



Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

Lesson 22 : Reading complex emblems.

In the last lesson I asked you to attempt a reading of a rather complex looking emblem. I will now present a detailed reading. This may differ in many ways from your own, though I would hope that you were able to identify many of the key components of the emblem and recognised most of the interrelationships between these symbols. This emblem has a structured geometry which helps us analyse and investigate the individual symbols.



The first thing we note is a vertical division into the heavenly world and the earthly world. The heavenly world pours down rays of influences onto the earth below. The woman at the foot of the tree has a text which rises vertically upwards "A wise person is ruled by the stars" while another text is presented horizontally along the sceptre which she holds out in her right hand "That which is below is as that which is above". This, of course, you will have recognised is from the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes*. In her other hand she holds open a book labelled "wisdom". This is the main human figure in the emblem

who engages with us. All the other figures are wrapped up in their own realm of work, but this woman is reaching out to us trying to draw our attention to something very important. It is no accident therefore that she stands in the centre of the emblem space beside a tree which spans the worlds, its roots in the earth and with its canopy touching the heavens. This "tree of life" in a sense envelops all the other symbols in the emblem, and the emblem could perhaps be seen in essence to be presenting the hermetic maxim that the processes that can be worked in the earthly realm mirror those in the heavenly, and that this can be reduced essentially to the symbolic image of the tree.

So now we can see what the emblem is picturing to us in this little drama, we can begin to examine in detail something of the mass of symbolism found here which amplifies and develops this theme in particular ways.

Firstly, let us look at the realm of the heavens. High up, above the topmost clouds we see the highest heaven with the Trinity - the Father (Tetragammmaton), the Son in the lamb and the Holy Spirit in the dove. From out of the Trinity rays descend and animate a middle heaven. At the top of this middle space the two angels present a banner which proclaims this very thing to us "All things are from the One, all things are in the One, all things are through the One". Here we have the region of the zodiac with its twelve signs, and below this the seven planets. Rays descend from out of this middle heaven and touch the earth realm where various symbols are brought to life reflecting the essence of these spiritual forces. Inside the sphere of the zodiac we see a double ouroboros and within that a series of spheres. These have labels in Latin and reflect series of triplicities.

The year or cycle of the winds	The year or cycle of the Sun	The year or cycle of the stars
Philosophical Mercury	Corporeal Mercury	Common or vulgar Mercury
Fixed Sulphur	Ethereal Sulphur	Combustible Sulphur
The Central Salt	The Salt of the Elements	Earthly Salt

Inside this is a reference to the four fires "The four fires in relation to the work are being discovered". Then within this is a triangle in which the caduceus symbol of mercury is seen together with upward and downward pointing triangles and their union in the hexagram.

The clouds, which part to show the heaven of the fixed stars, divide this heavenly realm of spiritual forces and principles from the earthly sphere below.

We find a reflection of the twelve zodiacal signs and the seven planets in the branches of the tree, in the form of various alchemical symbols. The lower group of seven are the common planetary symbols for the metals, but above these are alchemical symbols for various substances, including Sulphur, Tartar, Sal Ammoniac, Salt, Auripigment, Verdigris, Alum among others. These symbolise twelve alchemical substances which most actively reveal or embody the energies of the zodiacal signs.

The tree grows out of a plain, bounded on the left by a mountain and on the left by a grotto or cave. Above the mountain on the left a phoenix rises from the flaming pyre on the summit. Just below the phoenix are two spheres one containing a salamander (a

reference to the element fire), while the other has a bird representing the air element to us.

Above the alchemist's grotto is the eagle with spheres of water and the element earth. The mountain on the left has an outer fire burning on its summit, the grotto as we see has the alchemical fires of furnaces burning inside it.

As we have already noted, rays pour down from the spiritual realm above. Two touch the Phoenix and the Eagle. Another seven rays in all descend to the earth. One to the left of the woman at the tree descends and illumines two people who are in the act of killing a dragon. In some alchemical contexts the dragon can indicate the primal energies that have to be subdued at the beginning of the work. Further to the left we see three birds, which as we have noted in an earlier lesson, often represent other stages of the alchemical process, the Black crow, the Peacock spreading its tail, and the white swan. The text here reads "I am the black the white the yellow and the red". To the right of the tree we see the rays descend and illumine a Moon-headed and a Solar-headed figure who walk with their lions towards the alchemical grotto. Here they are met by Mercury-Hermes and we are given a glimpse into the alchemical laboratory where the process is under way, tended by



two alchemists. Above the lintel of the grotto is a stone bearing a diagram and the inscription "May your days be long and healthy and may you have fame and infinite riches". The circular diagram is a symbolic quotation from emblem 21 of the *Atalanta fugiens* - "From a man and a woman make a circle, then a square, a triangle and finally a circle and you will have the philosophers' Stone." It also incorporates the three alchemical principles - salt, sulphur and mercury.

Set on top of this is a stone with a depiction of two interlaced triangles each with a planet at their vertices and the sun at the centre, and atop this is a pelican nourishing its young with its own blood, one of well known symbols for the final stages of the alchemical process.

In essence this emblem is presenting to us the hermetic concept that the spiritual forces in the heavenly world are reflected down into the earthly realm, where they manifest as the work of alchemy in transforming the elements and prime matter, through a series of seven stages. Here the label below indicates that one of the products will be the making of the potable gold.

I am sure that through your study of the previous lessons in this course you were able to read much of this for yourself. If not then perhaps you should read over the earlier lessons where many of the analytical tools I have used here are demonstrated. This emblem, though complex and full of imagery, is at root quite simple. Other emblems though simpler in terms of imagery may be more obscure and difficult to read. Although this emblem was a bit of a challenge, if we follow through the work we have done in the course we will find it relatively easy to read.

I hope you will realise that all the alchemical ideas presented in such an emblem relate together and support one another, so that it is totally unnecessary to import ideas from other traditions in order to see what this emblem is telling us. This course has tried to show that alchemical imagery can and should always be explored from within itself. The alchemists who created these images were not schooled in our modern tendency to integrate ideas and imagery from diverse traditions and cultures. The eclectic view, popularised in recent times, that we can throw any ideas or traditions at a subject like alchemy in order to understand it, is, for anyone who knows the richness of alchemical symbolism, completely flawed. How much more satisfying to understand alchemical emblems from inside alchemy without recourse to spurious associations with tarot, kabbalistic, or entirely contrived shamanistic ideas which have no reality outside people's imaginations. The alchemical emblems have their own inner strength because the imagery is so tightly woven together. Alchemical emblems are not a patchwork of diverse images merged and forced together but are intricately and beautifully structured out of alchemical ideas and symbols. Neither are they the product of a 'surrealist' or unconscious prompting, but are created by a clear mind in order to illustrate an alchemical point.

I will now give you, in the way of an exercise, a further elaborate emblem. Again you should try and read it using the methods pursued in the course. This is one of the central images from the *Ripley Scroll* which dates at least from the early 16th century and is associated with the important early English alchemist George Ripley. This presents an alchemy rooted in practical work but wrapped in an allegorical form. There are a few terms on the image which will need some explanation at the outset. The words "spus" and "aia" are contracted Latin words for 'spirit' and 'soul'.

The writing around the topmost vessel is :

"The white Sea - the white Moon - the white Sun",

while that around the lower vessel is:

"The red Sea - the red Moon - the red Sun".

The text below may help you a little in understanding the symbolism. Here is my somewhat modernised version:

On the ground there is a hill
Also a serpent within a well
His tail is long with wings wide
All ready to fly on every side
Repair the well round about
That the serpent pass not out
For if that he be from there gone
You lose the virtue of the stone

What is the ground thou may know here
And also the well that is so clear
And also the serpent with his tail
Or else the work shall little avail

The well must burn in Water clear
Take good heed for this thy Fire
The Fire with Water burnt shall be
And Water with Fire wash shall he
Then Earth on Fire shall be put
And Water with Air shall be knit

Thus ye shall go to putrefaction
And bring the serpent to reduction

First he shall be black as any crow
And down in his den shall lie full low
Swollen as a toad that lies on the ground
Bursting with bladders fitting so round
They shall break and lie full plain
And thus with craft the serpent is slain

He shall show colours there many a one
And turn as white as is bone
With the water that he was in
Wash him clean from his sin
And let him drink a little and a light
And that shall make him fair and white
The which whiteness is ever abiding

Lo ! here is the very full finishing
Of the White Stone and the Red
Lo ! here is the true deed

