

Solve et Coagula: Creative Alchemical Transmutations

being Part One of ‘Alchemy and the Imagination’



[This article is based upon the draft of a talk delivered to the Bendigo Writers' Council and general public in August 2008 by Dr Ian Irvine entitled 'Alchemy and the Imagination'.]

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Author Bio (as at September 2010)

Dr. Ian Irvine is an Australian-based poet/lyricist, writer and non-fiction writer. His work has featured in publications as diverse as *Humanitas* (USA), *The Antigoniish Review* (Canada), *Tears in the Fence* (UK), *Linq* (Australia) and *Takahe* (NZ), among many others. His work has also appeared in two Australian national poetry anthologies: *Best Australian Poems 2005* (Black Ink Books) and *Agenda: 'Australian Edition'*, 2005. He is the author of three books – *Dream-Dust Parasites* a novel (written as Ian Hobson); *The Angel of Luxury and Sadness* a non-fiction book concerned with post-traditional forms of alienation/chronic ennui; and *Facing the Demon of Noontide*, a collection of poetry. Dr. Irvine currently teaches in the Professional Writing and Editing program at BRIT (Bendigo, Australia). He has also taught history and social theory at La Trobe University (Bendigo, Australia) and holds a PhD for his work on creative, normative and dysfunctional forms of alienation and morbid ennui. In his recent theoretical work he has attempted to develop an anti-oppressive approach to creative writing based upon the integration of Cultural-Relational theories concerning 'self in relation' with Jungian and Groffian models of the 'collective' or 'transpersonal' unconscious.

'Solve et Coagula: 'analyse all the elements in yourself, dissolve all that is inferior in you, even though you may break in doing so; then, with the strength acquired from the preceding operation, congeal.'¹

'[To the mind informed by alchemical principles] correspondences pervade every field. From the stars to the parts of the body. Thence to the impulses of the mind and soul, the gods, the daemons which govern the planets and of whom the planets themselves are only the bodily cloak are related in essence to our spirit and soul by ties of interaction. Nothing occurs below that does not have its correspondence above, and conversely; and this correspondence extends to every sphere of the Universe.'²

¹ Discussed in Piobb, P.V. *Clef Universelle des sciences secretes*. Paris, 1950.

² Bernoulli, Rudolf, p.312, 'Spiritual Development in Alchemy.' in *Spiritual Disciplines*, 1935.

The Archaic Heritage: Hermes-Thoth and Alchemy

A challenge for all writers, I think, is to maintain an awareness of the deepest motivations behind one's writing. If we aren't vigilant we may simply absorb prevalent definitions of what it is to be a writer from our immediate cultural milieu. This discussion concerns the complex relationship between creativity, psycho-spiritual transformation and the writer/artist's attitude toward the 'sentient others' with whom he or she shares this planet. In thinking about the reasons I was first drawn to poetry and fiction back in the mid-1980s I recall that certain writers and thinkers somehow managed to speak directly to my existential state—one of those writer/thinkers was Carl Jung and despite being a psychologist he will figure prominently in this discussion of Alchemy, Hermetica and creativity.

Back in 2003 I wrote a series of poems inspired by my childhood fascination with stamp collecting. Retrospectively I realize that the poems were permeated by the figure of Hermes, both a Greek god and, in alchemy, a kind of archetype for the medieval magician/chemist (known as Hermes Trismegistus). Many of the poems have been published in all sorts of odd places, and thus I've ended up with rather fond feelings toward the mischief-maker God, 'Hermes'. Back in 2003 I imagined, wrongly as it turned out, that I'd simply write a few amusing little poems about stamps and Hermes before moving on to more serious creative business!

Five Creativity Archetypes: Dionysus, Orpheus/Apollo, Taliesin, the 'Celebrity Writer' and 'The Bohemian Writer'

Between 2005 and 2007, after some years coordinating a writing course and thus being exposed on a daily basis to the 'business of writing'—as it is increasingly known these days in contemporary Australia—I experienced something of a vocational crisis. There seemed no point, to me, in continuing as a writer and teacher of writing if I couldn't find a way to regain some of the existential excitement and authenticity of the encounters I'd had as a young adult with a range of writers, poets, and thinkers—in short, if I couldn't continue to believe in 'the work' (ah there's a term we'll return to repeatedly!), at the very least 'my work', as something more than simply a 'productive', 'self-expressive', 'Social Darwinist' activity to be assessed by the icy, 'invisible hand' of the marketplace. In seeking to exorcise myself of the 'celebrity-Neoliberal' writer archetype, I found myself turning for inspiration to three traditional poet-writer archetypes from the European tradition: Orpheus (whom I also associate with Apollo), Dionysus and Taliesin (a figure beloved of my Celtic ancestors).

The Orphic/Apollonian model of literary activity is understood by scholars to be rational, measured and socially conformist in style, as well as melodic, technically excellent and highly melancholy/sensitive. The Dionysian model, on the other hand, activates the primal instincts: sex, aggression and emotional excess. In the Dionysian worldview we may experience a violent seizure of consciousness by underground (unconscious) forces—pounding, often discordant, music and large quantities of wine (or name your own intoxicant) complete the picture. If the Orphic/Apollonian poetic is sedate and safe (its product pleasing to the ear), the Dionysian poetic is the path to personal mayhem, ruined relationships, Acquired Brain Injury, and, occasionally, premature death. Neither poetic, on its own, has ever sat comfortably with me.

'Taliesin', a Welsh poet archetype, has long acted as a useful counter to the limitations I perceive in both the Orphic/Apollonian and Dionysian archetypes. I guess the foundational shamanic/animistic elements to the Taliesin story, coupled with a deep acknowledgement in the Celtic polytheistic tradition generally of female creativity appeals to me - there are many stories, for example, concerning powerful female druids, *ovates*, *filidh* and bards. On the other hand, I've often felt Taliesin's druidic derived poetic to be too remote, too embedded in the polytheistic Celtic past, too New Age, these days, to allow a modern 'poet/writer' to deal effectively with the

many new problems currently afflicting us—e.g. rampant desacralisation, alienation, globalisation, technocratic authoritarianism, etc..

The other writing archetype that influenced me profoundly as a young person was that of the Modernist/Postmodernist bohemian, *avant gardist* writer. I find the literature that came out of the Symbolist, Imagist, Dada, Surrealist, Expressionist, etc. movements personally inspiring. Likewise, I've long admired modernist writers and poets such as Charles Baudelaire, W.B. Yeats, Jean Paul Sartre, George Orwell and Franz Kafka. However, few of these figures (I think Yeats is the exception) seem to me to be connected to archaic literary traditions that outline a personal path for psycho-spiritual transformation (healing?). Similarly, few offer a viable alternative to life inside the Cartesian-Newtonian, Darwinist and Neo-liberal materialist paradigms that still dominate the West today. Transpersonal dimensions of being, however, were explored by the poets and shamans of antiquity and, most importantly for me as an Australasian writer, were believed in by the Maori people I'd come across in New Zealand and many of the Koori people I've come to know in Central Victoria. Various personal experiences have thus convinced me that the materialist/scientific paradigm is merely a useful narrative adopted by large numbers of Westerners at a particular point in history—it's not the final word on the nature of the universe. Importantly, it seems to me that many contemporary materialist models of the 'writer/poet' seem to have been seamlessly absorbed into the 'Celebrity Writer' model so beloved of new millennium hyper-capitalism.

Jungian theorizing on creativity is for me a useful bridge between some of the archaic creativity archetypes discussed above and a possible effective new millennium poetic that may be worth practicing. It is also a useful modern entry point to the potentially bottomless pit that is the alchemical/ Hermetic tradition. Jung spent four decades of his life attempting to understand alchemy and wrote three full-length books and numerous essays on the subject as it pertained to his theory of the archetypes. During those decades he also used alchemy to develop the key Jungian therapeutic technique of 'active imagination', which not only psychologists, but writers and artists, have found inspirational.³

According to Jung, a form of active imagination was practiced (was even perfected) by the late-Medieval alchemists. To him their long-term meditative 'projections' of unconscious content onto minerals, liquids, plant extracts and gases suggested a prototype for initiating positive psycho-spiritual transformation. To say, however, that 'alchemical processes' are central to Jungian psychology and its take on creativity, is also to say that Hermetic philosophy is central, and if that is so, then the figures of Thoth, Hermes/Mercury, Hermes Trismegistus and Mercurius become pre-eminent in our attempts to understand the place of creativity in our lives today.

The rest of this discussion will be devoted to outlining key aspects of 'spiritual alchemy' that may be of relevance to modern writers and theorists on creativity.

History of Alchemy

Alchemy of course has been practiced in one form or another for at least the last two and a half thousand years and was apparently known to the Mesopotamian, Ancient Egyptian, Persian and ancient Indian civilizations either before, or synchronous with, its development in the Classical

³ Many writers, poets and thinkers, and not just from the medieval period, have used alchemical categories, concepts and symbols in their work. Jung well understood the influence of 'the Great Work' on artists and poets down the millennia. In *Psychology and Alchemy*, p.67, trans. R.F.C. Hulls, Princeton/Bollingen Paperbacks 1980, he described Goethe's classic work, *Faustus*, for example, as 'an alchemical drama from beginning to end.' The same could be said of many other medieval and early modern literary classics. We're interested here in Jung's reading of the old texts, what he made of them and how his interpretation affected his understanding of the imagination, creativity and the technique of 'active imagination'.

Greek and Roman civilizations. In ancient Greece it was linked to the speculations of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, and influenced by Neo-Pythagorist, Orphic, and Gnostic beliefs. Alchemical systems also developed in China, Japan and Korea. Interestingly, as the West entered its so-called 'Dark Ages', Islamic alchemy flourished and talented Muslims such as Al Geber make significant contributions in their dedication to the 'Great Work'. Alchemy eventually became a powerful creative force in European culture and society between 1200CE and 1660CE.

Medieval European alchemy possessed a number of original features; in part due to the influence of Arab alchemical traditions, but also due to Christian (mainstream and mystic) theological developments. Medieval alchemy represented a unique merging of archaic and contemporary knowledge systems associated with chemistry, metallurgy, theology and mythology. To the modern materialist eye, of course, its central theoretical constructs are routinely dismissed as 'unscientific' i.e. heavily 'polluted' with 'proto-scientific superstitions' derived from its mystic, mythological and theological sources.

'The Great Work'

Each stage of the spiritual or allegorical alchemical journey (understood as the 'Great Work') was divided into a number of stages best understood as proto-scientific 'rituals' that involved mixing volatile minerals, gases and liquids together in a primitive laboratory setting. The alchemists used terms like, calcination, solution, separation, conjunction, mortification, putrefaction, sublimation, cibation, exaltation, etc. to describe the various progressions and transmutations carried out in their 'work'. A recipe would typically put various elements (water, fire, earth, air), and specific metals or minerals through a series of 'circulations' in order to purify both the less pure substances and the soul of the person thus engaged. At times, as Eliade notes, it seemed as though some of the metals died only to be reborn later in another form.

Scholars of alchemy have noted three or four primary stages to the psycho-spiritual progression of their 'work'. The process begins with the '*prima materia*'; an ambivalent primal substance containing the potentiality of both the 'elixir' of immortality (and, at a more realistic level, physical and mental healing) and the 'stone' of penultimate alchemical spiritual transformation. The progression from *prima materia* to stone/elixir is, roughly speaking, as follows: the Nigredo Stage (confusion, blackness), the Albedo Stage (minor work, whiteness, quicksilver) and the Rubedo Stage (redness, sulfur and balanced passion). A fourth golden stage, the Philosophic Congelation, is sometimes described independent of, or as the culmination of, the Rubedo stage.

The Nigredo Stage represented an undifferentiated soul/substance state, a state of conflict, of moral confusion and psychic distress. It was also associated with the planet Saturn, the 'melancholy humour' (black bile) and the heavy metal lead. In some cases even the prime material (*prima materia*) was symbolized in terms of 'lead'. The raven also figures prominently during the Nigredo, as do images of melancholy 'vapours'.

The Albedo Stage, by contrast, represented a state of limited Union of Opposites (male/female, soul/body, above/below, mercury/sulfur). The appearance of a purified 'white queen' (often associated more scientifically in the flask with the appearance of salt) often symbolized this stage of the work. Though the comparison is imperfect (given the earthy sexual nature of much of the Medieval and Early Modern symbolism associated with this stage of the process!) the Albedo stage has sometimes been associated with the Catholic figure of Mary, mother of Christ. The purification of the vices and soul conflicts indicative of the undifferentiated 'Nigredo' or saturnine stage is progressing well, but there is more work to be done.

The Rubedo Stage represented the ultimate conjunction of opposites and preceded the appearance of the perfected human being. A product of this stage was an epiphany concerning the Philosophers' Stone (which could turn 'lead' i.e. *nigredo* soul states, into gold, i.e. happiness and joy). Hardened materialists, Medieval or Modern, are inclined to imagine gold in the most literal sense—and to them wealth may symbolize the only true path to happiness. Historically, however, at least some of the master alchemists saw this stage, and the epiphanies that accompanied it, as symbolic of a psycho-spiritual *resurrection* or *rebirth* – the purified metals and salts that symbolize the soul have become more subtle and are more open to the powers of the sacred imagination. Similarly, this stage was often symbolized by the harmonious coming together of the previously bickering male and female (Sol and Luna) elements into a harmonious symbolic whole (the hermaphrodite). To Jung this stage corresponded with the emergence of what he termed the 'self archetype'; the ultimate goal of his analytic psychology. Unconscious complexes have been 'purified' (made conscious) and the feminine 'anima' aspect in a man (symbolic of the unconscious) is in balance with the more conscious masculine elements. Intra-sychic conflict is thus at a minimum.

Philosophic Congelation: In the final stage of the Rubedo the 'new man', 'original man' or 'world being'— understood as Adam before the Hermetic version of the fall (to Jung the 'self archetype') emerges from the flask. This original man (or woman) doesn't represent quite the same psycho-spiritual goal pursued by followers of transcendental religious traditions, however—the goal is not transcendence of the world, rather the alchemist seeks to return to the world in a more integrated form—mind and body working together, conscious and unconscious (Jung), male and female principles, human and divine, etc. Hence the redness to the figure's cloak signifying a purified but still embodied human state. Indeed this stage represents a profound integration between the inner human and the cosmos generally; including all aspects of the physical creation. The pagan origins of alchemy are nowhere more apparent than in this endless uroboric birth, death, resurrection sequence—the very essence of the old circular notion of time—clearly related, as Bernoulli (1935) noted, to the cyclic nature of the seasons and the miraculous resurrection of animal and vegetative life in spring (at least in the European climes).

The psycho-spiritual purification processes associated with each of the three or four stages could take months or even years to complete. According to Jung the kinds of images we see accompanying the late Medieval alchemical recipes (especially in the spiritual or allegorical tradition) were probably projected into the 'flasks' (i.e. onto matter) as genuine unconscious content—in other words the alchemists day-dreamed or hallucinated (thus the link with 'active imagination') the images that accompanied some of the texts. Different types of hallucinations accompanied different stages of the work (i.e. the Ouroboros = beginnings; a Raven's Head = Death/ Putrefaction/ Nigredo; a Peacock's Tail = attainment of Albedo stage; and a Winged Hermaphrodite = attainment of Rubedo stage).⁴ Alchemical initiation was said to give a person the gift of 'double seeing' – *Mercurius Duplex*. This was a balanced way of experiencing the world – matter and spirit were, in a sense, merged aspects of the same reality, the green of the material world merged with the gold or yellow of the spiritual world to produce a religious philosophy of immanence.

The Great Work of the alchemist-philosopher thus involved initiation rites not unlike those experienced by primordial shamans world-wide, thus 'dismemberment' prior to 'rebirth' in a more powerful, purified form figures prominently. Eliade, in *The Forge and the Crucible*, specifically links this feature of the 'The Work' to ancient Greek and Roman mystery cults when

⁴ This same process, only slightly altered, entered the psychiatry of the period and helped to bury the so-called 'Demonological tradition' associated with the Medieval Church—that tradition had been built upon the Seven Deadly Sins visualized as demons. In this sense alchemy contributed to the resurrection of humoral psychology—which had first been developed by the ancient Greeks.

he states: ‘... the essence of initiation into the Mysteries consisted of participation in the passion [suffering], death and resurrection of a God’. In linking this theme to Medieval alchemy he continues: ‘the dramatic spectacle of the “suffering”, “death” and “resurrection” of matter is very strongly borne out in the very beginnings of Graeco-Egyptian alchemistical literature.’ Further on he writes: ‘It is the mystical drama of the God ... which is projected on to matter in order to transmute it. All in all, the alchemist treats his Matter as the God was treated in the Mysteries.’⁵

The physical processes and stages involved in alchemical transmutation also have clear psycho-spiritual corollaries associated with the human life-span: Conception, Pregnancy, Birth, Marriage (of Rex to Luna), Death (and Resurrection?) and so on. The seasonal miracles associated with agriculture are also prominent, as we’ve noted, and perhaps hark back to ancient ‘correspondences’ between human life cycles and the life cycles of animals and plants.

Alchemy and the Imagination

I’d like to suggest that the study of Alchemy may allow modern writers and artists to meditate on an ancient symbol system capable of uniting physical (i.e. elemental) transmutations with symbolic/imaginative and psychospiritual transmutations. Alchemy greatly influenced Astrology and also medieval Humoral Physiology and Psychology. It also provided Medieval, Early Modern and even Romantic poets, dramatists and writers with a ready-made symbol system capable of describing the volatile (changeable) aspects of the human psyche (e.g. the emotions) and also the fundamentals of human personality and character.

Jung and Von Franz understood its importance and believed that the alchemists were focusing their concentration on the processes unfolding in the flasks etc. to such a degree that they were actually meditating and even catharting (purifying?) the negative *prima materia* of their personal lives. They were perfecting the self/soul through ‘active imagination’, i.e. through a kind of dialogue between the constituent elements of matter AND the archetypal forces resident in each individual’s unconscious. Patient work by way of the imagination thus produced not only great art/literature BUT a self at home in the cosmos – also maybe a little philosopher’s gold or elixir!

As we progress through this series of articles I want to suggest that when writers and artists make use of objects in symbolic ways, we should remember that the substance (or substances) that the object is composed of may have a subliminal affect on our audience due to correspondences between psychic life and external matter. This affect may be related to archetypal associations with various elements (metals etc.) buried deep in the psyche – whether universal or cultural. Likewise, readers may sense the transmutational possibilities open to objects made of various substances as used in symbolic ways – each object automatically evokes a subliminal sign system of elemental possibilities. Water will rust iron and fire will burn wood. Similarly, steam represents a fusion of heat/fire and cold/water. When the psyche is out of balance we can depict the problem symbolically in terms of various elemental imbalances – the Fires of Hell, Hardness of Heart, Drowning, Aridity, Excessive Heat/Humidity, etc. We can also depict the resolution of life crises and conflicts between people by resort to alchemical principles of transmutation. Is not all life an endless process of dying to an old and outgrown or malfunctioning self (the imperative surely of the *nigredo* stage), creating a tentative new self (which flowers in the *albedo* stage) and perfecting that self at a particular moment in time (symbolised by the *rubedo* stage)?

In Part Two of this series we will look more closely at the history of the Thoth/Hermes/ Mercury archetype (or Hermesian principle as I will label it) as well as at his

⁵ Eliade, Mircea. p.149-150, *The Forge and the Crucible*.

association with some traditional notions of knowledge/learning and creativity.

Appendix One – Explanations of Some Key Alchemical Concepts

It is worth outlining some of the key terms that appear over and over again in the alchemical literature.

Prima Materia – the Prime Material. One needs this to begin the ‘Great Work’. It had many forms (essences), but was chiefly a symbolic entity associated with the *daimon* Mercury (personified as Mercurius the Earth Spirit). The Prime Matter also had links to Orphic, Neo-Platonic, Gnostic and Hermetic creation myths. It had both male and female components: Sulphur was seen as feminine (the Queen, Luna), whereas Mercury was seen as male (the King, Rex). To Jung the *prime material* symbolizes an undifferentiated state of being, a state of unconsciousness and thus it represents that which we possess the beginning of the transformative process; the impurities (i.e. psychic and interpersonal conflicts) we’ve inherited from our up-bringing and socialisation. The self is yet to manifest, projection of psychic content is unconscious and instinctive and thus in some people hidden complexes control subjectivity. The self is fraught with divisions, but the psyche, like the prime material, possesses within itself the means for overcoming these divisions—in the alchemical formulation through commitment to ‘the work’ of substance purification.

The Philosophers’ Stone (‘the stone that is no stone’) – To the alchemists this legendary stone could be used to transmute base metals into more perfect metals – mercury into silver, lead into gold, etc. In the alchemical literature we come across an almost infinite number of names for the ‘Stone’. Some of the more interesting definitions have it as a something that is everywhere, commonly found, but unappreciated by the ordinary person. In spiritual or mystical alchemy the Stone is simply the completion of the ‘Great Work.’ We note that some traditional alchemists also speak of a ‘plant stone’ - apparently ‘plant stones’ were most often associated with medical elixirs. From a traditional magical perspective a ‘stone’ created by an alchemist - whether ‘plant’ or ‘mineral’ in form - contained the concentrated and potent magico-spiritual energy of the alchemist who had created it - something of his or her spiritual mana was understood to have been transferred to such a stone during its creation, perhaps due to the close proximity of the alchemist throughout the operation. To Jung, a modern psychologist, the legendary attributes associated with the philosopher’s stone were indicative of its psycho-spiritual links to the process of ‘individuation’ – i.e. the process of reconciling the many conflict-laden dualisms in the psyche.

Aqua Vitae and Mercury: this fluid (often associated with quicksilver) could be extracted from the *Prime Matter*. It was called ‘the fire which doesn’t burn.’ It was understood to be a magical water (specifically the *aqua vitae*), but a water ‘which doesn’t wet the hands.’ Throughout the alchemical texts the *aqua vitae* was closely associated with both Mercurius (Hermes Trismegistus), as a spirit, and the metal ‘mercury’ or quicksilver. As the alchemists understood it, Mercurius oversaw the entire process of alchemical transformation from beginning to end being the essential principle of transformation. To Jung individuals in the early stages of psychic transformation might see ‘mercury’ (as the spirit Mercurius) as a threatening trickster figure—this arises from their natural fear of complete psychic ‘dissolution’, i.e. into insanity. The alchemist gradually applies ‘mercury’ (the spirit of Mercurius) to the wall that separates the two realms of the psyche, i.e. the ego, associated with consciousness, and the unconsciousness, which to Jung had both personal and collective dimensions. Amberlain (1960) describes the *aqua vitae* as follows: ‘The universal spirit enclosed in the heart of metallic darkness, spark of life enclosed in all that is in its natural primitive state.’ (Amberlain, 1960)

The Hermetic Egg - A vessel in which alchemical transmutations took place – shaped like an egg. The flasks and vials the alchemists used were often described by them in terms of feminine procreative symbolism—the various stages of the work represented a kind conception, pregnancy, and birth sequence. The ‘hermetic egg’ thus became a kind of artificial womb for personal transformation. In it various dramatic transformations of matter took place leading, after much hard labour, to the penultimate birth of the integrated hermaphrodite and rebis figures as the culmination of ‘the work’.

The Three Mysterious Principle Substances: Mercury, Sulfur, Salt – These three substances are

implicit to the various major stages of the alchemical process from *Prima Materia* to *nigredo*, to *albedo*, to *rebis* (i.e. black, whit, red) in many texts. Their union, circulation, purification, coagulation, etc. during the various phases of the Great Work is understood as a blue print for human spiritual and psychological transformation in the spiritual alchemical tradition. The 'Philosopher's Salt' is not the same as 'common salt', it arises from the conjoining of Mercury and Sulfur. 'Sulfur' (not 'common Sulfur' but 'Gold of the Wise') is the symbol of the male principle and is often associated with the gold to be prepared for the final phase of the work. Similarly 'Mercury' (not 'common mercury' but 'Silver of the Wise') symbolises the alchemical silver (as well as the feminine principle) to be prepare, purified etc. during 'The Great Work.'

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