



Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

Lesson Fourteen : First steps to understanding emblems as a whole - different types of emblems.

Over the past six months we should have gained some knowledge of the complexities of alchemical symbolism and hopefully developed some ability to use some analytical methods for investigating emblems. I have constantly asked you to refrain from interpreting the emblems or the individual symbols and instead to take the approach of letting the symbolism gradually reveal itself. We must now begin to apply this knowledge of individual symbols to looking at an emblem as a whole. I have deliberately avoided using the term 'interpretation' in our examination of alchemical emblems. To me an 'interpretation' is usually the projection or imposition of someones intellectual preconceptions onto an emblem. Commentators fire their intellectual big guns at alchemical symbolism or attack emblems with their various ideas. I have purposely used these rather aggressive terms because this reflects what many commentators seem to do when they try and interpret alchemical emblems. I would rather we tried to examine the significance of an emblem by illuminating it. When we shine a light on an object we see its contours by the light it reflects back to us. A blue object responds to our beam of light by reflecting back blue light to us, and if we shine a light which has the blue component removed then the object can reflect nothing back to us and appears black and opaque. I am sorry to be so metaphorical here, but is it essential that we do not throw away all the good work we have done in the previous lessons by rushing to one dimensional 'interpretations'. We must allow the full spectrum of our understanding to illuminate the material, and resist the urge to intellectualise and merely see the emblematic material through a fine filter of our particular preconceptions.

I suspect some of the people taking this course will now say to themselves - "Well, we have endured half a year of McLean showing us what is contained in alchemical emblems, now we can get down to the real business of finding what we always knew was there in the emblems. Now we are finally free to find the tarot imagery so obvious to everyone except McLean, or the various Jungian archetypes, and of course alchemical imagery is undoubtedly based on magical and kabbalistic ideas, surely it all goes back to ancient Egypt (or was it Atlantis), and we must not forget that only by means of a theosophical or anthroposophical view can we really see the true ground of things."

To those who must go down this path, I wish you well. You will indeed find what you want to find in the emblematic symbolism, but you will be turning your backs upon the treasures that are in alchemy.

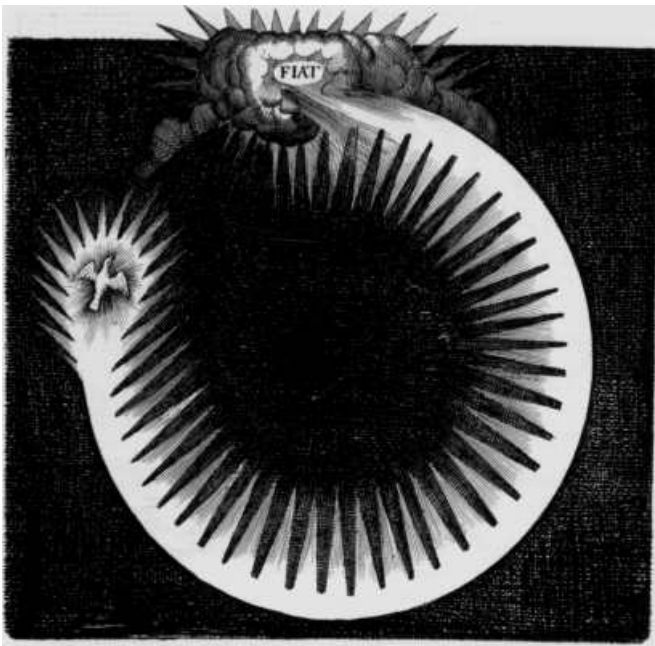
I want us now to attempt to find a way of examining an emblem as a whole symbolic

construct without rushing into 'interpretation' or translating alchemical imagery into some other system of ideas unrelated to alchemy. I would like us to use the metaphor I presented above, and take up the stance as regards alchemical emblems of standing before them in the position of an observer as if they were objects. Indeed this is the way one must relate to emblems if one want to explore them using meditative exercises. We are to look at an emblem as if it was an object and explore it by shining our light into all its corners and upon all its facets and seeing what is reflected back. If you ponder upon this for a while I hope you will come to see that this is a very different stance than the one of intellectually deconstructing and rebuilding the imagery to meet some preconceived set of ideas.

But before we can see an emblem as a whole we have to realise that there are different kinds of emblems.

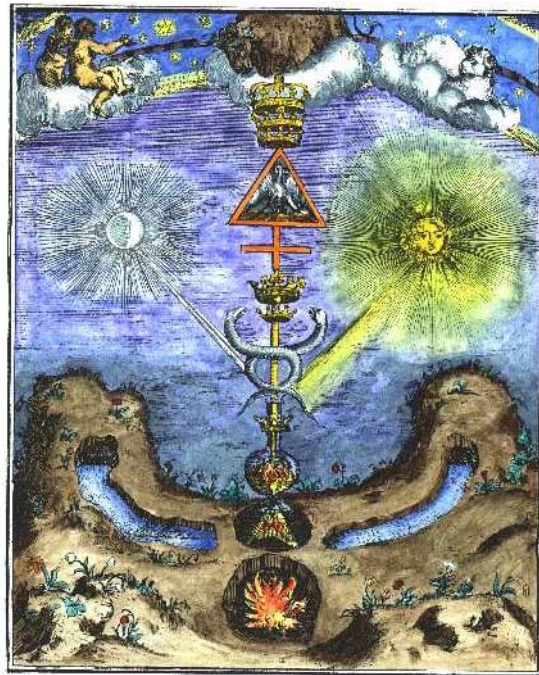
In order to look at an emblem in its wholeness we must bear in mind the intention of the creator of the emblem. In different contexts, imagery was gathered together into a emblem structure for different purposes. It is important for us to realise the purpose of an emblem if this is possible. Of course, in many cases, we cannot investigate the context of the emblem, as this is not immediately available to us. In some cases the original context has been lost in the copying from one manuscript to another. Sometimes we only have the emblem without context and must make do with this.

The first type of emblem we should consider is one which merely serves to illustrate some abstract idea.



The first emblem from Robert Fludd, shows in a straightforward, though powerful and evocative way, the Fiat or beginning of creation. The second emblem from the *Pan-Sophia Enchiretica*, shows us that the human being contains in itself the animals and plants. This second image is, however, slightly more ambiguous, and contains another layer, as it shows this in the form of a painting and even presents us with the artist and his brushes and palette. I include this to show that even within a seemingly simple emblem there may be other facets to explore.

The second group I want us to identify is the individual emblem which presents us with a constellation of symbolism whose significance is not immediately obvious. These are the emblems most familiar to us - their riddle of symbolism, teasing and sometimes exasperating us. The creator of such an emblem did not want to convey a simple message, but instead to present us with a riddle, a knot, of imagery that works upon us, bypassing a one dimensional abstract idea, in favour of a multifaceted puzzle to intrigue us and lead us into considering more deeply the inner nature of alchemy.



The third group are those like the second type, but which are themselves components embedded in a larger series. Examples are very numerous - the *Twelve keys of Basil Valentine*, the *Lambspring* figures, the *Crowning of Nature* and many more.



Here it is usually essential that we look at the emblem within the context of the series. The emblems in a series talk to each other, reflect each others imagery, so we may entirely fail to grasp the significance of a particular emblem unless we view it within its series. Not all series are sequential, that is in the sense of presenting an ordered progression of symbolic ideas. Sometimes series have to be broken down into sub-sections or geometrically arranged in patterns in order to see the resonances between emblems in the sequence. Some series do not seem to contain an obvious progression but can be examined as individual emblems. If you compare for example the *Atalanta fugiens* with the *Rosary of the Philosophers*, you will find two very different gatherings of emblems. The *Book of Lambspring* may appear to be a simple sequence, but do the *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* reflect a underlying progression? Series of alchemical emblems are inherently complex but rewarding to work with as there are so many layers and interlinkings to consider. It will not be possible within this study course to investigate series in depth, but if there is sufficient interest I may create a further course which will explore a few of these sequences in detail.

A fourth group are those frontispieces or engraved title pages found in some alchemical books, which should not be seen as coherent emblems, as their purpose is rather to summarise pictorially the material presented in the book. They are, in a sense, to be likened to modern book covers. An example might be the frontispiece to *La Toyson d'Or* of 1612, which is a French version of the *Splendor solis*. The engraving shows us in sketches most of the imagery from the *Splendor solis*. Once one realises the context of this emblem, we know not to try and analyse it as a single coherent emblematic figure. Its message is rather to give us a resume of the symbolic material in the book, than to present



us with a unified emblematic statement. Other title pages are definitely emblematic and fall within the second group, so it is important for you to be able to recognise the differences.

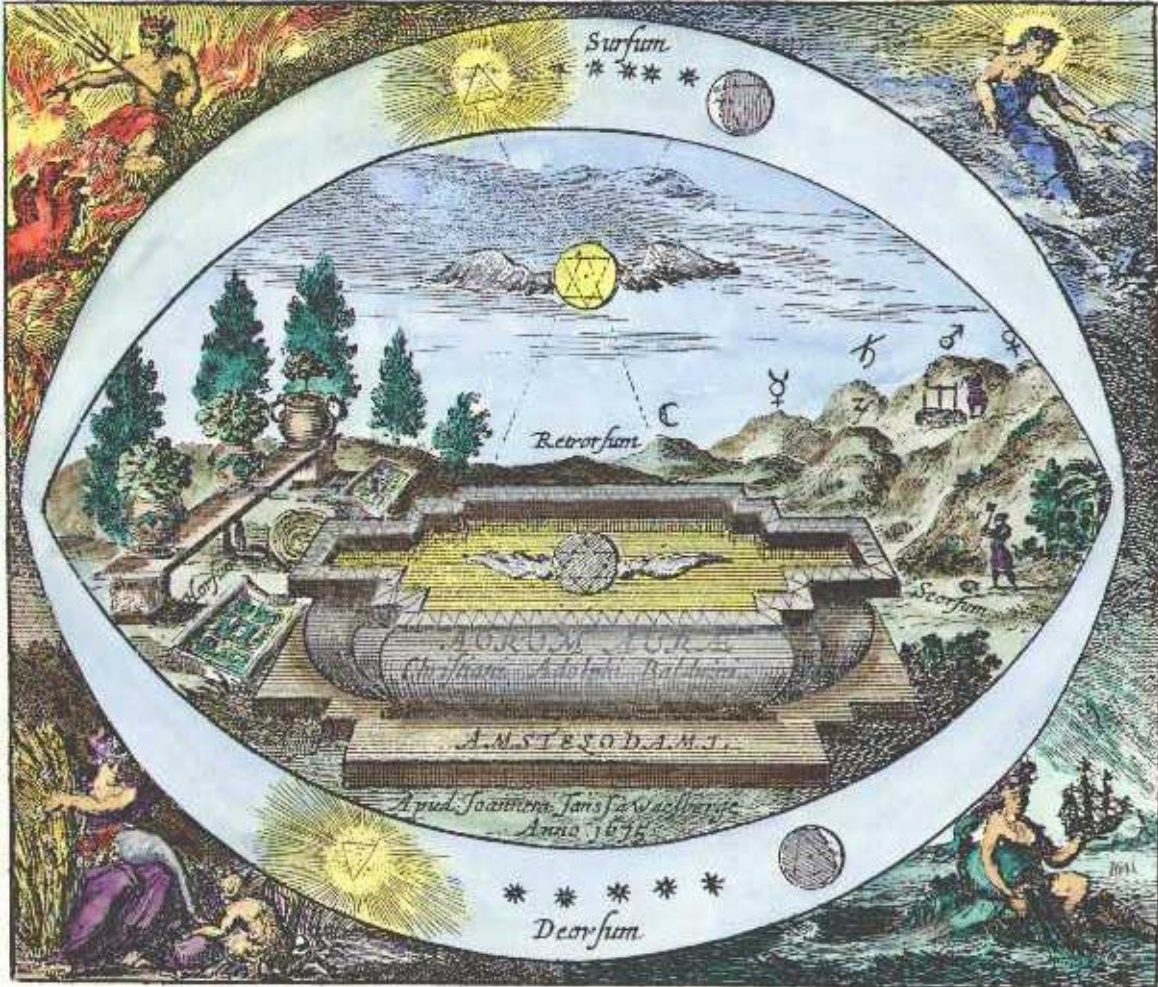
The Exercises.

I would like you now to consider the examples and try and see which of the four main groups I have outlined into which emblems seem to fall.

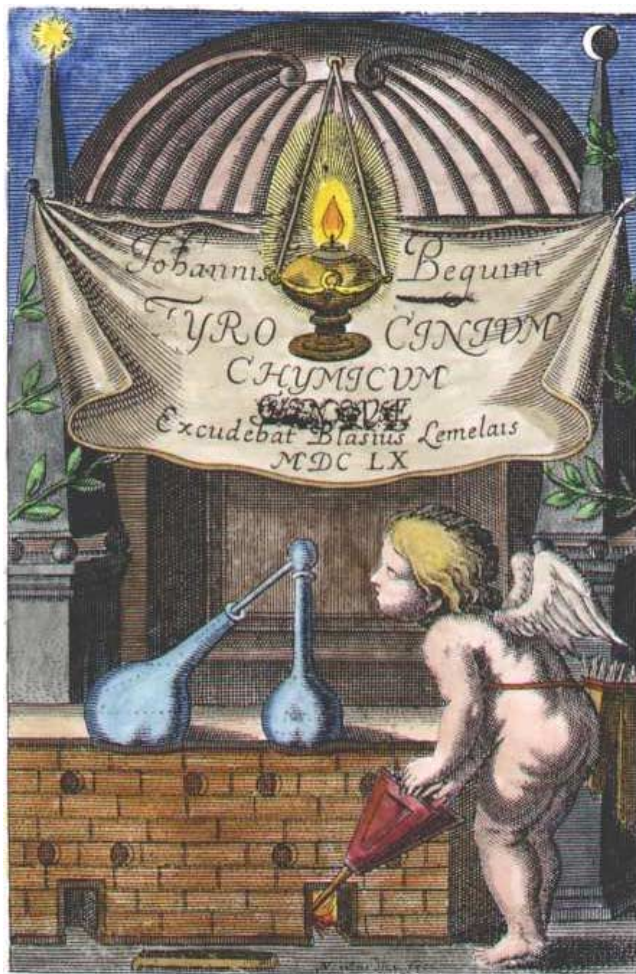
1. Those with a simple abstract message, illustrating a simple idea.
2. Individual emblematic statements.
3. Emblems which must be viewed in the context of a larger series.
4. Emblems which are, in essence, pictorial summaries.

If you have any books with reproductions of alchemical emblems do try and see if they fit into these main groups. If there are any which seem to fall outside these categories or belong to two categories at once, try to identify the particular aspects of the emblem that point to it being in these groups.

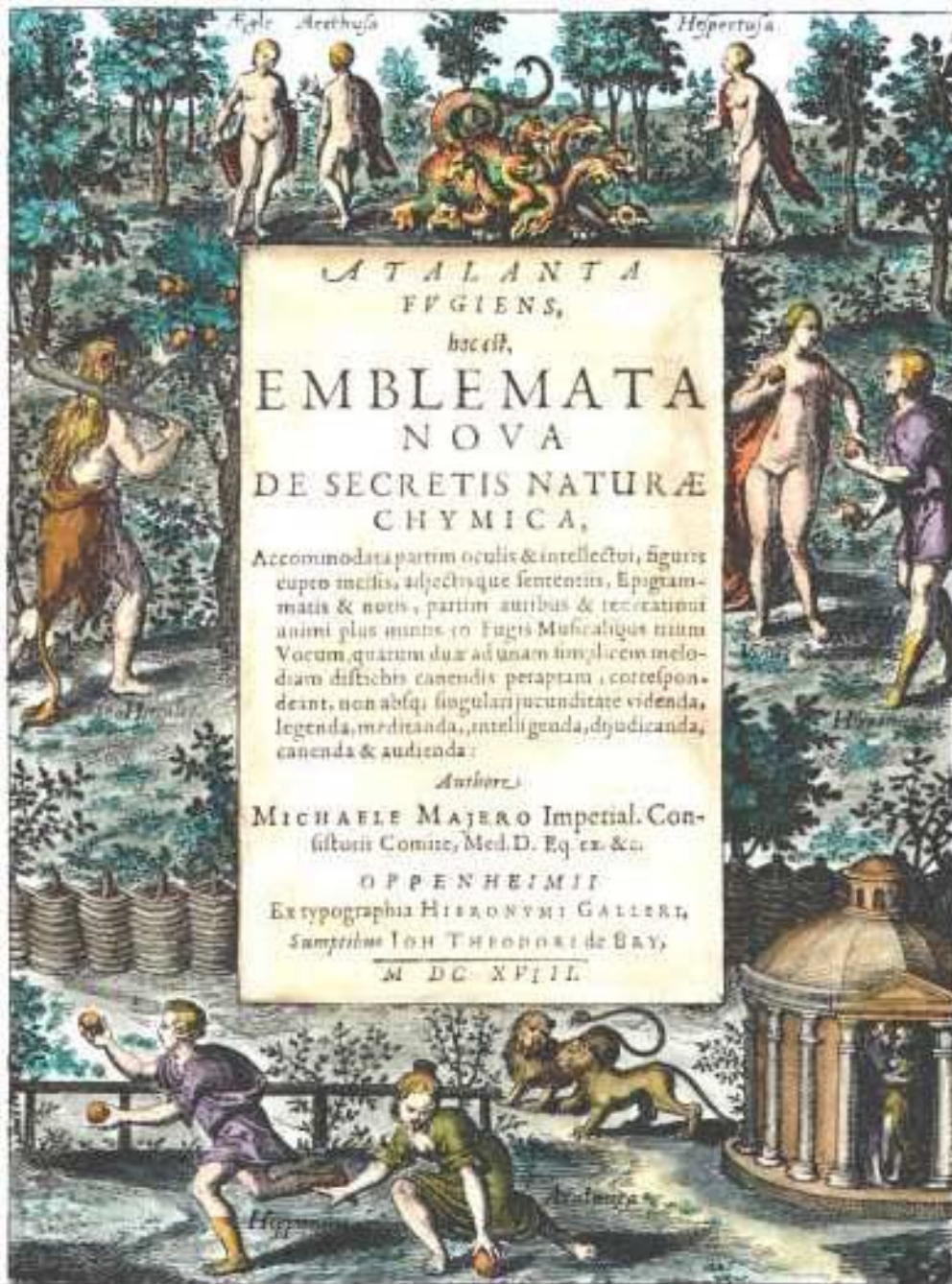
Example 1. . Frontispiece from Balduin's *Aureum superius et inferius*.



Example 2. Frontispiece from Jean Beguin, *Tyrocinium chymicum*, 1660.



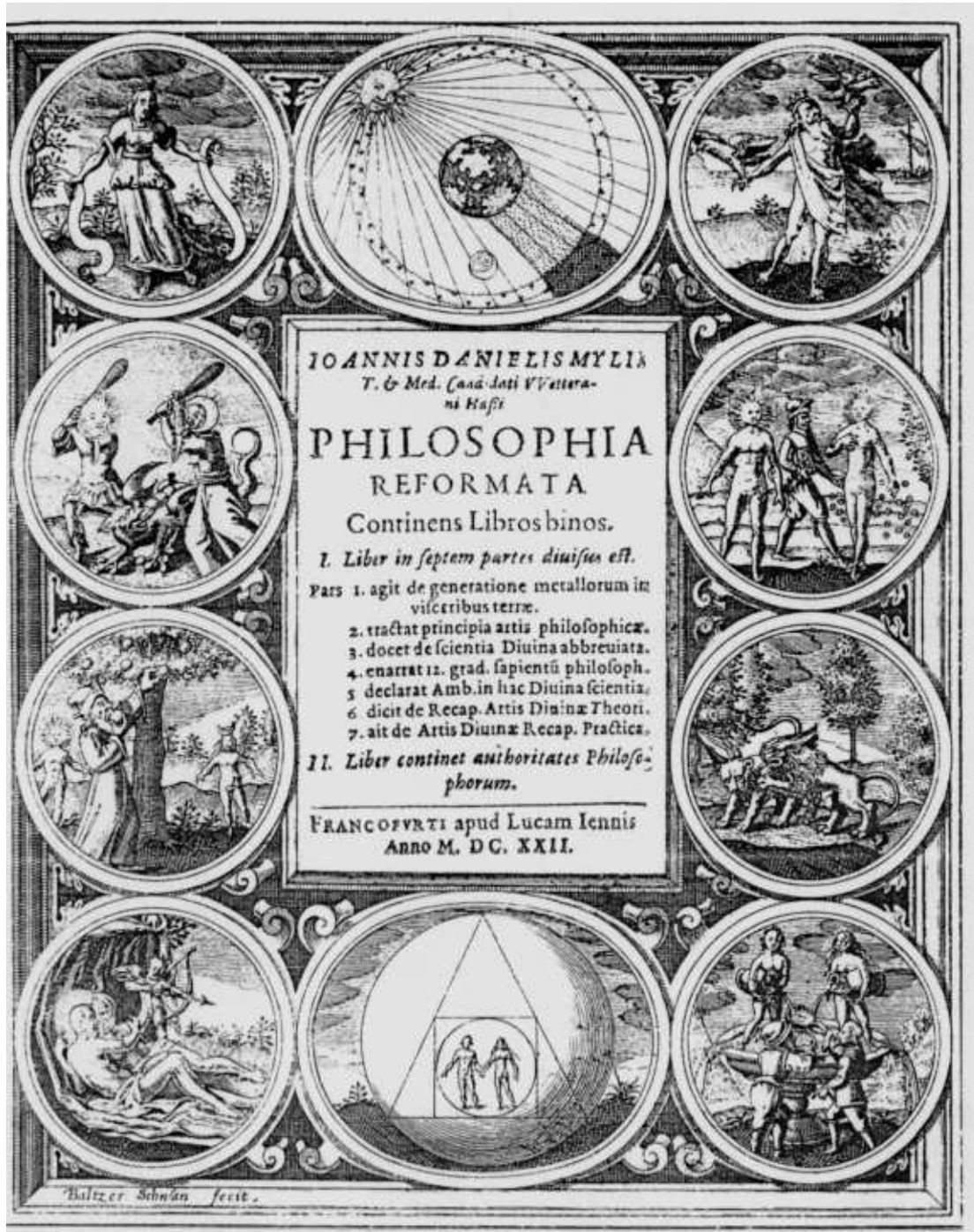
Example 3. Title page from *Atalanta fugiens*.



Example 4. Vincentius Koffsky, *Hermetische Schrifften*, 1786.



Example 5. Title page from Mylius *Philosophia reformata*.



Example 5. Emblem 4 from Mylius *Philosophia reformata*.

