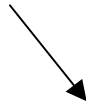


The alchemical work

"From its earliest days alchemy had a double face: on the one hand the practical chemical work in the laboratory, on the other a psychological process, in part consciously psychic, in part unconsciously projected and seen in the various transformations of matter."

"Alchemy is rather like an undercurrent to the Christianity that ruled on the surface. It is to this surface as the dream is to consciousness, and just as the dream compensates the conflicts of the conscious mind, so alchemy endeavours to fill in the gaps left open by the Christian tension of opposites."

Prima materia: the raw stuff of nature = MERCURIUS



The *opus*: the processes to which prima materia is subjected which takes place in the alembic



Nigredo (blackening) = confrontation with the shadow through

- *Solutio* (dissolution in water, drowning) = suffering through disintegration of ego control in emotional affect
- *Calcinatio* (burning) = suffering through frustration of desire
- *Coagulatio* (coagulation, burial) = suffering through depression and loss of false identifications and defences
- First *coniunctio* (descent into the unconscious, symbolised by the opposite sex image = anima or animus, leading to *solutio*, *calcinatio* or *coagulatio*)



Sublimatio (extraction of the spiritual essence)

- *Albedo* (whitening) = waiting period, relationship with the unconscious through dreams and fantasies
- *Rubedo* (reddening) = sensing of new possibilities through integration of unconscious components



Second *coniunctio* = conscious relationship with the unconscious



The *lapis* = alchemical gold = MERCURIUS

The alchemist = MERCURIUS

The celestial ascent of the soul as 'individuation'

[NB: The references quoted in the footnotes below are important optional reading]

C. G. Jung, discussing the celestial ascent in relation to alchemy, informs us, 'The journey through the planetary houses boils down to becoming conscious of the good and the bad qualities in our character, and the apotheosis means no more than maximum consciousness, which amounts to maximal freedom of the will.'¹ With this statement, the celestial ascent transforms into a symbolic map of 'individuation', the inner process through which an individual can achieve full integration of the personality. Jung perceived the expressions of the ascent in Gnostic, Hermetic, and alchemical texts as structurally similar to the processes through which his patients moved as they accessed the various levels of their inner worlds. The bypassing of the hostile Gnostic archons symbolises 'the overcoming of a psychic obstacle, or of an autonomous complex, suitably represented by a planetary god or demon. Anyone who has passed through all the spheres is free from compulsion'.² Commenting on the celestial ascent described in the late fifteenth century *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of Colonna, Jung notes that the author has left us a psychological document that is 'a perfect example of the course and the symbolism of the individuation process'.³

Although he notes the relationship between the 'seven phases of the alchemical process' and the seven planetary spheres, Jung does not confine the individuation process to a specific number of steps such as seven or nine.⁴ However, the initial and final phases of the process seem to correspond closely with the alchemical ascent, beginning with the 'psychic suffering' and 'war on a moral plane' of the Saturnian *nigredo*, and culminating in the solar alchemical gold: a direct inner experience which on a spiritual level reflects the soul's 'faculty of relationship to God', and on a psychological level reflects the 'unified self'.⁵ This correlation between alchemical and psychological processes, Jung states, is not due to any imposition of an *a priori* esoteric model, but is 'based first and foremost on my observations of people'.⁶ In every human life, there is a development or movement towards some goal or end, and the alchemical stages 'could just as well represent the individuation process of a single individual'.⁷ Individuation is thus a psychological enactment of the archetypal pattern of the soul's journey, which is also expressed symbolically in alchemical, Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Hermetic, and Kabbalistic portrayals of the celestial ascent. While it occurs naturally in all people, techniques of analytic work such as active imagination deepen and enhance the process.⁸ This model can justifiably be seen to reflect the contemporary 'psychologization of religion and the sacralization of psychology', and for this reason Hanegraaff questions Jung's reliability: his psychology is 'not a conclusion from empirical research but part of a religious belief system'.⁹ Whether Hanegraaff's conclusions are based

¹ Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, CW14, para. 309.

² Jung, CW14, para. 308.

³ Jung, CW14, para. 297.

⁴ Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, CW13, para. 398.

⁵ Jung, CW14, para. 494; Jung, CW12, para. 11; Jung, CW9ii, para. 264.

⁶ Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, CW12, para. 2.

⁷ Jung, CW12, para. 3; Jung, CW14, para. 792.

⁸ Jung, CW14, paras. 752-55.

⁹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 507.

on empirical research would require a discussion beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁰ However, as we have seen, the celestial ascent was understood as an inner journey nearly two millennia before the term 'individuation' was formulated.

Jung's model of individuation presents the celestial ascent as the symbol of an archetypal process of psychological and spiritual development. Various researchers exploring the ascent in specific cultural contexts have found Jung's concepts valuable as a means of understanding the continuity and structural similarity of various ascent narratives. Corbin, discussing the ascent in eleventh century Islamic mysticism, makes frequent references to Jung's alchemical exegeses, his theory of archetypal images, and his use of active imagination.¹¹ Merkur concludes that the combined use of visionary and 'unitive' experiences, dependent largely on the technique of active imagination, constitutes the revelation at the mystical core of Gnostic ideas in Western esotericism from late antiquity to modern times.¹² Shaw, discussing Iamblichus' theurgical practices, compares them specifically to active imagination.¹³ Idel, although cautious about any 'mechanical' application of Jung's 'Platonic perspective', notes that a careful use of Jungian models may be helpful in understanding certain aspects of Kabbalistic mysticism.¹⁴ Understanding the celestial ascent as an archetypal pattern, experienced as simultaneously subjective and objective, and envisioned in a wide range of images and forms, may be one of the more useful models currently available to explore the structure, continuity, and culturally mediated varieties of this enduring idea.

¹⁰ For Hanegraaff's full discussion on Jung, including his sources, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 496-513. On the tensions between 'emic' and 'etic' in the study of religions, see Russell T. McCutcheon, 'Introduction', in *idem*, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 15-22; Peter Donovan, 'Neutrality in Religious Studies', in *Insider/Outsider Problem*, pp. 235-247.

¹¹ See, for example, Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1980), pp. 165, 208-222, 257-69; Henry Corbin, 'Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imagenal', trans. Ruth Horine, in Benjamin Sells, ed., *Working with Images: The Theoretical Base of Archetypal Psychology* (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 2000), pp. 70-89, on pp. 78-79, 84.

¹² Dan Merkur, *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. ix.

¹³ Gregory Shaw, 'Containing Ecstasy: The Strategies of Iamblican Theurgy', *Dionysius*, Vol. 21 (December 2003), pp. 53-87.

¹⁴ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 25.