

THE ALCHEMISTS AND THEIR SYMBOLS

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Serge Hutin (1927-1997) was an important figure in French esotericism, a doctor of letters, a graduate of the Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes, and ex-attache of research at the CNRS (the French National Center for Scientific Research). He was also a long-term member of the Rosicrucian Order, during which time he wrote many articles and around forty books and was a regular lecturer for the Order. In his will, he donated all his writings to the Order.

During medieval times, the alchemists, real and spurious, kept strange and very mixed company. There were nobles and commoners, priests and laymen, Christians and Jews, learned and illiterate men and women, scholars, simple artisans, doctors, and “magicians” – in other words, a cross-section of society. Wandering alchemists abounded in Germany, France, England, and Italy. They led vagabond and stray lives, and often changed their names. But once they had achieved a transmutation, they would leave wherever they happened to be, and would thenceforth take every precaution to remain anonymous. The alchemists were true “world citizens,” but they kept closely in touch, through their secret societies, which in some ways resembled the guilds; they had signs and countersigns so that the initiates could recognize one another. This explains how they were able to make long journeys, since wherever they went they could surely find a welcome; in the Middle Ages one could see the world cheaply. To be assured of board and lodging, the alchemists would often join bands of pilgrims, or even gypsies. In some towns, such as Paris and Prague, whole streets abounded with alchemists’ laboratories and meeting places.



Fear played a part in the prestige enjoyed by the alchemists. Having infiltrated the clergy and the guilds of the cathedral-builders, and being sometimes protected even by royalty, they formed a real occult power, and one to be reckoned with. Alchemy was considered by the scholars of the time a natural science, and in opposition to the scholastic teachings of the universities, it provoked a craze for experimentation. In addition, it became a vehicle for a number of more or less heretical doctrines, which had to be kept hidden from the Church.

ALCHEMY AND THE CHURCH

Faced with these alarming developments, the Church did not remain inactive. The Vatican condemned the Hermetic art on several occasions. Pope John XXII (r. 1316- 1334) issued a bull of excommunication against all who practiced the art, although, curiously, one tradition asserts he was its protector. The Inquisition burned a number of alchemists at the stake, and the secular courts hanged others. But in spite of this persecution (which was only intermittent), alchemy thrived, and its adepts occasionally played important roles in politics. One such was Jacques Coeur, the “grand silversmith” of

King Charles VII of France, who was said to have found the Philosopher's Stone.

THE TRAINING OF THE ALCHEMIST

How did one become an alchemist? The adepts had very high-flown ideas about their profession. "Whosoever has bent his back over our books," states the work known as the *Turba Philosophorum*, "and is faithful to our art, will not be led astray by frivolous thoughts; whosoever puts his trust in the Divine has discovered a kingdom that he will lose only in death." For the alchemists maintained that it was essential to possess high qualities, and even to receive divine help, in the form of revelation. This belief was still more pronounced in the adepts of the Royal Art, who often mentioned the episode in the Book of Matthew (22:11-14) of the guest who did not wear a wedding garment, which is to say that he had not purified himself morally before undertaking the Work:

Know yourself.

If you are not wholly purified

The wedding feast will harm you.

Woe to him who stays too long

Let the light-hearted keep away.

"The most prominent characteristic of the alchemist," writes Hoefer, "was his patience. He was never deterred by failure. A practitioner who was taken from his studies by unexpected death would often leave his son the heritage of an unfinished experiment; and it was common enough for the son to include in his own will the secrets of the incomplete experiment he had learned from his father." The candidate had to follow the maxim *Lege, Lege, relege, ora, Labora et invenies* (read, read, reread, pray, work, and thou shalt find). While having to read a lot, one had to be wary of merely bookish knowledge. Again, the adepts themselves constructed their own equipment, their ovens, glass retorts, and alembics.

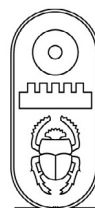
But alchemical instruction was mainly oral. The beginner would usually serve as an apprentice to a master, if necessary searching Europe to do so; like the many students of the time who attended distant universities in order to study under the most celebrated teachers. The training itself sometimes consisted of the study of one or more manuscripts, but more often took the form of a catechism to be memorized.

THE "GREAT INITIATES"

At a later date the adepts of the *Ars Magna* arrived at a mystical conception of initiation. According to the Rosicrucian Robert Fludd (1574-1637), the initiates formed a "hidden Church" of the elect, which in different periods of history took different forms. Invisible, unknown to the vulgar, and vested with divine powers, they were the repositories and guardians of the Tradition. This doctrine was to have singular success: in the eighteenth century,



Statue of Jacques Coeur (1395-1456), the "grand silversmith" of King Charles VII of France, who was said to have found the Philosopher's Stone. Jacques Coeur Palace, Bourges, France.



Saint-Germain and Cagliostro never failed to announce themselves as “illustrious strangers,” and the same idea can be found in esoteric works even today.

ALCHEMICAL LITERATURE

The alchemists did their best to keep the secrets of the Great Work – as well as their esoteric philosophy – from the profane. Why did they do so? It has often been said that it was for security reasons. Actually, this esotericism was deliberate, and was aimed at hiding from the common people secrets that it was thought they ought not to know. “By revealing the secret,” Roger Bacon writes in his *Opus Tertium*, “one lessens its efficacy. The people can understand nothing of it; they would make common use of it and take away all its value. It would be folly to give lettuce to a donkey, which is quite content with thistles; and the wicked, if they knew the secret, would misuse it and overthrow the world. I must not oppose the will of the Divine nor the best interests of science, so I will not write down the secret in a way that anybody can understand.”

Everything had to be done to discourage the curious. “At the door of the laboratory there must always be a sentinel armed with a flaming sword to question all visitors and to turn back those unworthy of being admitted.” There were few, the adepts held, who were fit to enter “the closed palace of the King” (in the words of Eirenaeus Philalethes). So their aim had to be disguised beneath mysterious symbols, and in this the alchemists were absolutely successful; it is quite impossible to understand any alchemical treatise without knowing the theory and so having a key to its principal symbols.

We must now make a kind of inventory of the alchemical literature, modern as well as medieval, for a great number of such works appeared before the end of the seventeenth century, and some even later.

THE WRITTEN WORKS

The alchemical treatises that have come down to us are extremely numerous; they would fill a vast library. This abundant output can be divided into two groups: Latin translations of Arabic writings that



The confused and dark matter sustained by the astral sulphurous sign. From Speculum Veritatis (The Mirror of Truth) Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Cod. Lat. 7286, author unknown.

appeared in the West about the eleventh century, often confused and full of passages, even pages, taken straight from the Greek alchemists; and original works by Western alchemists, published first in Latin, then in the vernaculars (these become more and more frequent from the thirteenth century on). These writings are sometimes in prose, sometimes in verse. (The influence of Hermetic Philosophy on poetry was considerable.)

In spite of the very large number of works lost, those that remain are more than enough to acquaint us with alchemy. Some scholars have prepared collections of those texts that seem most representative, but the libraries of Europe still contain many little-known manuscripts, only a few of which have ever been published.

Even the most verbose of these works remain esoteric, and contain many strange symbols and mysterious injunctions, of the following sort: "You must make the now fixed Stone, by the ways of Sublimation volatile, and the volatile fixed; and the fixed Dissolved; and the Dissolved again volatile, and the volatile again fixed, until it flow and alter, into Solifick, and Lunifick, with certain Complement."

Often the procedure is set out in disordered form, in order to make the treatise even less comprehensible. Also, most of these works are not limited to the practical side, but deal with all the Hermetic teachings. They frequently begin with an invocation to the Divinity, such as this passage from the *Rosarium Philosophorum* of Arnold of Villanova: "Our heart will be restless until we have returned to Him, for the superior essence of the elements rises toward that Fire which is above the stars. And we, who issued forth from Him, rightly aspire to return to Him, the one source of all things." The texts become supported by illustrations; beside detailed drawings of apparatus appear such symbols as the hermaphrodite, who represents the

union of the male and female principles. From the fifteenth century on these plates become more and more numerous and complicated, to the extent that they are real pentacles, talismanic symbols summarizing a whole theory by including quite separate elements within a single image. These curious illustrations, of real artistic value, often help us understand the texts. They are particularly numerous in *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine*, the *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* of H. Khunrath, and the works of Maier and Fludd.

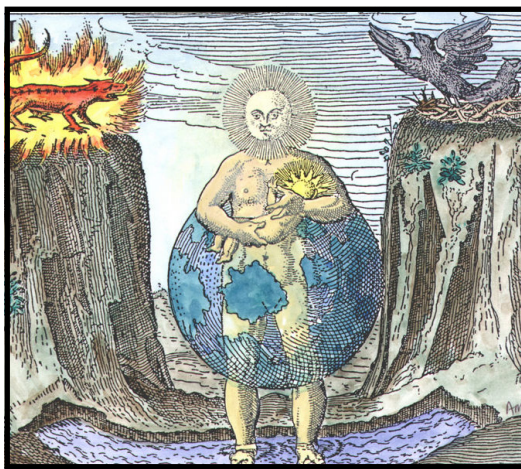
THE ALLEGORIC DRAWINGS

Some works consist entirely of symbolic images. One such is the *Mutus Liber* (*Silent Book*), which sets forth the various stages of the Great Work in a series of engravings without captions. Others are *The Hieroglyphic Drawings of Abraham the Jew*, with a commentary by Nicolas Flamel, and the *Rosarius Magnus*.

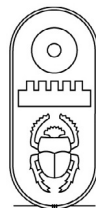
In this category also must be placed the famous Tarot, one of the most curious of Eastern esoteric objects.

THE TAROT

The arrival of the Bohemians (or Zingari) in Western Europe is estimated to

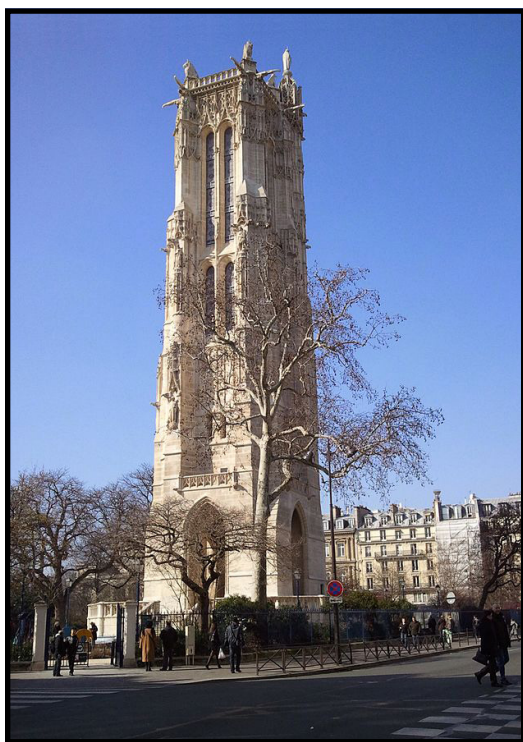


Engraving from J.D. Mylius's *Philosophia reformata*, Frankfurt, 1622. It shows a salamander in Fire, birds in Air, Water at the base of the mountains, and the engraving symbolizes a downward pointing triangle with the Earth globe at the center.



have occurred at the end of the fourteenth century. Bohemian esoterism included methods of divination; clairvoyance and magic, and mythical stories (perhaps of Indian origin), but most important it incorporated the Hermetic tradition, condensed into a symbolic and emblematic book, the Tarot (also called the Book of Thoth), which is not only a means of divination but also a sort of summary of Hermetic Philosophy.

The Tarot consists of seventy-eight leaves (divided into twenty-two “major” leaves and fifty-six “minor” ones) whose figures seem to have been designed about the fifteenth century. When the twenty-two “major” leaves are arranged in a specific order, the whole Hermetic cosmogony



Saint-Jacques Tower is all that remains of the church Saint-Jacques-de-la-boucherie located on Rue de Rivoli at Rue Nicolas Flamel. The ancient church and its landmark tower welcomed pilgrims setting out on the road that led to Tours and headed for the way of St James, which led to the major pilgrimage destination of Santiago de Compostela. The famous alchemist, Nicolas Flamel, a patron of the church, was buried under its floor.

is obtained: Chaos, the Creative Fire, the division of the one primordial matter into four elements, and so on. One can also detect a solar theology, knowledge by illumination (symbolized by the “Popess”), sympathy and antipathy, sexual dualism, evil, and the Fall. In these curious pictures, whose origin is most mysterious, one can also determine the different stages of the Great Work, according to certain modern occultists.

ALCHEMICAL SCULPTURES

The alchemists also made use of the plastic arts to show their doctrines and practices. A number of buildings (Jacques Coeur’s house in Bourges) and religious buildings (the tower of Saint Jacques in Paris, built by Nicolas Flamel) are rich in the most interesting symbolic sculptures.

ALCHEMICAL SYMBOLS

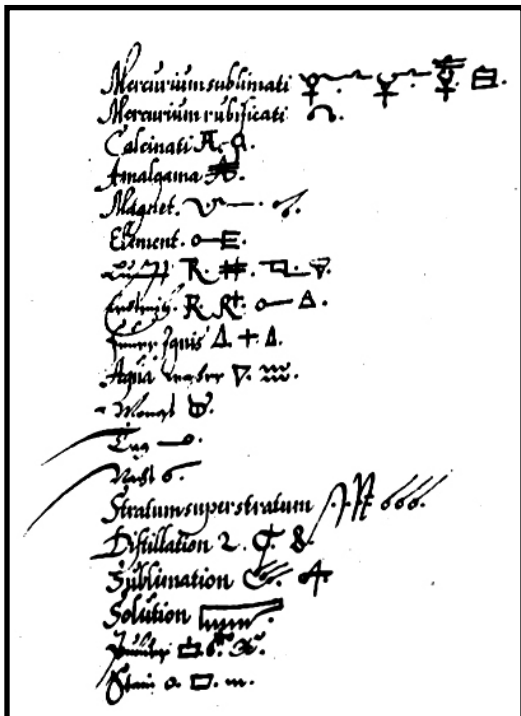
In order to conceal their mysteries from the people, the alchemists devised during the Middle Ages a whole system of symbols, which continued in use up to the beginning of modern times. Contrary to current prejudiced views, this symbolism, far from being arbitrary, remained constant through many centuries.

Signs resembling stylized hieroglyphics were already known to the Greek alchemists, and were handed down unaltered to the medieval adepts and their successors.

Certain treatises, such as the *Confessio de Chao Physico-Chimicorum Catholico of Khunrath*, are written almost exclusively in signs. John Dee, in his *Monas Hieroglyphica*, tried to erect an entire metaphysics around these alchemical signs; the sign of the Sun, for example, represents the Monad, or the dot, encircled by the world.

Anagrams, enigmas, and acrostics were used by alchemists to disguise their ideas. Thus the Philosopher’s Stone is denoted by the word *Azoth*, formed with the initial letter common to all alphabets

(A), followed by the last letter of the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew alphabets (Z), signifying that the Stone is the beginning and end of all substance.



Alchemical cryptic symbols. Anon., 16th century, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit Leiden.

ALLEGORIES AND MYTHS

To disguise their experiments, the alchemists resorted to mythological fables. (The reverse was also thought possible, and some authors even made alchemical interpretations of Homer, Ovid, and Virgil.) One widely used myth was that of the phoenix, which rises from its own ashes. But the alchemists also fabricated their own allegories, with alacrity. One, taken from the German work *The Little Peasant's Casket*, symbolizes the colors adopted by matter during the Great Work: "Now as I set off on a journey, I found myself between two mountains, where I gazed upon a man of the fields. He was grave, and of modest appearance, dressed in a gray coat, with a black band on his hat, a white scarf around his neck, a yellow leather belt and red boots."

CRYPTOGRAPHY

Alchemists frequently used cryptography, using letters (Raymond Lully), letters and numbers, mirror writing, or alphabets made up entirely of strange signs (Trithem). Some writers resorted to music, trying to coordinate the sounds with the reactions of matter; the Rosicrucian Michael Maier is notable here. (This attempt was taken up by Cyrano de Bergerac, in his *Comic History of the States and Empires of the Moon*.)

ALCHEMY AND RELIGION

The adepts made numerous analogies with religion, and discovered a kind of nature cult. "Nature," writes Lully, in his *Theories*, "has fixed a time for conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. So the alchemist, after fertilizing the matter, must await the birth. When the Stone is born, he must feed it, as he would a child, until it can withstand great heat." The alchemists made endless comments on the evangelical text "If the grain does not die, it cannot bear fruit," which they interpreted to mean that as wheat must decompose in the earth, so the Stone must pass through a stage of putrefaction. In this way, alchemy affiliated itself to the domain of religion; certain writers, such as Ripley and De Nuysement, even made alchemical interpretations of the Scriptures. As George Ripley writes in his *Book of Twelve Gates*: "Both the world and the Stone issued from an unformed mass. The fall of Lucifer, like original sin, symbolizes the corruption of base metals." The Christian adepts tried to make of their art a kind of esoteric religion, superior to ordinary Christianity; they readily compared the Philosopher's Stone to Christ, for the Stone, assimilated to the final cause that can reproduce itself, fertilizes and engenders itself, like the Word of the Divine. The Ars Magna, augmenting the comparisons with the Passion of Christ, becomes a veritable Gnosticism.

