

A Note for Stanton Marlan

James Hillman

The following, "A Note for Stanton Marlan", was a reflection on alchemy, sent as part of a correspondence with James Hillman while I was doing research for an article for the proposed Handbook of Jungian Analysis, by Renos Papadopoulos. It is James Hillman's response to my query about his approach to alchemy and indicates his early interest in the field and his differences from Jung and the classical approaches of von Franz and Edinger, as well as his reaction to interpretations of alchemy bound to Christian metaphysics.

Stanton Marlan

My first organized attempts at alchemy were lectures given at the Zürich Jung Institute in 1966. I had been drawn by its obscure poetic language and strange images, and by its amazing insights, especially in Jung's introduction to *The Secret of the Golden Flower* and "The Philosophical Tree." As a contrarian, I was also drawn by the fact that while Jung had given his later years to alchemy and a third or more of his major writings were on the subject, it remained absent in the education program of the Institute.

Then, in 1968, while at the University of Chicago as visiting professor, I expanded my library research and collection of dreams with alchemical motifs, giving each week during the

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fall term a long public lecture in the old wooden chemistry hall, "Analytical Work—Alchemical Opus."

This title sets forth my angle: to exhibit a background to analytical work that is metaphorical, even preposterous, and so, less encumbered by clinical literalism. I explained this method at the International Congress of Jungians in Rome in 1977, and continue to work the field to this day.

The point of my alchemical engagement is this: Whereas the history of European (Arabic as well) alchemy associates it with (a) varieties of mysticism or (b) fraudulent charlatanism of gold-making mountebanks or (c) bumbling early experimental science, Jung's work showed its psychological significance as a devotional discipline of psychic exploration as if required by, or invented by, the soul for its own benefit. Jung wrote that his recovery of alchemy laid a ground for his psychology, which he saw as its continuation.

While Jung reclaimed alchemy for the psyche, he also claimed it for his psychology. His liberation of alchemy from the former traps (mysticism, charlatanism, pre- or pseudo-science) entangled it in his system of opposites and Christian symbols and thought. Though Jung recognizes that alchemy was a kind of shadow-practice within a Christian world, Jungian alchemy (i.e., von Franz, Edinger) remains tied to what it tries to differ from. Of course the language of alchemical texts pays homage to Christian metaphysics, pieties, and hopes. The psychology of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance/Reformation was embedded in the Christian *Weltanschauung* and symbols. But that level of collective consciousness can be peeled away, so that the material may speak more phenomenally. Then pagan images stand out: metals, planets, minerals, stars, plants, charms, animals, vessels, fires, and specific locales. These are the stuff of the work and the texts, and are more basic to the alchemical opus than the metaphysical scaffolding which has supported, if not twisted, alchemy into a seven-story mountain of redemption.

The distinction I am trying to make is between an alchemy of spirit and an alchemy of soul. Transformation of the psyche—alchemy's *leitmotif*—can be distinguished from redemption of the soul, which is largely a Christian concern. When this

distinction is kept clearly in mind, then the subtle changes in color, heat, bodily forms, and other qualities refer to the psyche's processes, useful to the practice of therapy for reflecting the changes going on in the psyche without linking these changes to a progressive program or redemptive vision.

In short, alchemy's maxims and curious images are useful, less because alchemy is a grand narrative composed by many hands depicting one theme—individuation's stages in the conjunction of opposites—but rather because alchemy's myriad, cryptic, arcane, paradoxical, and mainly conflicting texts reveal the psyche phenomenally; and so alchemy needs to be encountered with the least possible intrusion of metaphysics.

