



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

Lesson Eighteen : Reading an emblem in harmony with the author's intentions.

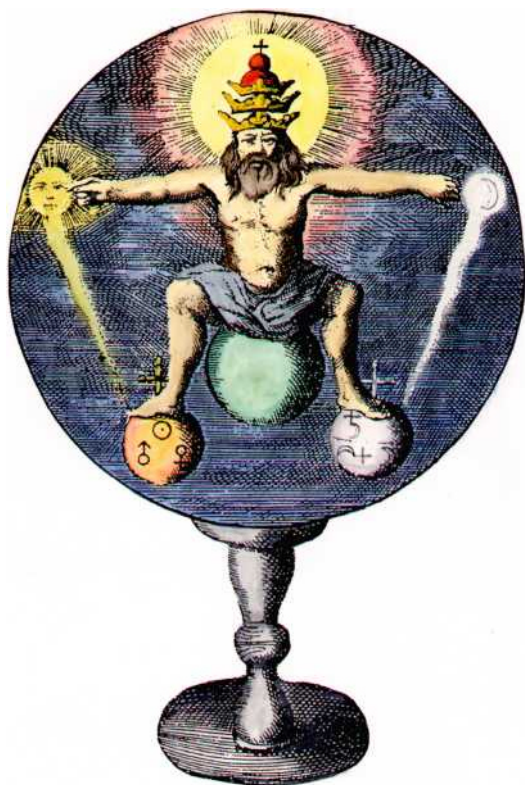
Let me now just give a reading of the two emblems I presented to you in the previous lesson as examples. My reading of these is not meant to be definitive or exhaustive and there will be ways in which it can be improved or developed, however, I have tried to indicate the main features of each emblem. You should have identified these for yourself in working with these exercises. If your way of looking at these differs radically from the one I outline here then I suggest you have not fully understood the approach I am taking and it might be timely for you to review the course lessons.



First the frontispiece engraving from the *Waterstone of the Wise*. There are a number of interesting symbols here. The heart, the candle, the hand of God, a tree stump. These do not present us with many difficulties. As we have seen in reading other emblems, there is a little drama being worked out here, and once we can see this then we can read the emblem quite easily. On the left we see two kings walking into the darkness. They seem not to have noticed the light, or are actively rejecting it by turning their backs upon it. On the right a simply dressed or humble man in a gesture of piety turns towards the light. The light comes from a candlestick which is placed on the stump of a cut-down tree. This candle pierces through the heart. It does not burn from itself, but is being lit from a taper which descends, held in the hand of God reaching down from the triangle of the Holy

Trinity in the heavens. For this reason the flame burns downwards. The tree is important, or rather the absence of the tree. By showing the stump, the creator of the emblem implies that the tree formerly existed (or potentially existed). If a tree grew in this space with its roots in the earth and its branches in the heavens this would suggest that the earthly or material can be readily transformed into the heavenly or spiritual (see lesson seven). Such a tree does not exist here but only the remnants in the form of the stump. To the creator of this emblem the link between the material and spiritual world comes

through the light of the spirit in the heart. This is essentially a devotional path. The writer of the text of this book, Siebmacher, draws various parallels between the Philosophers' Stone, the 'waterstone of the wise' and the spiritual or Heavenly Stone which he associates with Christ the corner stone. It might be instructive for you to read the text of this extremely significant text of spiritual alchemy. (It is on the alchemy web site <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/hydrolit.html>).



The second emblem I wanted you to look at was the frontispiece engraving to Monte Snyder's *Metamorphosis of the Planets*. This is an elaborate and extremely confusing (and muddled) allegory, but the emblem is quite straightforward. Here a great figure sits upon a globe (possibly the Earth, as we shall later see). His head is in the heights of heaven in a great sphere of light. He wears a triple crown. We have already seen this triple crown in our examination of the *Hermetic Triumph*, where it possibly implied mastery of the three worlds or realms. The figure (whose head and limbs seem to form a pentagon) reaches out to the Sun on the left and the Moon on the right. From these, beams descend to spheres below on which his feet are resting. The sphere on the left has the solar planets (those which have the sun disc as part of their sigil) Sun ☉, Mars ♂ and Venus ♀. The sphere on the right has the lunar planets Moon ☾, Saturn ♄ and Jupiter ♃.

The drama that is being enacted here lies in the great figure placing himself in the centre of things and reaching out to the different forces in the cosmos (or the planetary metals) and seeking to integrate these together.

One planet (perhaps the most important) is not represented here - Mercury ☿. This planet bears both the solar circle and the lunar crescent (it has a foot in both camps) and thus can link together these two realms. The great figure also, like Mercury, tries to unite the different solar and lunar streams and the earth and the heavens - the material and the spiritual. Like the tree between earth and heaven that was missing in the *Waterstone of the Wise* emblem, here another symbol, Mercury, though not shown, is nevertheless a significant element in the drama.

Let us now look at what Monte Snyder has to say about this image.

"I here place three irrational worlds whereon all depends, whereof one has brought forth the other two, I set my left foot on one birth of the great world, and place my right foot on the other hermaphroditic world, and its figure as an universal, irrational and mineral microcosm, and I sit with my hinder parts on the mother of them both which is the globe of the earth, and thus sitting, I stretch out my arms towards midday and

midnight, and touch with my hands both the great luminaries of the crystalline, glittering heaven. And I swear by the most high Creator, that I have heretofore in my treatise written the truth, and will now in this description further bring to light that corner stone whereat so many have stumbled, and been scandalised at, which all true philosophers have hinted. I say true philosophers because there are few such - for the true philosophic books are depraved, and counterfeited by many thousand venders of processes, glosses, and false philosophers. And if one would take the pain to examine all with diligence, one should find no matter which hath not been forbidden or rejected. By my posture I showed that the uppermost was like the nethermost, and that the earth whereon with arms stretched out I thus sat, was the mother and bearer of temporal salvation, who had subjected and made serviceable unto me both her children, whereof the one was Lunar, the other hermaphroditic, viz., a Solar and Lunar birth. Both these are distinguished from each other by a small little stream, laterally flowing out, and like as the Sun is to be discerned from the Moon, even so also are these two easily to be discerned one from the other."

Monte Snyder's text is an elaborate allegory in which the various planets try to gain supremacy. Mercury is a key player, of course, in the allegory. At one point in the text Mercury says :

"Gentle brother, thou shalt understand that although I am cold, earthly and heavy, that I am nevertheless spiritual, celestial and an ever burning living fire. Wherefore I am called living Mercury, because I do as it were awaken, move and enliven other things which are dead. In respect of these my laudable qualities I am used as a most upright arbitrator between the highest and the lowest, between the heavenly and earthly. I take part with the uppermost and give assistance to the nethermost, and tie them both together with a most indissoluble band of love. I as a double nature am familiarly acquainted with both of them, and no fawning dissembler but a peace maker."

So here we can produce a reading of the emblem, based on our work through this course, which to a great extent resonates with or is in some harmony with what the original author intended to communicate through creating his emblem. One of the main aims of this study course is to persuade us to read the alchemical emblems from inside their symbols, rather than by projecting external ideas upon them. If you can do this then you will find that you get closer to the nature of alchemy itself, as your interpretation or reading of these emblems will not differ essentially from that of the original creator of the emblem. That is why I have presented some examples which have some explanatory text from the original author. Not all emblems (indeed very few) have an original explanation attached, so eventually we will have to rely on our own abilities and try and remain true to the nature of the material.

I present two emblems as a further two examples for you to consider over the next two weeks. Again I will give a reading of these at the beginning of the next lesson.

Example 1. This is my facsimile painting of the illustration in a 16th century manuscript J. Perreal *Les remonstrances de Nature à l'alchimiste errant*.



Example 2. Engraving from Thomas Vaughan *Lumen de lumine*, London, 1651.

