The Philosopher's Stone

Paracelsus (1493–1541)

Paracelsus (born Theophratus Bombastus von Hohenheim) was a self-described revolutionary. In the presence of his students, he burned the great medieval compilation of medical knowledge, the Canon of Avicenna. Paracelsus looked upon the metals as fundamentally identical with one another, differing only in their degree of maturity. Gold, Paracelsus contended, is the most perfect or mature, as is indicated by its resistance to decay and corruption. It is produced when the natural processes that produce metal in the Earth are carried to their completion. When this process is stopped short for any reason, one of the baser metals is the result. Alchemy was the attempt to carry to fruition the natural processes whereby gold is produced in the Earth. In this approach, its rich vocabulary expressed the organic conception of nature in vivid organic terms—fermentation, vegetation, digestion, generation, maturation.

A school known as iatrochemistry, led by Jean Baptiste van Helmont (1579–1644), formed around the writings of Paracelsus. The key was to be alchemy but a reformed alchemy informed by magic and mystical experience. This school regarded chemistry as the servant of medicine. The books that this school sponsored consisted mostly of medical recipes that were usually prefaced by a superficial stab at theory. The theory itself was based on Paracelsus' belief that there are three principles—salt, sulfur, and mercury—out of which all mixed bodies are compounded.

You who are skilled in alchemy, and as many others as promise yourselves great riches or chiefly desire to make gold and silver, which alchemy in different ways promises and teaches, equally, too, you who willingly undergo toil and vexations, and wish not to be freed from them, until you have attained your rewards, and the fulfillment of the promises made to you; experience teaches this every day, that out of thousands of you not even one accomplishes his desire. Is this a failure of nature or of art? I say no, but it is rather the fault of fate, or of the lack of skill of the operator.

Since, therefore, the characters of the signs, of the stars and planets of heaven, together with the other names, inverted words, recipes, materials, and instruments are thoroughly well-known to such as are

Source: Paracelsus. 1976. *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus the Great: Now for the First Time Faithfully Translated into English.* Trans. Arthur Edward Waite. Boulder, CO: Shambhala, pp. 3–11.

acquainted with this art, it would be altogether superfluous to return to these same subjects in the present book, although the use of such signs, names, and characters at the proper time is by no means without advantage.

But herein will be noticed another way of treating alchemy different from the previous method, and deduced by Seven Canons from the sevenfold series of the metals. This, indeed, will not give scope for a pompous parade of words, but, nevertheless, in the consideration of those Canons, everything which should be separated from alchemy will be treated at sufficient length, and, moreover, many secrets of other things are herein contained. Hence, too, result certain marvelous speculations and new operations which frequently differ from the writings and opinions of ancient operators and natural philosophers, but have been discovered and confirmed by full proof and experimentation.

Moreover, in this art nothing is more true than this, though it be little known and gains small confidence. All the fault and cause of difficulty in alchemy, whereby very many persons are reduced to poverty, and others labor in vain, is wholly and solely lack of skill in the operator, and the defect or excess of materials, whether in quantity or quality, from which it ensues that, in the course of operation, things are wasted or reduced to nothing. If the true process shall have been found, the substance itself while transmuting approaches daily more and more towards perfection. The straight road is easy, but it is found by very few.

Sometimes it may happen that a speculative artist may, by his own eccentricity, think out for himself some new method in alchemy, be the consequence anything or nothing. He need do nothing in order to reduce something into nothing, and again bring back something out of nothing. Yet, this proverb of the incredulous is not wholly false. Destruction perfects that which is good; for the good cannot appear on account of that which conceals it. The good is least good while it is thus, concealed. The concealment must be removed so that the good may be able freely to appear in its own brightness. For example, the mountain, the sand, the earth, or the stone in which a metal has grown is such a concealment. Each one of the visible metals is a concealment of the other six metals.

By the element of fire all that is imperfect is destroyed and taken away, as, for instance, the five metals, Mercury, Jupiter [tin], Mars [iron], Venus [copper], and Saturn [lead]. On the other hand, the perfect metals, Sol [gold] and Luna [silver], are not consumed in that same fire. They remain in the fire; and at the same time, out of the other imperfect ones which are destroyed, they assume their own body and become visible to the eyes. How, and by what method, this comes about can be gathered from the Seven Canons. Hence, it may be learned what are the nature and property of each metal, what it effects with the other metals, and what are its powers when mixed with them.

But this should be noted in the very first place; that these Seven Canons cannot be perfectly understood by every cursory reader at a first glance or a single reading. An inferior intelligence does not easily perceive occult and abstruse subjects. Each one of these Canons demands no slight discussion. Many persons, puffed up with pride, fancy they can easily comprehend all which this book comprises. Thus, they set down its contents as useless and futile, thinking they have something far better of their own, and that, therefore, they can afford to despise what is here contained.

THE SEVEN CANONS OF THE METALS

1. *Concerning the Nature and Properties of Mercury*

. . . By the mediation of Vulcan, or fire, any metal can be generated from Mercury. At the same time, Mercury is imperfect as a metal; it is semi-generated and wanting in coagulation, which is the end of all metals.

PLATE 5 Engraving of Paracelsus.

Up to the halfway point of their generation all metals are Mercury. Gold, for example is Mercury; but it loses the Mercurial nature by coagulation, and although the properties of Mercury are present in it, they are dead, for their vitality is destroyed by coagulation . . .

2. *Concerning the Nature and Properties of Jupiter (Tin)*

In that which is manifest (that is to say, the body of Jupiter) the other six corporeal metals are spiritually concealed, but one more deeply and more tenaciously than another. Jupiter has nothing of a quintessence in his composition, but is of the nature of the four elementaries. On this account his liquefaction is brought about by the application of a moderate fire, and, in like manner, he is coagulated by moderate cold. He has affinity with the liquefactions of all the other metals. For, the more like he is to some nature, the more easily he is united thereto by conjunction. For the operation of those nearly allied is easier and more natural than of those which are remote . . .

The more remote, therefore, Jupiter is found to be from Mars and Venus, and the nearer Sol and Luna, the more "goldness" or "silverness," if I may say so, it contains in his body, and the greater, stronger, more visible, more tangible, more amiable, more acceptable, more distinguished, and more true it is found than in some remote body. . . . This, therefore, is a point which you, as an alchemist, must seriously debate with yourself; how you can relegate Jupiter to a remote and abstruse place, which Sol and Luna occupy, and how, in turn, you can summon Sol and Luna from remote positions to a near place, where Jupiter is corporeally posited; so that, in the same way, Sol and Luna may also be present there corporeally before your eyes. For the transmutation of metals from imperfection to perfection there are several practical recipes. Mix the one with the other. Then, again, separate the one pure from the other. This is nothing else but the process of permutation, set in order by perfect alchemical labor. Note that Jupiter has much gold and not a little silver. Let Saturn and Luna be imposed on him, and of the rest Luna will be augmented.

3. *Concerning Mars (Iron) and His Properties*

The six occult metals have expelled the seventh from them, and have made it corporeal, leaving it little efficacy, and imposing on it great hardness and weight. This being the case, they have shaken off all their own strength of coagulation and hardness, which they manifest in this other body. On the contrary, they have retained in themselves their color and liquefaction, together with their nobility. It is very difficult and laborious for a prince or a king to be produced out of an unfit and common man. But, Mars acquires dominion with strong and pugnacious hand, and seizes on the position of king. He should, however, be on his guard against snares; that he be not led captive suddenly and unexpectedly. It must also be considered by what method Mars may be able to take the place of king, and Sol and Luna, with Saturn, hold the place of Mars.

4. *Concerning Venus (Copper) and Its Properties*

The other six metals have rendered Venus an extrinsic body by means of all their color and method of liquefaction. It may be necessary, in order to understand this, that we should show, by some examples, how a manifest thing may be rendered occult, and an occult thing rendered materially manifest by means of fire. Whatever is combustible can be naturally transmuted by fire from one form into another, namely, into lime, soot, ashes, glass, colors, stones, and earth. This last can again be reduced to many new metallic bodies. If a metal, too, be burnt, or rendered fragile by old rust, it can again acquire malleability by applications of fire.

5. *Concerning the Nature and Properties of Saturn (Lead)*

Of his own nature Saturn speaks thus; the other six have cast me out as their examiner.

They have thrust me forth from them and from a spiritual place. They have also added a corruptible body as a place of abode, so that I may be what they neither are nor desire to become. My six brothers are spiritual, and thence it ensues that so often as I am put in the fire they penetrate my body and, together with me, perish in the fire, Sol and Luna excepted.

6. *Concerning Luna (Silver) and the Properties Thereof*

The endeavor to make Saturn or Mars out of Luna involves no lighter or easier work than to make Luna, with great gain, out of Mercury, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, or Saturn. It is not useful to transmute what is perfect into what is imperfect, but the latter into the former. Nevertheless, it is well to know what is the material of Luna, or where it proceeds. Whoever is not able to consider or find this out will neither be able to make Luna. It will be asked, what is Luna? It is among the seven metals which are spiritually concealed, itself the seventh, external, corporeal, and material. For this seventh always contains the six metals spiritually hidden in itself. And the six spiritual metals do not exist without one external and material metal. So also no corporeal metal can have place or essence without those six spiritual ones. The seven corporeal metals mix easily by means of liquefaction, but this mixture is not useful for making Sol or Luna. For, in that mixture each metal remains in its own nature, or fixed in the fire, or flies from it. For example, mix, in any way you can, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Venus, Sol, and Luna. It will not from this result that Sol and Luna will so change the other five that, by the agency of Sol and Luna, these will become Sol and Luna. For though all be liquefied into a single mass, nevertheless, each remains in its nature whatever it is. This is the judgment which must be passed on corporeal mixture. . . .

A question may arise: If it be true that Luna and every metal derives its origin and is generated from the other six, what is then its property and its nature? To this we reply: From Saturn, Mercury, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Sol, nothing and no other metal than Luna could be made. The cause is that each metal has two good virtues of the other six, of which altogether there are twelve. These are the spirit of Luna, which thus in a few words may be made known. Luna is composed of the six spiritual metals and their virtues, whereof each possesses two. Altogether, therefore, twelve are thus posited in one corporeal metal. . . Luna has from the planet Mercury. . . its liquidity and bright white color. So Luna has from Jupiter. . . its white color and its great firmness in fire. Luna has from Mars . . . its hardness and its clear sound. Luna has from Venus . . . its measure of coagulation and its malleability. From Saturn . . . its homogeneous body, with gravity. From Sol . . . its spotless purity and great constancy against the power of fire. Such is the knowledge of the natural exaltation and of the course of the spirit and body of Luna, with its composite nature and wisdom briefly summarized . . .

7. *Concerning the Nature of Sol (Gold) and Its Properties*

The seventh after the six spiritual metals is corporeally Sol, which in itself is nothing but pure fire. What in outward appearance is more beautiful, more brilliant, more clear and perceptible, a heavier, colder, or more homogeneous body to see? And it is easy to perceive the cause of this, namely, that it contains in itself the congelations of the other six metals, out of which it is made externally into one most compact body. . . . The fire of Sol is of itself pure, not indeed alive, but hard, and so far shows the color of sulfur in that yellow and red are mixed therein, in due proportion. The five cold metals are Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, Venus, and Luna, which assign to Sol their virtues; according to cold, the body itself; according to fire, color; according to dryness, solidity; according to humidity, weight; and out of brightness, sound. But that gold is not burned in the element of terrestrial fire, nor is even corrupted, is effected by the firmness of Sol.

For one fire cannot burn another, or even consume it; but rather if fire be added to fire it is increased, and becomes more powerful in its operations. The celestial fire which flows to us on the Earth from the Sun is not such a fire as there is in heaven, neither is it like that which exists upon the Earth, but that celestial fire with us is cold and congealed, and it is the body of the Sun. Wherefore, the Sun can in no way be overcome by our fire. This only happens, that it is liquefied, like snow or ice, by that same celestial Sun. Fire, therefore, has not the power of burning fire, because the Sun is fire, which, dissolved in heaven, is coagulated with us.

WHAT IS TO BE THOUGHT CONCERNING THE CONGELATION OF MERCURY

To mortify or congeal Mercury, and afterwards seek to turn it into Luna, and to sublimate it with great labor, is labor in vain, since it involves a dissipation of Sol and Luna existing therein. There is another method, far different and much more concise, whereby, with little waste of Mercury and less expenditure of toil, it is transmuted into Luna without congelation. Any one can at pleasure learn this art in alchemy, since it is so simple and easy; and by it, in a short time, he could make any quantity of silver and gold. It is tedious to read long descriptions, and everybody wishes to be advised in straightforward words. Do this, then, proceed as follows, and you will have Sol and Luna, by help whereof you will turn out a very rich man. Wait awhile, I beg, while this process is described to you in a few words, and keep these words well digested, so that out of Saturn, Mercury, and Jupiter you may make Sol and Luna. There is not, nor ever will be, any art so easy to find out and practice, and so effective in itself. The method of making Sol and Luna by alchemy is so prompt that there is no more need of books, or of elaborate instruction, than there would be if one wished to write about last year's snow. . . .

The art is this: After you have made heaven, or the sphere of Saturn, with its life to run over the Earth, place it on all the planets, or such, one or more, as you wish, so that the portion of Luna may be the smallest. Let all run, until heaven, or Saturn, has entirely disappeared. Then, all those planets will remain dead with their old corruptible bodies, having meanwhile obtained another new, perfect and incorruptible body.

That body is the spirit of heaven. From it these planets again receive a body and life, and live as before. Take this body from the life and the Earth. Keep it. It is Sol and Luna. Here you have the art altogether, clear and entire. If you do not yet understand it, or are not practiced therein, it is well. It is better that it should be kept concealed, and not made public.

FURTHER READING

Debus, Allen G. 1991. *The French Paracelsians: The Chemical Challenge to Medical and Scientific Tradition in Early Modern France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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