Alchemy and Initiation: Death, Resurrection, and Synthetic Life
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We begin with the basic premise:

Freemasonry utilizes the technology (*techné*) of ancient initiation—that is, a process of death and resurrection—to fructify spiritual life within the soul of the candidate.

To this, we add the premise that alchemical practice also utilizes the same *techné*. What, then, is alchemical practice, and what's its purpose?

The earliest alchemical texts are Greek (ca. 100-300 CE), and they trace the practice of alchemy to Egypt, as well as metallurgy. These early alchemical texts reference a certain female alchemist called Maria the Jewess (ca. 1-3rd century CE), credited as the inventor of various new chemical apparatus, and thought to be the first true western alchemist. The texts also mention the so-called Philosopher's Stone. Middle Eastern philosophers in the 6th, 7th, 8th, century claimed to have created this Philosopher's Stone. These ideas were later transmitted to medieval Europe, where their exponents became known as alchemists, from the Arabic prefix *al-* and Greek *chemeia*; al-kīmiyāʾ ءايميكلا derived from the Greek "to pour together." Alchemy was practiced as a mystery, a secret, encoded in a veiled language.

There are two types of alchemical practice, which we should distinguish. The first type is called operative alchemy and consists of laboratory work and distillation processes. It is reminiscent of modern chemistry in its attempts to carry out the transmutation of matter, usually base metals into gold. Operative alchemists pursued the formation of the Philosopher's Stone, as well as the creation of artificial life. Through the purification and transformation of certain herbs, they also created healing tinctures. The second type of alchemy is called inner or spiritual alchemy and consists of inner spiritual work, performed in contemplation and meditation, and the use of symbols and allegorical imagery. The transformation of lower Self to Higher Self, through a process of purification was, for the inner alchemists, a transmutation of the gross soul into the gold soul (*sol*).

However, both types of alchemists make mention of the same operations, for example "the squaring of the circle," which draws on Aristotle's classical cyclic arrangement of elements and depicts interactivity between the four elements of matter to symbolize the Philosopher's Stone.

Perhaps the most important alchemist of the Middle Ages is Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim “Paracelsus” (1493-1541). Paracelsus was rejected as a theologian and physician by the academy and so turned alchemist and astrologer. He placed a high value on the lived experience of observing nature, in a kind of pre-Goethean protophenomenology. His followers considered him a prophet and a Rosicrucian. He fully accepted the theory of the four elements and taught a doctrine of *quintessence*, a 5th element or ether, and he pioneered the use of chemicals and minerals in medicine, beginning the modern medical practice we call pharmacology.

Paracelsus also spoke of the Philosopher’s Stone. But what are we to make of such an enigmatic symbol? What was it really? How was it made? The alchemists referred to it as the Legendary Stone, thought to possess magical powers, sometimes described as a red or yellow powder or liquid, rather than a stone. They claimed it was common, everywhere and nowhere, that it involved the ingesting of poisons and specific ingredients, and to create it they implored the assistance of angels and demons. The philosopher’s stone was created through The Magnum Opus or Great Work, an operation accomplished via a series of *color phrases*: nigredo, albedo, citrinitas, and rubedo. The successful formation of the Philosopher’s Stone yielded immortality, elixirs, and even the creation of the *panacea.* The elixir of immortality was often equated with the philosopher’s stone, bestowing eternal life and/or eternal youth:

> “The Stone is found in the country, in the village, in the town, in all things created by God; yet it is despised by all. Rich and poor handle it every day. It is cast into the street by servant maids. Children play with it. Yet no one prizes it, though, next to the human soul, it is the most beautiful and the most precious thing upon earth, and has power to pull down kings and princes. Nevertheless, it is esteemed the vilest and meanest of earthly things. It is cast away and rejected by all.”—First published in German as *Gloria Mundi sonsten Paradeiss Taffel*, Frankfurt, 1620

Central to the alchemical process of creating the Philosopher’s Stone—in both the operative and speculative operations—is the harnessing of the death processes, as well as the generative processes, to facilitate spiritual and material transformation and rebirth, “Indeed, the philosophers’ stone was often described as the end result of processes figuratively pictured in terms of copulating kings and queens who are murdered and reborn” (233).

These operations commonly began with the state of putrefaction, which is the breaking down of a dead body, decay—resulting in fermentation, or the decay of a substance or element. And the culmination of these operations were always characterized by rebirth, transformation:

> “I thank God that I recognize the greatest and highest secret in the light of nature, namely death and life, whereby a thing has been destroyed, killed, and brought to

> nothing, to its first form, and afterward has been much nobler in its form, power, and virtue than it was before. Only in the divine art of alchemy do I wish to demonstrate such a thing—that the noblest and best life originates through death."—ValentinWeigel, *Dialogus de Christianismo* (Newenstadt: Johann Knuber, 1618)

Alchemical rebirth and transformation, achieved through harnessing the death processes, was also connected to the creation of new life. Often this was conferred upon plants as well as on metals and minerals, and always upon the alchemist himself or herself. Palingenesis—from the Greek *palin*, meaning again, and *genesis*, meaning birth—is the concept of rebirth or re-creation, and it was joined with what alchemists called spagyrics. Spagyrics is the putrefaction, distillation, and extraction of mineral elements from burned up plants (ash). In other words, "artificial rebirth of living things by artificial means" (227), or plant resurrection. According to Quercetanus (ca. 1544-1609), a French physician and follower of Paracelsus, "an anonymous Polish doctor was able to burn plants and flowers to ash and then resuscitate them in a hermetically sealed flask" (228).

But it wasn't only plants being brought to life; it was also inanimate matter being animated through the alchemical process known as creation of homunculi (Latin for "little men"). First mentions of creating an artificial man can be found in 3rd c. Greek texts and medieval Arabic sources (Salaman and Absal ca. 1037). In the Greek these objects are called *anthroparion*—that is, a little man or homunculus. Paracelsus is credited with the first mention of forming a homunculus in *De homunculus* (c. 1529-1532), and *De natura rerum* (1537). A full-grown homunculus, because it was created through art, was the embodiment of human art, could therefore know the secrets of "the arts," and often grew into giants, magical beings, and great sorcerers like Merlin. However, Paracelsus claimed that it could also be a sin. For what was the difference between art and nature, or was there a difference? If Creation itself was Fallen, could it be restored through magical art, through alchemical art?

> "We must now by no means forget the generation of homunculi. For there is something to it, although it has been kept in great secrecy and kept hidden up to now, and there was not a little doubt and question among the old philosophers whether it even be possible to nature and art that a man can be born outside the female body and [without] a natural mother.… But how this should happen and proceed—its process is thus—that the sperm of a man be putrefied by itself in a cucurbit for forty days with the highest degree of putrefaction in a horse's womb [feminine flask], or at least so long that it comes to life and moves itself, and stirs, which is easily observed. After this time, it will look somewhat like a man, but transparent, without a body. If, after this, it be fed wisely with the arcanum of human blood and be nourished for up to forty weeks, and be kept in the even heat of the horse's womb a living human child grows therefrom, with all its members like another child, which is born of a woman, but much smaller."—*De natura rerum*

But how could such a thing be possible? It was possible, according to Paracelsus, because of the mystery of the spermatozoon. Early gene theory—I mean, really early—believed there was a little man in sperm that just needs to be grown, and that all other generations exist therein. And furthermore: “The womb acts naturally when it preserves the semen and supplies it with a natural heat that stimulates its growth. But when it nourishes the semen with menstrual blood, it behaves artificially, like an agriculturalist does when he fertilizes a field. By this reasoning, pseudo-Thomas concludes that the mother contributes nothing to the essence of the child but only provides a sort of incubator and nourishment” (188).

To the mystery of the spermatozoon was added the concept of spontaneous generation, which had been formulated earlier by Aristotle. Aristotle believed scallops formed spontaneously in sand. This classical idea held that living organisms could be produced from nonliving matter, and it was “proven” by the apparent production of life in seemingly non-fertile environments. It was an archaic theory that developed to explain the origins of life, but it did anticipate our modern conception of parthenogenesis, which is the reproduction from an ovum without fertilization, or asexual reproduction such as is found in some invertebrates, bees, and plants.

Based on all this, the alchemist reasoned that the creation of a homunculus was possible. But the procedure was shrouded in mystery and performed in secret in a private laboratory. The “recipe” usually included sperm, menses, blood, mud, clay, and even feces. The alchemist’s lab probably smelled awful. Sperm was regularly “fed” to the flask over a period of days and was “baked” on a sustained heat and kept at a regulated temperature. After a time, life would emerge in human form, though in miniature.

Where did the alchemists dream up such a crazy idea? Well, they did not pull it out of thin air.

There were precedents, such as the Jewish Golem. And the folk tradition of Mandrake Roots. In fact, the mandrake root tradition bore such a resemblance to homunculi that Paracelsus felt the need to clarify:

> “The homunculus, which the necromancers falsely call *alreona* and the natural philosophers *mandragora* [mandrake magic], has become a topic of common error, on account of the chaos in which they have obscured its true use. Its origin is sperm, for through the great digestion that occurs in a venter equinus [feminine flask], the homunculus is generated, like [a man] in all things, body and blood, with principal and lesser members.”—*De vita longa*

So, what is Mandrake Magic and what did it consist of? It was a European folk tradition of burying semen in dung in the ground, feeding it semen over time, with the idea of exposing it to natural prolonged heat and decay, to germinate a little human. This practice was predicated on the legend of the “Gallows’ Man.” Paracelsus goes so far to say that mandrake root magic is, in fact, homunculus magic.

In conclusion, we can see from this brief survey of the alchemical tradition that certain forces drawn on by the practitioners—namely, the forces of birth, death, and new life—can also be identified as playing a role in the Ancient Craft Degrees of Freemasonry.

Bibliography

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