also a certain cast of soul, failing which its practice may involve no small dangers for the soul. 'Is it not recognized', writes Artephius, a famous alchemist of the Middle Ages,[5] 'that ours is a cabbalistic[6] art? By this I mean that it is passed on orally, and is full of secrets. But you, poor deluded fellow, are you so simple as to believe that we would clearly and openly teach the greatest and most important of all secrets, with the result that you would take our words literally? I assure you in good faith (for I am not so jealous as other philosophers), that whoever would take literally what the other philosophers (that is, the other alchemists) have written, will lose himself in the recesses of a labyrinth from which he will never escape, for want of Ariadne's thread to keep him on the right path and bring him safely out . . .'[7] And Synesios,[8] who probably lived in the fourth century A.D., writes: 'The (true alchemists) only express themselves in symbols, metaphors, and similes, so that they can only be understood by saints, sages, and souls endowed with understanding. For this reason they have observed in their works a certain way and a certain rule, of such a kind that the wise man may understand and, perhaps after some stumbling, attain to everything that is secretly described therein.'[9] Finally Geber, who resumes the whole of medieval alchemical science in his *Summa*, declares: 'One must not explain this art in obscure words only; on the other hand, one must not explain it so clearly that all may understand it. I therefore teach it in such a way that nothing will remain hidden to the wise man, even though it may strike mediocre minds as quite obscure; the foolish and the ignorant, for their part, will understand none of it at all . . .'[10] One may well be surprised that, in spite of these warnings, of which many more examples could be furnished, many people – especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – believed that by diligent study of the alchemical texts they would be able to find the means of making gold. It is true that alchemist authors often imply that they preserve the secret of alchemy only to prevent anyone unworthy acquiring a dangerous power. They thus made use of an unavoidable misunderstanding to keep unqualified persons at a distance. Yet they never spoke of the seemingly material aims of their art, without also mentioning the truth in the same breath. Whoever was motivated by worldly passion would automatically fail to grasp the essential in any explanation. Thus in the *Hermetic Triumph* it is written: 'The philosophers' stone (with which one can turn base metals into gold) grants long life and freedom from disease to the one who possesses it, and in its power brings more gold and silver than all the mightiest conquerors have between them. In addition, this treasure has an advantage above all others in this

[5] Artephius is perhaps the latinized name of an otherwise unknown Arab author. (See: E. von Lippmann, *Entstehung und Ausbreitung der Alchemie*, Berlin, 1919.) He must have lived before 1250.

[6] 'Cabbalistic' is understood here in the etymological sense of the word, that is, 'handed down orally'.

[7] *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

[8] It is disputed whether or not Synesios is to be identified with the Bishop of Cyrene of that name (379–415). The latter was a pupil of the Alexandrian woman Platonist Hypatia.

[9] *Bibl. des phil.*

[10] *ibid.*

life, namely, that whoever enjoys it will be perfectly happy – the very sight of it making him happy – and will never be assailed by the fear of losing it.'[11] The first sentence appears to confirm the outward interpretation of alchemy, whereas the second indicates as clearly as is deemed desirable, that the possession in question here is inward and spiritual. The same is to be found in the already mentioned *Book of Seven Chapters*: 'With the help of Almighty God this [philosophers'] stone will free you and protect you from the severest illnesses; it will also guard you against sadness and trouble, and especially against whatever may be harmful to body and soul. It will lead you from darkness to light, from the desert to home, and from indigence to riches.'[12] The double meaning which is to be perceived in all these quotations is in keeping with the often expressed intention to teach the 'wise' and mislead the 'foolish'.

Because the alchemical mode of expression, with all its 'hermetical' taciturnity, is no arbitrary invention, but something entirely authentic, Geber was able to say, in an appendix to his famous *Summa*: 'Whenever I have seemed to speak most clearly and openly about our science, I have in reality expressed myself most obscurely and have hidden the object of my discourse most fully. And yet in spite of all that, I have never clothed the alchemical work in allegories or riddles, but have dealt with it in clear and intelligible words and have described it honestly, just as I know it to be and have myself learnt it by divine inspiration . . .' On the other hand, other alchemists have purposely composed their writings in such a way that the reading of them brings about the separation of the sheep from the goats. The last mentioned work is an example of this, for Geber says in the same appendix: 'I hereby declare that in this *Summa* I have not taught our science systematically, but have spread it out here and there in various chapters; for if I had presented it coherently and in logical order, the evil-minded, who might have misused it, would be able to learn it just as easily as people of good will . . .' If one studies closely the seemingly metallurgically-intended expositions of Geber, one will discover, in the midst of the more or less artisanal descriptions of chemical procedures, remarkable leaps of thought: for example, the author, who has not previously mentioned a 'substance' (in connection with the 'work'), will suddenly say: 'Now take this substance, which you know well enough, and put it into the vessel . . .' Or suddenly, after stressing at length that metals are not transmuted by outward means, he speaks of a 'medicine that heals all sick metals' by turning them into silver and gold. On each such occasion, mental understanding is rudely brought to a halt, and this indeed is the purpose of an exposition of this kind. The pupil is made to experience directly the limits of his reason (*ratio*), so that finally, as Geber says of himself, he may look within himself: 'In turning back on myself and meditating on the way in which nature produces metals in the interior of the earth, I perceived that true substance which nature has prepared for us, so as to enable us to perfect them *on* earth . . .' Here one will note a certain similarity with the method of Zen Buddhism, which seeks to transcend the limits of the mental faculty by concentrated meditation on certain paradoxes enunciated by a master.

That is the spiritual threshold which the alchemist has to cross. The ethical threshold, as we have seen, is the temptation to pursue the alchemical art only on account of gold. Alchemists constantly insist that the greatest

[11] *ibid.*
[12] *ibid.*

obstacle to their work is covetousness. This vice is for their art what pride is for the 'way of love' and what self-deception is for the 'way of knowledge'. Here covetousness is simply another name for egoism, for attachment to one's own limited ego in thrall to passion. On the other hand, the requirement that the pupil of Hermes must only seek to transmute elements in order to help the poor – or nature herself – in need, recalls the Buddhist vow to seek the highest enlightenment only with a view to the salvation of all creatures. Compassion alone delivers us from the artfulness of the ego, which in its every action seeks only to mirror itself.

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It might be objected, that my attempt to explain the meaning of alchemy is an infringement of the alchemists' prime requirement, namely, the need for reserve in this domain. To this it may be answered that it is in any case impossible to exhaust by mere words the meaning of the symbols which contain the key to the innermost secret of alchemy. What can to a large extent be explained are the cosmological doctrines fundamental to the alchemical art, its view on man and nature, and also its general mode of procedure. And even if one were able to interpret the whole of the Hermetical work, there would always be something left over which no written word can convey and which is indispensable for the perfection of the work. Like every sacred art in the true sense of the term (that is, like every 'method' which can lead to the realization of higher states of consciousness) alchemy depends on an initiation: the permission to undertake the work must normally be obtained from a master, and only in the rarest instances, when the chain from man to man has been broken, may it happen that the spiritual influence leaps miraculously over the gap. In the conversation between King Khalid and Morienus it is said concerning this: 'The foundation of this art is that whoever wishes to pass it on must himself have received the teaching from a master . . . It is also necessary that the master should often have practised it in front of his pupil . . . For whoever knows well the order of this work and has experienced it himself, cannot be compared with one who has only sought it in books . . .'[13] And the alchemist Denis Zachaire[14] writes: 'Above all I should like it to be understood – in case one has not yet learned it – that this divine philosophy far exceeds purely human power; still less can we acquire it from books, unless God has introduced it into our hearts by the power of His Holy Spirit, or has taught us through the mouth of a living man . . .'[15]

[13] *ibid.*
[14] French alchemist of the Sixteenth century.
[15] *Bibl. des phil. chim.* II.