



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

Lesson Fifteen : A first attempt at reading some emblems

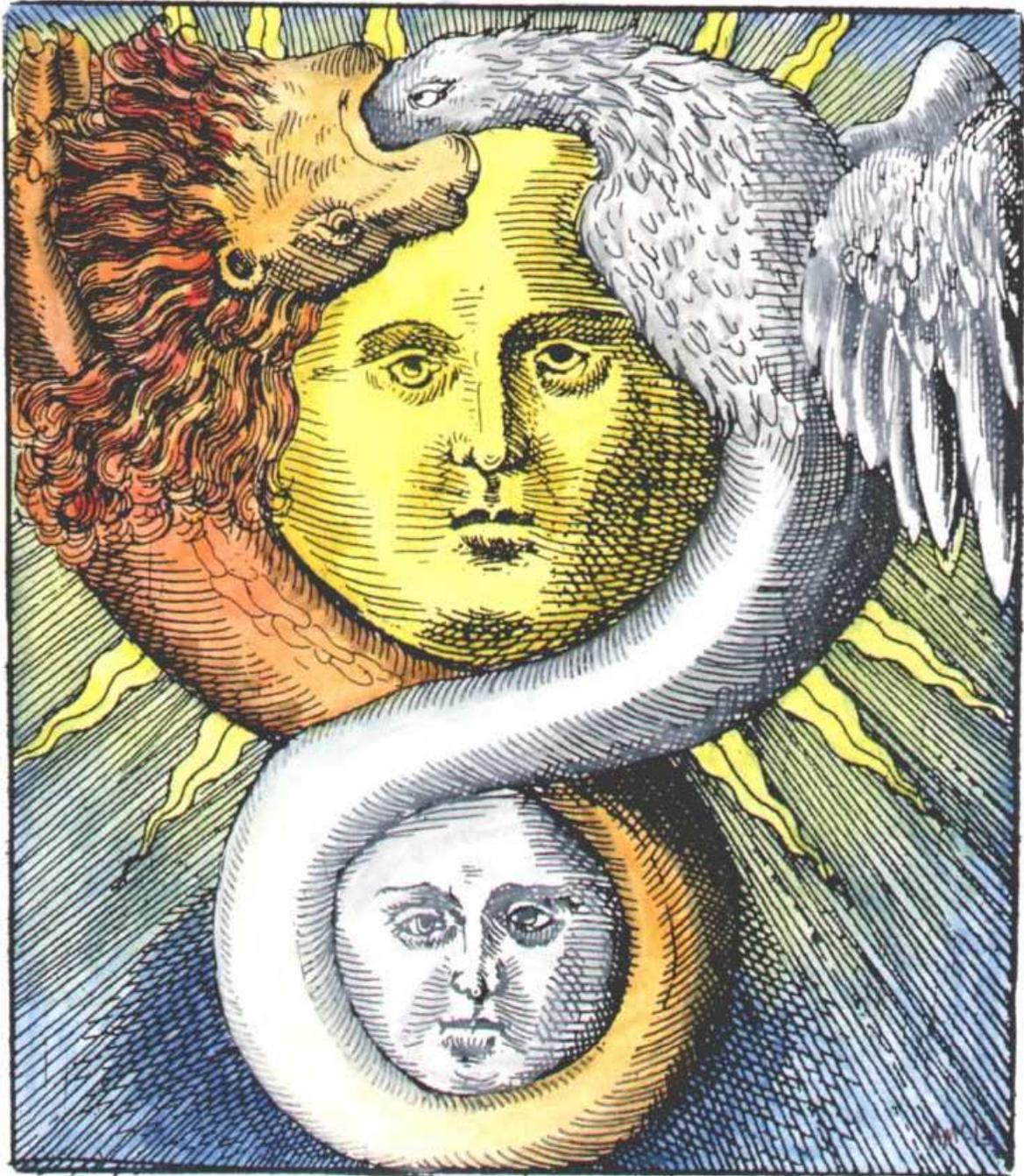
In order to come to some understanding of an alchemical emblem we have first to analyse the individual symbols in their context - we have done plenty of that over the past months - but to move forwards we now have to begin to see how they relate to the whole emblem, that is we have to integrate each symbol into the space of the emblem.

An alchemical emblem, if properly constructed, is not just a haphazard amalgam of symbols. Instead, the composer of the emblem presents us with a puzzle, a symbolic riddle. An emblem is a space which is active. The symbols are not there in some merely decorative placement but they are chosen and positioned in such a way as to create a kind of drama, a kind of symbolic event which actively engages the viewer. They are, in a sense, to be likened to modern art installations in which various objects are placed to challenge the viewer.

In order to "read" alchemical emblems, we must allow ourselves to enter into this drama. It is possible to use emblems as the basis for inner meditative work, and this course looks towards this, but before we can use these in meditations we must truly encounter the emblems through our thinking and intellect. Only then can meditative exercises be really useful, otherwise the churning fountain of our inner world will just seize on those particular images and symbols with which we personally resonate - either through our attraction to them, or by our being repelled or disturbed by some images. We should begin by entering the dramatic space of the emblem with our mind, and clearly try to see its structure and how the emblem is designed to work upon us, before throwing this directly into the melting pot of our psyche.

In the last lesson we saw how there are different types of emblems. In this lesson and for most of the rest of this course we are only to look at emblems of the second and third groups. These classic alchemical emblems present us with a symbolic drama, often indicating or hinting at a resolution of the symbolic tension. Of course this is best articulated in a series, where, like a comic book cartoon strip, the alchemist can show in sequence how the stages of the alchemical drama unfold. However single emblems usually present us with a dynamic symbolic situation and give us some idea or indication of how the tensions resolve. Alchemy is primarily about processes and transformations, so a single symbolic snapshot is a difficult method for recording or describing an active dynamic process of change. But that is how some emblems are designed to work and we will find single emblematic statements challenging and full of significance.

Let us now consider again the very first alchemical emblem that we looked at in this study course. Here I show my own coloured version. Although this is actually from the *Azoth* series, I will for now just look at this emblem in isolation from the series. To explore it fully we would have to look at each of the other thirteen emblems in this sequence and see how they relate together.

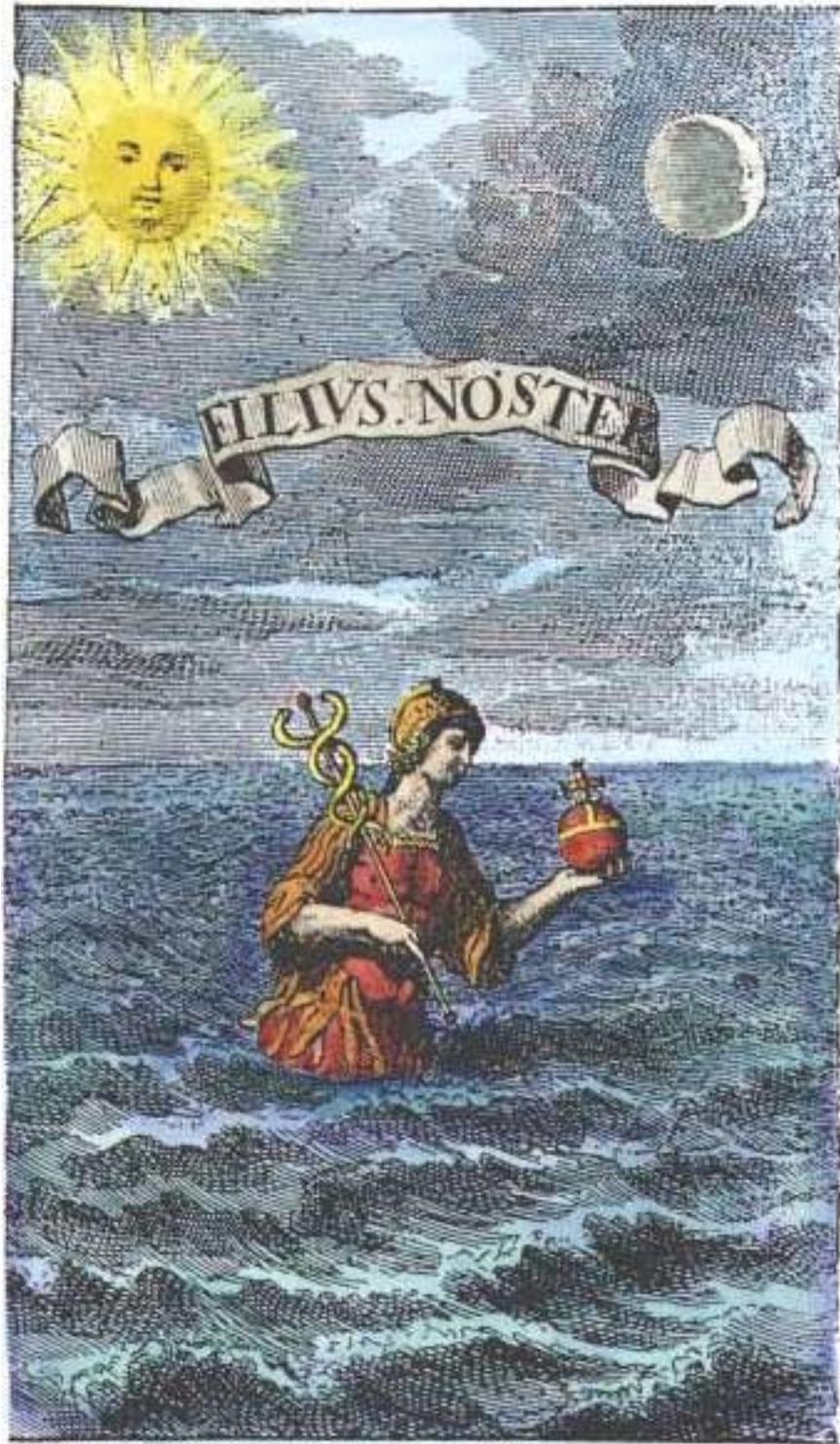


This emblem presents us with the Sun and Moon - the two powerful polarities of

alchemy. These two great symbols have many resonances, male and female, active and passive, day and night, fountain of light and mirror of light, constancy and change, gold and silver, warmth and cold, and many more. You will, if you persevere with alchemy, find yourself continually discovering new facets to the Sun and Moon symbols. Here the Sun and Moon appear in a vertical polarity. The Sun appears somewhat above the Moon. Just for one moment try and picture in your mind a similar emblem but with the Moon set above the Sun. This would indeed be a different space. Here the Sun stands in a paramount place above the Moon. Its rays shine out into the upper region and to the left and right, but the presence of the Moon disturbs the flow of light and leaves a darkness in the area below.

The drama presented in this emblem is the simple one of how the seemingly opposed powers and qualities of the Sun and Moon can be brought together - an eternal concern of alchemists. Many emblems address this problem. This particular emblem offers a solution. A snake form wraps itself around the Sun and Moon, forming an ouroboros that ties together these two symbols. Unlike a normal snake-ouroboros this being has two heads - one in the form of a lion and the other an eagle. In my coloured version I have made the lion yellowish-red and the eagle a whitish-gray. In alchemy the lion is sometimes conceived of as a solar beast and the white eagle as a lunar animal, so I have chosen to amplify these aspects through the colouring. The eagle is sometimes seen as a stage towards the lunar stone in alchemy (the gluten of the eagle), while the lion can be indicative of the red stone. So here we can say that the author of our emblem wished to show that in some way the resolution of the polarities of the Sun and Moon can be found in the lion and eagle. But here lion and eagle are not separate entities but part of the same snake-ouroboros body. Thus this emblem seems to be saying to us that, through the seeking of the two alchemical stones (the red and the white tinctures of the Sun and Moon) and the bringing them together into one thing, the opposites can be reconciled. Additionally, we find a further subtlety, in that the head of the lion is depicted upside down as it devours the eagle head. Obviously it is impossible for the maker of this emblem to show the lion and the eagle simultaneously eating one another's head. Thus if the lion merely eat the eagle this would be an indication of the triumph of the lion-solar over the eagle-lunar, and this is not what the emblemist intends us to find in his construction. Just as the Sun disc stood over the Moon, by inverting this through the turning of the head of the lion upside down, the eagle though being devoured remains in the dominant upright position, and the emblem now contains a more subtle and inclusive image of the resolution of the Sun and Moon. Now we have not so much a triumphing of the solar, but a true meeting of the Sun and Moon. One can pour more resonances and symbolic echoes onto this image, but this should suffice for now. I have shown how we can approach through its structure something of the intention of this emblem.

Now we will look at how an alchemist of the early 18th century envisaged a different way of resolving the polarities of Sun and Moon.

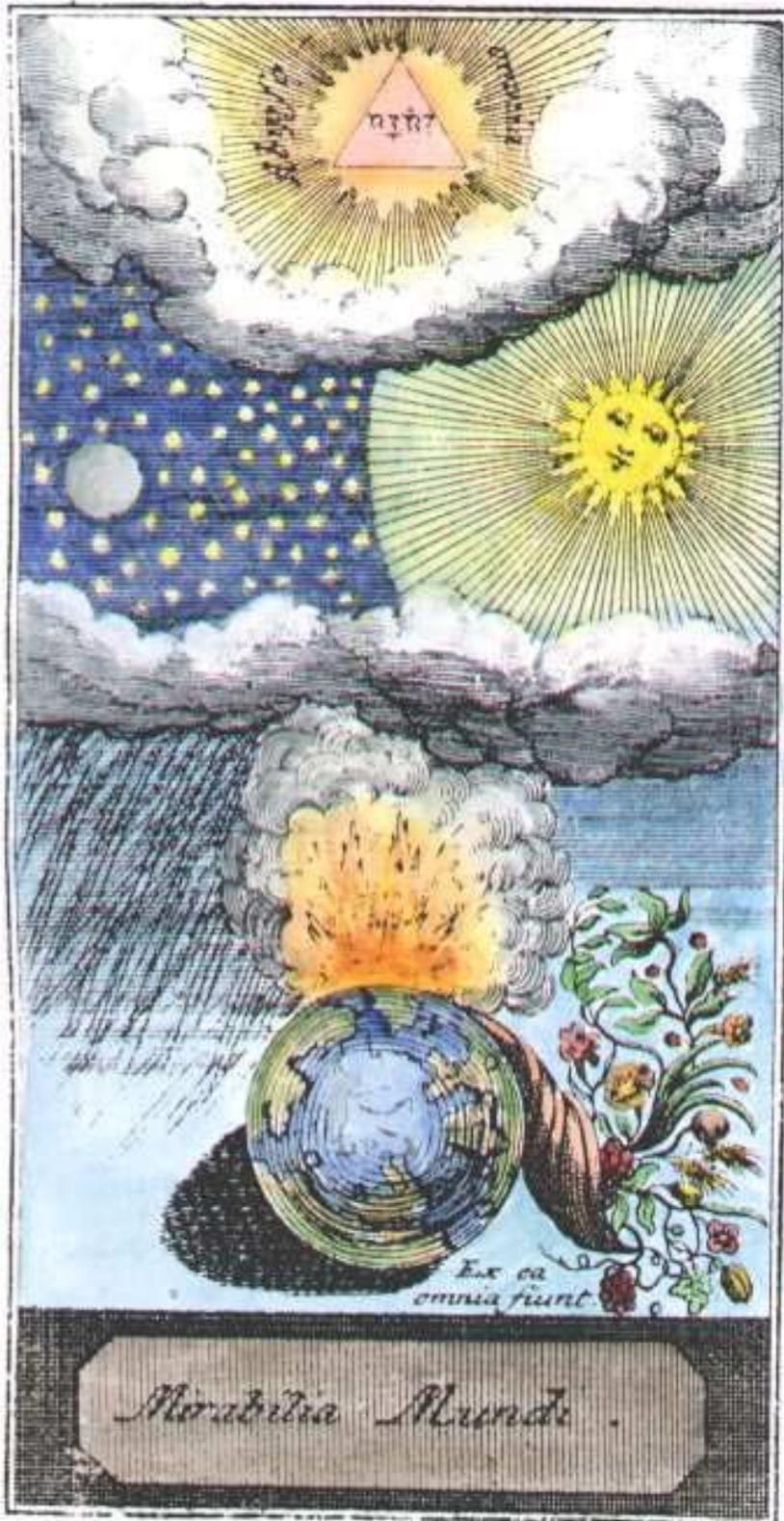


The Sun and Moon appear again, on this occasion on opposite sides of the sky, while below the figure of Hermes-Mercury walks through waves. The text in the banner tells us that he is "Our son". The emblem states the problem - "How can the Sun and Moon be united together". The answer given is - through fusing together and having an offspring. The main candidate for this honour in alchemy is Mercury. This is because he is an androgynous being, and his symbol ☿ contains both that of the Sun and the Moon. Here no reference is made directly to his symbol, though you will find this in other emblems. His caduceus is, however, in some ways a reflection of the conventional symbol for Mercury. Here Hermes-Mercury carries his caduceus in the form of a rod or sceptre over his right shoulder, while in his left hand he holds out an orb ☉. These two are the main elements of the regalia of a monarch. The sceptre shows the authority or power of the ruler, while the orb shows the dominion or region within which the ruler can express kingly power. The sceptre or wand is the active manifestation of power, thus it connects more to the solar-masculine, and Mercury here holds it in his right hand. The orb is a more passive image of power, its spherical form shows the enclosing of power. Here it can be seen to reflect the lunar-feminine aspect being held here in the left hand. Mercury in bearing these regalia shows us that he balances the solar and the lunar within his being. We note how the Sun and Moon form with Mercury a downward pointing triangle.

Mercury is half immersed in the sea. This may indicate that Mercury does not stand above or dominate the watery element but somehow has this as a part of his nature. Some alchemical texts refer to the "Mercurial water" or "Mercurial sea", though this idea is unclear and imprecise. We do know that Mercury is a liquid metal and also that it can dissolve gold (Sun) and silver (Moon). So perhaps the formation of an amalgam in some small way reflects the idea of the "Mercurial water". The sea is an important symbolic component of this emblem though it does not appear to have a completely unambiguous reading. Another aspect we can identify is that of the sea as the 'waters of birth' - Mercury is here being born from the matrix of the waters. This emblem demonstrates that we cannot entirely force a single reading onto an alchemical symbol. We may have to accept the power and importance of the symbolic image of the sea without necessarily being able to wrap it up into a neat interpretation. Perhaps reading the text of the work might give us a clearer view on the way the composer of this emblem wanted us to view the sea.

The orb appears in a number of alchemical emblems. In itself it contains a number of separate symbolic components - the cross (often of the four elements), the sphere or circle, and also the bar across the globe can represent an alchemical substance (☉ salt, or ☿ vitriol, ☽ sometimes nitre). Thus in some contexts the orb with central bar could be showing us salt, and if there were symbols of, say, sulphur and mercury related to this within the emblem space, then we would be right to view the orb as symbolising the salt facet of the three alchemical principles. In this particular image the orb does not seem to carry this message, so we are probably wise to restrict our interpretation to that of the conventional orb of power. Often to clear up such points one would have to turn to the text of the book or manuscript in which the emblem occurs. [I include this information to emphasise the point that a symbol may have different meanings and imply distinct messages in different emblems. One must always look to the context in which the symbol occurs - rather than using a fixed dictionary of symbols and their meanings.]

A third way in which an alchemist has sought to resolve the energies of the Sun and Moon is seen in an engraving from Johannes de Maldini *Mirabilia Mundi*, 1754.



Here the Sun and Moon are seen as emanating from some higher sphere, that of the realm of the spirit, indicated by the triangle with the name of God within it. As the text states "from this all things [are derived or created]". The Sun and Moon occupy an intermediate realm in the starry heaven. In the realm below we see the globe of the Earth. From the lunar side of the clouds water in the form of rain can be seen, while the Sun manifests itself in the flames of fire. Alchemists often thought of the Moon as mediating the element of water and the Sun as bringing fire. These two elements play upon the Earth, and promote the growth of vegetation. The result of their action is shown in the cornucopia (conventional horn of plenty) with its abundance of fruits, flowers and leaves. As the text states "from these all things are made". In this emblem the Sun and Moon though polarised and separate from each other come together in nourishing the growth of vegetation and life on Earth.

Now we have looked at three emblems which present us with different ways of bringing together the seemingly opposed Sun and Moon. The first pictured this happening through the interweaving ouroboros and the formation of the tinctures, the second showed us that these polarities are resolved in Mercury, while the third presented us with the image that the life of the vegetable kingdom is based on the co-operative working of the Solar and Lunar forces. I hope this may serve to demonstrate that in interpreting alchemical emblems we cannot just apply a fixed formula, and that we can only get to the essence of an emblem when we look at it as an object in itself and keep its individual symbols in a proper context. Also we must take to heart the fact that one cannot always exhaustively and precisely read an emblem. Often one just must allow it to remain ambiguous. Emblems can contain or express a symbolic power that we can recognise and feel, but it may not be possible for us to entirely grasp or explain it with our intellect. In a sense, it is this that keeps alchemical symbolism alive. I have been living with some alchemical emblems for 30 years and still find they challenge me. If we are to continue appreciating alchemical symbolism we have to be able to live with the power of the imagery without needing to entirely resolve it into abstractions.

I do not intend to provide actual exercises with this particular lesson. I want to present more worked examples to you before pressing you to work on your own on an emblem. In place of exercises I will ask you to look through the emblems we have previously examined in the course or those on the CD-Rom or in any books which you might have, and see if you can find other emblems which present further ways of bringing together the polarities of Sun and Moon