

C. G. Jung and the Alchemical Renewal

by Stephan A. Hoeller

The lovely little town of Knittlingen, near the Black Forrest in West Germany, is noted far-and-wide as the original residence of the famed Dr. Johannes Faustus. A plaque in the small but exquisite museum devoted to the facts and legends concerning Dr. Faust tells us that, although alchemy has often been considered a pseudo-science based on the pretense that gold could be made from other metals, it is now known that, in reality, it was a spiritual art having as its aim the psychological transformation of the alchemist himself. This public statement, viewed daily by large numbers of visitors, demonstrates most impressively the rehabilitated image alchemy has acquired in recent decades. This positive change is due in large measure to the work of one remarkable man: Carl Gustav Jung.

When Jung published his first major work on alchemy at the end of World War II, most reference books described this discipline as nothing more than a fraudulent and inefficient forerunner of modern chemistry. Today, more than twenty-five years after Jung's death, alchemy is once again a respected subject of both academic and popular interest, and alchemical terminology is used with great frequency in textbooks of depth-psychology and other disciplines. It may be said without exaggeration that the contemporary status of alchemy owes its very existence to the psychological wizard of Küssnacht. Take away the monumental contribution of C.G. Jung, and most modern research concerning this fascinating subject falls like a house of cards; to speak of alchemy in our age and not mention him could be likened to discoursing on Occultism without noting the importance of Helena P. Blavatsky, or discussing religious studies in contemporary American universities without paying homage to Mircea Eliade.

Jung's "first love" among esoteric systems was Gnosticism. From the earliest days of his scientific career until the time of his death, his dedication to the subject of Gnosticism was relentless. As early as August, 1912, Jung intimated in a letter to Freud that he had an intuition that the essentially feminine-toned archaic wisdom of the Gnostics, symbolically called *Sophia*, was destined to re-enter modern Western culture by way of depth-psychology. Subsequently, he stated to Barbara Hannah that when he discovered the writings of the ancient Gnostics, "I felt as if I had at last found a circle of friends who understood me."

The circle of ancient friends was a fragile one, however. Very little reliable, first-hand information was available to Jung within which he could have found the world and spirit of such past Gnostic luminaries as Valentinus, Basilides, and others. The fragmentary, and possibly mendacious, accounts of Gnostic teachings and practices appearing in the works of such heresy-hunting church fathers as Irenaeus and Hippolytus were a far cry from the wealth of archetypal lore available to us today in the Nag Hammadi collection. Of primary sources, the remarkable *Pistis Sophia* was one of very few available to Jung in translation, and his appreciation of this work was so great that he made a special effort to seek out the translator, the then aged and impecunious George R. S. Mead, in London to convey to him his great gratitude.¹ Jung continued to explore Gnostic lore with great diligence, and his own personal matrix of inner experience became so affinitized to Gnostic imagery that he wrote the only published document of his great transformational crisis, *The Seven Sermons to the Dead*, using purely Gnostic terminology and mythologems of the system of Basilides.²

In all this devoted study, Jung was disturbed by one principal difficulty: The ancient Gnostic myths and traditions were some seventeen or eighteen hundred years old, and no living link seemed to exist that might join them to Jung's own time. (There is some minimal and obscure evidence indicating that Jung was aware of a few small and secretive Gnostic groups in France and Germany, but their role in constituting such a link did not seem firmly enough established.) As far as Jung could discern, the tradition that might have connected the Gnostics with the present seemed to have been broken. However, his intuition (later justified by painstaking research) disclosed to him that the chief link connecting later ages with the Gnostics was in fact none other than alchemy. While his primary interest at this time was Gnosticism, he was already aware of the relevance of alchemy to his concerns. Referring to his intense inner experiences occurring between 1912 and 1919 he wrote:

First I had to find evidence for the historical prefiguration of my own inner experiences. That is to say, I had to ask myself, "Where have my particular premises already occurred in history?" If I had not succeeded in finding such evidence, I would never have been able to substantiate my ideas. Therefore, my encounter with alchemy was decisive for me, as it provided me with the historical basis which I hitherto lacked.³

In 1926 Jung had a remarkable dream. He felt himself transported back into the seventeenth century, and saw himself as an alchemist, engaged in the *opus*, or great work of alchemy. Prior to this time, Jung, along with other psychoanalysts, was intrigued and taken aback by the tragic fate of Herbert Silberer, a disciple of Freud, who in 1914 published a work dealing largely with the psychoanalytic implications of alchemy. Silberer, who upon proudly presenting his book to his master Freud, was coldly rebuked by him, became despondent and ended his life by suicide, thus becoming what might be called the first martyr to the cause of a psychological view of alchemy.

Now it all came together, as it were. The Gnostic Sophia was about to begin her triumphal return to the arena of modern thought, and the psychological link connecting her and her modern devotees would be the long despised, but about to be rehabilitated, symbolic discipline of alchemy. The recognition had come. Heralded by a dream, the role of alchemy as the link connecting ancient Gnosticism with modern psychology, as well as Jung's role in reviving this link, became apparent. As Jung was to recollect later:

[Alchemy] represented the historical link with Gnosticism, and . . . a continuity therefore existed between past and present. Grounded in the natural philosophy of the Middle Ages, alchemy formed the bridge on the one hand into the past, to Gnosticism, and on the other into the future, to the modern psychology of the unconscious.⁴

Richard Wilhelm and the Chinese Connection



In 1928 the eminent German Sinologist, Richard Wilhelm, recently returned after a long period of residence in China, sent Jung a manuscript of a translation of an alchemical treatise of Taoist origin and requested that Jung might write a psychological commentary on the text. This work, subsequently known as *The Secret of the Golden Flower* catapulted C.G. Jung into the very midst of alchemical themes and interests. His studies disclosed that Chinese alchemy, just like the alchemy of the West, deals primarily with the transformational symbolism of the human soul. Although the ancient Taoists postulated that the quest for immortality was the central work of alchemy, their "Golden Flower" of immortality is not substantially different from the "Stone of the Philosophers," which is the supreme objective of Western practitioners of the Great Art.

Not only was there a rainbow bridge discernible that connected modern depth-psychology with the Gnostics of old, but there was also a similar bridge linking these Western traditions and disciplines with the Taoist sages of the ancient Middle Kingdom. While the bridge linking the past with the present might be envisioned historically, the bridge joining East with West might be seen to consist of archetypal rather than historical substance. As Richard Wilhelm himself came to state:

Chinese wisdom and Dr. Jung have both descended independently of one another into the depths of man's collective psyche and have there come upon realities which look so alike because they are equally anchored in truth. This would prove that the truth can be reached from any standpoint if only one digs deep enough for it, and the congruity between the Swiss scientist and the old Chinese sages only goes to show that both are right because both have found the truth.⁵

And now, we might ask at this point, might this truth be defined? It is a psychic fact that the opposites arising from the dark matter of the birth-agonies of the human soul confront each other in the alchemical vessel of spiritual transformation (in Chinese alchemy frequently envisioned as the human body) and after

many battles, woundings, and indeed deaths, ultimately come to unite in an indestructible state in the reconciliation of the binaries. Thus the lunar Queen and solar King (represented in China by the symbols of the Yin and Yang) are living presences within us, heralding the promise of the Philosophers' Stone or the Golden Flower which we are destined to become ourselves. "The Chinese Connection" thus revealed to Jung that alchemy is based upon universal archetypal principles which are of equal relevance to ancient Gnostics, Taoist wise men, and modern psychologists. It is thus that Jung found in the symbolism of alchemy one of the most potent connecting links between the psyches of Eastern and Western peoples. In the conclusion of his collaborative work with Wilhelm may be found the following words: "The purpose of my commentary is to attempt to build a bridge of psychological understanding between East and West."

Alchemical Redemption

Jung's dreams in 1925, 1926, and thereafter frequently found him in ancient houses surrounded by alchemical codices of great beauty and mystery. Inspired by such images, Jung amassed a library on the great art which represents probably one of the finest private collections in this field. In addition he secured photocopies of a large number of rare works which repose in various collections the world over. I well remember being told by the late Dr. Henry Drake, Vice President of the Philosophical Research Society in Los Angeles, how Jung secured copies of the extensive alchemical collection of the Society in the 1940's, and expressed his feelings to Manly P. Hall of that Society concerning the valuable use to which he had put these materials in his book *Psychology and Alchemy*. Jung's collection of rare works on alchemy is still extant in his former house in Küsnacht, a suburb of Zurich.



When asked whether he valued any alchemical work above others, Jung was wont to single out first one then another according to its applicability to the theme being discussed. Aniela Jaffe stated that "fundamentally it was not the thoughts of individual alchemists that were of importance for Jung's researches as much as the inexhaustible variety of their arcane images and descriptions, apparently so different yet all interrelated."⁶ Anyone who has had the good fortune to observe some of the major alchemical codices in their original form and feast their eyes on the incredibly impressive imagery, pictured in vivid colors and fantastic shapes, will sympathize with Jung's habit of meditating upon this imagery as an exercise in altered and expanded consciousness!

In 1935, after years of intense study and inner transformations, Jung presented some of his findings to the world for the first time. Needless to say this did not occur in some cold academic setting, but at the beautiful Villa Eranos, in Ascona. Surrounded by a splendid garden, elegant furnishings, fine wines and refreshments, the brilliant and distinguished guests of Madame Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn gathered to witness the unveiling of alchemy in its 20th Century psychological embodiment. In a lecture entitled "Dream Symbols and the Individuation Process" Jung traced the alchemical symbolism evident in the dreams of contemporary persons, thereby establishing that alchemy still lives in modern minds even as it did in ancient Alexandria or medieval Europe. A year later, at the same place, he lectured on "The Idea of Redemption in Alchemy." The select audience was intrigued and enchanted. The time had assuredly come when the hermetic silence could be broken and the *gnosis* of alchemy could be made available to an increasing number. For seven more years Jung worked with great diligence, expanding and amplifying his researches into alchemy. His labors culminated in his *chef d'oeuvre*, published in 1944, and entitled *Psychology and Alchemy*. Even some seminal pronouncements related to alchemy in his address delivered in 1941, on the 400th anniversary of the death of the great Swiss alchemist, Paracelsus. This lecture, which was later expanded and included in the 13th volume of *Jung's Collected Works* entitled *Alchemical Studies*, presents what is perhaps the clearest picture on record of Jung's fundamental attitude toward alchemy.

The point frequently missed by students of Jung, but amply elucidated by him in his above noted address (published under the title "Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon"), concerns the topic of alchemy as a modality of redemption. With Paracelsus, Jung held that in human life we possess two sources of Gnosis, or salvific knowledge. One of these is *Lumen Dei*, the light proceeding from the unmanifest Godhead, the other

is *Lumen Naturae*, the light hidden in matter and the forces of nature. While the Divine Light may be discerned and appreciated in revelation and in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Light of Nature needs to be released through alchemy before it can become fully operative. God redeems humanity, but nature needs to be redeemed by human alchemists, who are able to induce the process of transformation which alone is capable of liberating the light imprisoned in physical creation.

The cosmos, according to Paracelsus, contains the divine light or life, but this holy essence is enmeshed in a mechanical trap, presided over by a kind of demiurge, named by Paracelsus *Hylaster* (from *hyle*, "matter," and *astrum*, "star"). The cosmic spider-god has spun a web within which the light, like an insect, is caught, until the alchemical process bursts the web. The web is none other than the consensus reality composed of the four elements of earth, water, fire and air, within which all creatures exist. The first operation of alchemy therefore addresses itself to the breaking up (torturing, bleeding, dismembering) of this confining structure and reducing it to a condition of creative chaos (*massa confusa, prima materia*). From this, in the process of transformation, the true, creative binaries emerge and begin their interaction designed to bring about the *coniunctio* or alchemical union. In this ultimate union, says Jung, the previously confined light is redeemed and brought to the point of its ultimate and redemptive fulfillment.

While these statements ostensibly refer to the material universe and to nature, Jung perceives in them a model or paradigm for the material and natural aspect of human nature as well. Under the guise of liberating the light confined in matter, the alchemists were endeavoring to redeem the spirit or psychic energy locked up in the body and psyche (the "natural man" of St. Paul) and thus make this energy available for the greater tasks of the spirit or spiritual man.

The roots of this thinking within both the Christian and the Hermetic *gnosis* are clearly acknowledged by Jung, who likens the imprisoned light to the primordial man of the Gnostics, the *Adam Kadmon* of the Kabbalah, and by association to the lost lightsparks of the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria. (The implications of this concept of alchemical redemption are many and impressive. On the one hand, it is clear that matter and the body are by no means to be equated with evil and darkness, while on the other hand, the pagan emphasis on a mere immersion of human consciousness in nature as advocated by some in our times under such slogans as "affirmation of life" and the "celebration of nature" reveals itself as a limited view to which alchemy may serve as a much needed corrective.)

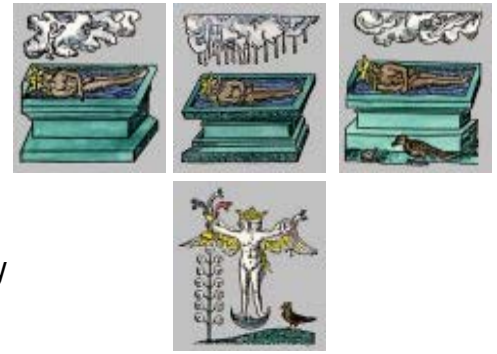
Alchemical Eros

One of the most fascinating explorations of the psychological analogues of alchemy was given to us by Jung in a lengthy essay not usually classified as one of his alchemical writings, entitled *The Psychology of the Transference*. In this study Jung employed the ten pictures illustrating the *opus* of alchemical transformation contained in a classic called *Rosarium Philosophorum* (Rosary of the Philosophers), where the dual powers of the "King" and "Queen" are shown to undergo a number of phases of their own mystico-erotic relationship and eventually unite in a new, androgynous being, called in the text "the noble Empress". The term "transference" is used by Jung as a psychological synonym for love, which in interpersonal relations as well as in depth-psychological analysis serves the role of the great healer of the sorrows and injuries of living.

The series of images begins with that of the mercurial fountain, symbolizing the aroused energy of transformation and continues with the meeting of the King and Queen, first fully clad and later having relinquished their garments. The lovers thus confront each other with their *personae* and defenses, but proceed to a meeting in "naked truth". The partners then immerse themselves in the alchemical bath, thus allowing the force of love to engulf their conscious egos, blotting out rational and mundane considerations. While in this state of passionate engulfment the psychosexual union (*coniunctio*) takes place. But, contrary expectations, this union, which initially brought forth a newly formed androgynous being, results in death. The spiritual result of love is not viable and, having expired, undergoes decomposition.



It is at this point that the force of commitment to the process (though not necessarily to a particular partner) becomes all-important. By not abandoning the transformational work, the soul of the dead androgyne ascends to heaven, *i.e.*, to a higher level of consciousness, while the body is washed in celestial dew. Soon the departed soul returns to its earthly body, and the reanimated corpse stands in its full, numinous glory for all to see. A new being is born which is the promised fruit of love, the transformed consciousness of the lovers, formed of the opposites, which are now welded into an inseparable imperishable wholeness. The alchemy of love has reached its true and triumphant culmination.



In *The Psychology of the Transference*, Jung has shared with the world his uniquely practical insight not only into the psychological mechanism of love but into the process of the reconciliation of all opposites - emotive, intellectual, physical, and metaphysical. Far more readily understood than his definitive treatise *Psychology and Alchemy*, this disquisition on the Alchemy of Eros is one of the most lucid and concise treatments of the process of unitive transformation. Published in 1945, it is not only a worthy successor to his earlier work, but also an excellent primer of the psychological approach to alchemy. In love, as in psychological growth, the key to success is the ability to endure the tension of the opposites without abandoning the process, even if the process and its result appear to have been brought to naught. In our impatient age, replete with divorce, fickleness, and the pursuit of change, these psycho-chemical insights are very much needed indeed!

The Alchemical Sophia

Jung's two greatest works on Alchemy are *Psychology and Alchemy* and *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, the latter representing his final summing up of the implications of his long preoccupation with alchemy. In this last summary of his insights on the subject, influenced in part by his collaboration with the Nobel Prize winning physicist Wolfgang Pauli, the old Jung envisions a great psycho-physical mystery to which the alchemists of old gave the name of *unus mundus* (one world). At the root of all being, so he intimates, there is a state wherein physicality and spirituality meet in a transgressive union. Synchronistic phenomena, and many more as yet unexplained mysteries of physical and psychological nature, appear to proceed from this unitive condition. It is more than likely that this mysterious condition is the true home of the archetypes as such, which merely project themselves into the realm of the psyche, but in reality abide elsewhere. While the tensional relationship of the opposites remains the great operational mechanism of manifest life and of transformation, this relationship exists within the context of a unitary world-model wherein matter and spirit, King and Queen, appear as aspects of a psychoid realm of reality.

The ever-repeated charge of radical dualism leveled against Gnostics and their alchemical kin is thus reduced to a misunderstanding by this last, and perhaps greatest, insight of Jung. The workings of the cosmos, both physical and psychic, are characterized by duality, but this principle is relative to the underlying reality of the *unus mundus*. Dualism and monism are thus revealed not as mutually contradictory and exclusive but as complimentary aspects of reality. It is a curious paradox that this revolutionary insight, impressively portrayed by Jung in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, has received relatively little attention from psychologists and metaphysicians alike.

Alchemical interest and perception permeate many of Jung's numerous writings in addition to those devoted primarily to the subject. His work *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, as well as numerous lectures delivered at the Eranos conferences, all utilize the alchemical model as a matrix for his teachings. Time and again he pointed out the affinities and contrasts between alchemical figures and those of Christianity, demonstrating a sort of mirror-like analogy not only between the stone of the philosophers and the image of Christ, but between alchemy and Christianity themselves. Alchemy, said Jung, stands in a compensatory relationship to mainstream Christianity, rather like a dream does to the conscious attitudes of the dreamer. The Stone of alchemy is in many respects the stone rejected by the builders of Christian culture, demanding recognition and reincorporation into the building itself.

It is here that some of the considerations outlined at the outset of our present study appear once more. Alchemy is not a phenomenon *sui generis*, but rather a phenomenon of attempted assimilation proceeding from Gnosticism - or at least so Jung believed. Even the chief sacrament of Christendom, the Holy Eucharist or Mass, was regarded by Jung as an alchemical work connected with a Third Century Gnostic alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis, in whom he placed the historical point of the convergence of Gnosticism and alchemy. (These considerations were explained by Jung in his *Transformation Symbolism in the Mass*, first published in the *Eranos Yearbook* 1944/45, and later included in *Psychology and Western Religion*, Princeton University Press, 1984.) Years later, one of Jung's academic associates, Prof. Gilles Quispel, came to coin a phrase reflecting Jung's point of view. "Alchemy," the Dutch scholar said, "is the Yoga of the Gnostics."

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions along these lines was given to us by Jung's singularly insightful disciple Marie-Louise von Franz, who devoted herself to the translation and explanation of a treatise first discovered by Jung entitled *Aurora Consurgens* and attributed to St Thomas Aquinas. This renowned saint, so the legend states, had a vision of the Sophia of God after meditating on the *Song of Songs* of Solomon and, following the command received in the vision, wrote this alchemical treatise. The *Aurora* differs from most other alchemical works inasmuch as its format is predominantly religious and filled with biblical references, and even more importantly, because it represents the alchemical opus as a process whereby the feminine wisdom *Sophia* must be liberated. Written in seven poetic but scholarly chapters, the treatise traces the liberation of *Sophia* from confinement by way of the alchemical phases of transformation.

It is thus through the agency of a brilliant woman disciple that the great project envisioned by Jung in 1912 came to a renewed emphasis. Led by the rediscovered words of the "angelic doctor" Aquinas, contemporary students of religion and psychology were confronted once again with the Gnostic task of alchemy. Published in German in 1957 and in English in 1966, Marie-Louise von Franz's work brought Jung's gnostic-alchemical vision in to full view once more. While at the individual level alchemy may assuredly be concerned with the redemption of the *Lumen Naturae* concealed in the psycho-physiological recesses of the human personality, the *Aurora* and also Jung's *Answer to Job* appear to point to a yet larger and more universal opus.

Crying from the depths of the chaos of this world, the wisdom-woman Sophia calls out to the alchemists of our age. Depth-psychology has indeed served as one of the principal avenues through which this redemptive project has been made known. The time may be approaching, and may in fact have come already, when potential alchemists in various disciplines and spiritual traditions may address themselves to this universal task of alchemical liberation. In 1950 Jung was greatly encouraged when Pope Pius XII used several manifestly alchemical allusions, such as "heavenly marriage", in *Apostolic Constitution, "Munificentissimus Deus"*, the official document declaring the dogma of the assumption of the Virgin Mary, (the Catholic Sophia). In our time alchemy has come into its own, and beginning with the most recent two decades Gnosticism has begun its return journey also. The stone that the builders rejected is moving ever closer to the structure of Western culture.

In the garden of Jung's country home in Bollingen stands a large cube-shaped stone inscribed by his own hand with magical and alchemical symbols. In his last revelatory dream prior to his death, Jung saw a huge round stone engraved with the words "And this shall be a sign unto you of Wholeness and Oneness". Perhaps these signs of the wondrous stone of the great work will serve to remind the many whose lives and souls were touched by the Swiss Wizard, of the great work to be done, the great miracle to be accomplished. It is to be hoped that such an awakening of mindfulness will please Carl Gustav Jung in the far land to which he journeyed, and that it will assist those who are still in this sub-lunar world in their search for the quintessence, the stone of the philosophers and the supreme good.

Notes

1. Information concerning this visit was given to the writer in a private interview by Prof. Gilles Quispel.
2. For material on Jung's Gnostic interests and on the Sermons, the reader is referred to the author's work *The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead*, (Quest Books, 1982).
3. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections of C.G. Jung*, ed. by Aniela Jaffe, transl. by R. and C. Winston (Vintage, 1963) p. 200.
4. *Ibid.* pp. 192-193.
5. Wilhelm, *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 21 January, 1929.

6. *Jung's Last Years and Other Essays*, by Aniela Jaffe, trans. by R.F.C. Hull and Murray Stein (Spring Publications, 1984) p. 54.

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