



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

## Lesson 23 : Reading an emblem from within itself.



In the last lesson I asked you as an exercise to attempt a reading of a part of the *Ripley Scroll*. This, of course, is a very important and seemingly obscure late 15th or early 16th century alchemical manuscript, but I deliberately chose a section which is relatively easily deconstructed and it should not have been too difficult for you to identify most of the components. A true reading of the *Ripley Scroll* would require us to examine the manuscript as a whole, but for now it is enough that we can see what lies within this small part of its elaborate symbolism. I will now just quickly summarise the main symbolic points that are found in this section of the scroll.

The geometry helps us. There are two main sections to this image - a lower fourfold basin or well and an upper sevenfold one. We also have an upper world where we see the Sun and Moon and the lower realm of the earth beneath where the serpent dragon lives. As the text states :

On the ground there is a hill  
Also a serpent within a well

The Sun and Moon disgorge feathers (in some versions of the scroll these are coloured gold and silver respectively). The feathers are labelled "spirit" and "soul". We have already

noted that birds are often used in alchemical emblems to reflect the idea of a principle or process which can rise up to the upper world and come back down to the lower sphere - something that can move between the worlds. The removal of the feathers from a bird obviously grounds it, and this image is used in another part of the *Ripley Scroll*, where the text then states:

In the sea without leas  
Stands the bird of Hermes  
Eating his wings variable  
And makes himself fully stable  
When all his feathers be from him gone  
He stands still as a bone.

Thus the removal of the feathers indicated a removal of the volatility, the ability to fly up and down through the worlds. Thus this section of the scroll seems to be asking us to consider the need to remove the volatility, to 'earth' the spiritual components. This is occurring through two processes - one in a sevenfold vessel and the other in a fourfold vessel. This is, of course, quite simple. In one stage the seven planetary forces must be integrated into the work, while at another stage the forces of the four elements should be brought together.

The upper vessel is in the form of a castellated basin with seven towers at its vertices. In each of these towers stand human figures who hold flasks and prepare to pour these into the vessel. These are labelled on their towers "the first imbibing" (drinking) through to the "seventh imbibing". The first three of these seem already to have poured their substance or forces into the vessel while the others await their turn. It is not immediately possible to exactly identify each image with an individual planet, but this is clearly the intention of the designer of this image. The towers are also labelled "fyer" and in some manuscripts appear to have flames at the base of each tower. Within the vessel stand a male and female figure both labelled "corpus" (body), while beside them are the images of the Sun and Moon. From the centre of the vessel a tree rises up, its canopy in the upper realm of the Sun and Moon. The naked male and female figures each grasp vines and eat their grapes. Half way up the tree trunk is a radiant child whose body bears the word "anima" (soul). From higher up in the tree a serpent or lilith-like figure reaches down towards the child. Here we appear to be asked to see this stage of the alchemical process as reflecting the Garden of Eden myth. Thus the Adam and Eve figures are partaking of the fruits of the tree of knowledge and this spiritual wisdom of Creation is being brought into the alchemical work. On the brickwork of this sevenfold vessel we note the words "The white sea, the white Luna, the white Sol".

The lower fourfold vessel has four towers at the vertices, each with a flask. These are labelled as the elements - "fire purges", "earth stands", "water washes" and with air "the spirit enters" (or in other manuscripts "the spirit enlivens"). From the centre of the fourfold basin a strong stone pillar rises to support the upper sevenfold vessel. In the basin itself stand two figures - a male figure surrounded by a nimbus of light and labelled "anima" and "oil", while beside him is a winged female figure with "spiritus" and "water". A strong man, a Hercules or Atlas figure holds the column, his body bearing the word "corpus". On the column are the words "the earth stands" (in the fire). This vessel, labelled below "the red Sea, the red Luna, the red Sol", seems to be showing us that the task is to create a substance which incorporates the volatile spirit and soul and yet it "stands in the fire" that is, it is entirely fixed into substance. Other text related to the *Ripley Scroll* identifies this earthing or grounding of the spirit and soul as one of the key aspect of the alchemical work and this is being expressed here emblematically.

By the Spirit is understood Mercury which subtly entering into the body disposes it into simplicity, and draws the soul from it, and elevating it upwards into the air, bears it with him. And afterwards disposes the body and reduces it into the nature of the quintessence which is a certain simplicity, and pours the soul into the body again. Which the body embracing rejoices with it, because the soul when it enters into the body makes it perfect, as the quick perfects the dead, until it rise again and lives. And this is the stone of Philosophy teaching thee to observe all things.

Below, on the body of the lower vessel, we see the dragon eating the venomous toad. As the text states:

On the ground there is a hill  
Also a serpent within a well  
His tail is long with wings wide  
All ready to fly on every side  
Repair the well round about  
That the serpent pass not out  
For if that he be from there gone  
You lose the virtue of the stone

Again we have the idea presented that a key part of the alchemical work is to hold, incorporate or embody the energetic, volatile and spiritual within an earthly material - a grounding of the spirit. We could even link the dragon symbolically with the lilith-like figure in the upper part of the emblem. The dragon arises from the ground and is a primal energy of the earth. While the lilith or snake-figure descends from the heights of the heavenly tree and brings a powerful energy from this realm into the work. In a way, the alchemy presented in this emblem is about uniting these two primal energies together. We also note that in each vessel there is a triplicity plus one. In the upper vessel Sun-man or Adam, Moon-woman or Eve and the child in the tree forming a triplicity, with the fourth aspect the lilith-snake form descending from above. In the lower vessel we have the two spiritualised figures of radiant Sun-man and angel-winged woman, forming a triplicity with the Atlas like figure, while rising from below the vessel is the serpent-dragon.

There is, naturally, much much more to the Ripley Scroll but in looking at this section we have touched a little upon the profound alchemy which it pictures to us. I hope you will appreciate the value of reading this emblem from within itself, rather than bringing a whole barrage (or baggage) of external ideas into your reading of this symbolic work. I have tried to demonstrate through the exercises that we do not need to reach out for our depth psychology, our systems of esoterics, all sorts of things external to alchemy, in order to come to some understanding of what is working in these alchemical emblems. The creator of the Ripley Scroll wanted us to understand what he was picturing to us. He has made sure that everything is there in the imagery and text. It is up to us to read it.

I must confess I find the attitude of such twentieth century depth-psychologists as Marie-Louise von Franz entirely misguided when she says about alchemical imagery and texts

that :

"...there is only one path to follow: to assume that the author did not express himself in clearly understandable concepts *for the simple reason that he did not possess them*, and that he was giving a stammering description of an *unconscious content which had irrupted into his consciousness*."

Well, the *Aurora consurgens*, the *Ripley Scroll* and all the emblems we have looked at in this cycle of lessons surely amount to more than mere "unconscious irruptions". This seems a rather bleak view. I hope I have demonstrated over the last year of these lessons that alchemical emblems have a well devised and often beautifully formed internal structure. Intelligence and much thought is woven into these emblems. If we try and resonate with the intention of the authors of these emblems, we will get closer to being able to read the message they were trying to convey. An alchemical emblem when looked at in the correct way will reveal its secrets directly to you without the need to impose some external interpretation.

This is the penultimate lesson in the foundation course, and to close it I will give you a more light-hearted exercise. We have over the past few lessons been looking at extremely difficult and elaborate emblems. Now to conclude we must surely also come to appreciate a little alchemical humour. So I would just like us to attempt a reading of the frontispiece from Johann Georg Schmid, *Der von Mose und denen Propheten übel urtheilende Alchymist* Chemnitz, 1706.

