

Rosemarie Rowley: A modest disquisition on JONSON AND ALCHEMY

The spirit of enquiry which started with the Renaissance, and the discovery of ancient scripts in Europe, brought about a change in the way people thought about the eternal questions of life, salvation, spirit and truth, and of course, how to make one's way in the world. During the time when Rome held the monopoly of truth, and the monolith and control of everyday life, the secret knowledge of the ages, the Hermetic tradition, had been driven underground, and were it not for the Arabs of North Africa, who valued the higher arts and sciences, much of ancient wisdom would have been lost. In fact, it was the Arabs who gave us the word Alchemy, since it translates Land of the Moon, meaning Egypt. The greatest single loss in the classical world was caused by the fire of Alexandria, when the city was set on fire by Caesar in the year 48 A.D. It is reported that many volumes were lost - volumes whose loss was irreparable, and irreplaceable. A special loss was the number of ancient manuscripts on magic and alchemy.

The beginnings of alchemy were traced back to Hermes Trismegistus, an incarnation of the Egyptian god Thoth, god of wisdom, mathematics, and natural sciences such as magic. A surviving manuscript, what was known as the Emerald Table, or Tabula Smaragdina, describes his credo as:

It is truth, truth without lies, certain truth

That that which is above, is like that which is below

And that which is below is like that which is above

To accomplish the miracle of one thing.

However, it wasn't until the rubrics of Greek geometry and philosophy reached Egypt that the practice of the magical science alchemy began to develop. When the Greeks reached Egypt and began to trade there, they aligned their philosophical thought models with

Egyptian alchemical practices. This conjunction within the Egyptian cosmos was to bring about the birth of the ancient discipline and learning of alchemy. In fact it was the fusion of Hermetic principles with Aristotle's elements which is the basis of the alchemical creed.

Before this process could come into being, there had to be primeval matter which encompassed all things. When Aristotle's teachings reached Egypt, they found a basis in the wisdom of the Emerald Table – the one thing referred to is the primeval *massa confusa*. From this was born the four elements, that is, Earth, Air, Fire and Water. However, philosophy and science as we know them were not to flourish until two millennia later.

Another manuscript which survives from this time known as the dialogue of Cleopatra with the philosophers, also indicates the birth of alchemy (U. Calgary, 2001) which some have dated as 200 AD. In answer to Cleopatra's discourse on earth, water and air, the philosophers replied:

In thee is concealed a strange and terrible mystery. Enlighten us, casting your light upon the elements. Tell us how the highest descends to the lowest and how the lowest rises to the highest, and how that which is in the midst approaches the highest and is united to it, and what is the element which accomplishes these things. And tell us how the blessed waters visit the corpses lying in Hades fettered and afflicted in darkness and how the medicine of Life reaches them and rouses them as if wakened by their possessors from sleep; and how the new waters, both brought forth on the bier and coming after the light penetrate them at the beginning of their prostration and how a cloud supports them and how the cloud supporting the waters rises from the sea.

We can see how from the beginning, how alchemy was bound up with an understanding of the origins of life and the natural processes.

And the philosophers, considering what had been revealed to them, rejoiced, as Cleopatra replied to them.

The waters, when they come, awake the bodies and the spirits which are imprisoned and weak. For they again undergo oppression and are enclosed in Hades, and yet in a

little while they grow and rise up and put on divers glorious colours like the flowers in springtime and the spring itself rejoices and is glad at the beauty that they wear.

For I tell this to you who are wise: when you take plants, elements, and stones from their places, they appear to you to be mature. But they are not mature until the fire has tested them. When they are clothed in the glory from the fire and the shining colour thereof, then rather will appear their hidden glory, their sought-for beauty, being transformed to the divine state of fusion. For they are nourished in the fire and the embryo grows little by little nourished in its mother's womb, and when the appointed month approaches is not restrained from issuing forth. Such is the procedure of this worthy art. The waves and surges one after another in Hades wound them in the tomb where they lie. When the tomb is opened they issue from Hades as the babe from the womb.

According to Aristotle, the four elements are distinguished from one another by their qualities, that is, the fluid or moist, the dry, the hot, and the cold. Each element possessed two of the primary qualities, while the two absent qualities were the contraries which cannot be coupled. The four possible combinations were, and still are: hot and dry = fire, hot and fluid = air, cold and fluid = water, and cold and dry = earth.

The alchemists revered the natural world as a template for their work, and did not seek possibilities outside these elements. As well as the human cycle of birth and death, they believed that such natural occurrences were of an intrinsic existing order, and therefore matter such as metal grew vegetable-like in the earth, and had to go through the processes of generation, with the addition or subtraction of varying degrees of the elements, which in turn, brought about the differences between the different metals. Therefore, they reasoned, if metals were treated as vegetables, and went through the stages of purification and putrefaction in the alchemist's laboratory, they could change what kind of metal they were. This foreknowledge of relationship between all elements only came into being much later on in the twentieth century with the discovery of atoms and the periodic table. However the alchemists, versed in magic, made their comparisons only in the visible natural world, and what they hoped was to bring inferior metals to a stage of perfection by imitating natural correspondences, that is, through the magical theories of similarity, correspondence, like, and

substitution, and above all, through imitation of the natural processes of generation or germination, and growth and decay. Since all matter is a combination of the elements, some are more perfect than others, and gold is the most perfect natural form. This is basic alchemy.

What is important in the process was that the alchemist did not dissociate the great work of metal transmutation from himself: perfection, transformation, and transmutation of his own soul was as much an object as perfection of the metals. This inner alchemy was considered to be far more important, by the adepts, than the extrinsic metallurgy. The object was to enter the complete and full life – gold being the great life force (Sol) which is hidden in the ordinary obscurity of daily events.

Albertus Magnus, Ramon Lully, Arnold de Villanova and Paracelsus are the great names in medieval alchemy, but none were more influential than Paracelsus. (Hartman, 1997). Born in 1493, he was originally called Aureolus Phillipus Theostratus Bombastus von Hohenheim, immortalized as "Paracelsus". He was the son of a well known physician who was described a Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, and it was from him that Paracelsus took his first instruction in medicine. At the age of sixteen, Paracelsus entered the University at Basle where he applied himself to the study of alchemy, surgery, and medicine. He was already acquainted with the study of alchemy, having previously read the works of Isaac Hollandus. Hollandus' writing roused in him the ambition to cure disease by medicine superior to those available at that time to use, for apart from his incursions into alchemy, Paracelsus is credited with the introduction of opium and mercury into the arsenal of medicine. His works also shows an advanced knowledge of the science and principles of magnetism. These are just some of the achievements that seem to justify the praise that has been handed him in the last century. Manly Hall (Hall, 1996) called him "the precursor of

chemical pharmacology and therapeutics and the most original medical thinker of the sixteenth century."

However, while a student in Basle, Paracelsus was forced to leave the city because of charges of necromancy brought against him. The Abbot Trithemius, an adept of a high order, and the instructor of the illustrious Henry Cornelius Agrippa, had initiated his study of alchemy and under the guidance of a wealthy physician Paracelsus was pursuing research into medicine, mineralogy, surgery, and chemistry – however for the next few years he had to earn his living as an astrologer and practitioner of the magic arts, as he fled through Germany, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden and Russia. Therefore the practice of magic was fundamental to his understanding and work in alchemy.

In Russia, he was taken prisoner by the Tartars and brought before the Grand Cham at whose court he became a great favourite. Finally, he accompanied the Cham's son on an embassy from China to Constantinople, the city in which the supreme secret, the universal dissolvent (the alkahest) was imparted to him by an Arabian adept. For Paracelsus, as Manly Hall has said, gained his knowledge "not from long-coated pedagogues but from dervishes in Constantinople, witches, gypsies, and sorcerers, who invoked spirits and captured the rays of the celestial bodies in dew; of whom it is said that he cured the incurable, gave sight to the blind, cleansed the leper, and even raised the dead, and whose memory could turn aside the plague."

In 1526, at the age of thirty-two, he went back to Basle, to the university he had entered as a youth, and took a professorship of physics, medicine, and surgery. This was a position of considerable importance that was offered to him at the insistence of Erasmus and Ecolampidus. Perhaps it was his behaviour at this time that eventually led to his nickname "the Luther of physicians," for in his lectures he was so bold as to denounce as antiquated the

revered systems and he actually burnt the works of these masters in a brass pan with sulphur and nitre! He was denounced as a heretic, and usurper, and even though he had effected cures with mineral medicines, once more had to leave Basle in a hurry and resume the life of a wanderer. He earned a reputation for bombast and conceit, but when he died in 1541 he had laid the basis for a revival of alchemy and the magic arts all over Europe. Although he numbered many enemies among his fellow physicians, Paracelsus also had his disciples, and for them no praise was too high for him. He was worshipped as their noble and beloved alchemical monarch, the "German Hermes."

In his book *Paracelsus*, Franz Hartmann says: "He proceeded to Machren, Kaernten, Krain, and Hungary, and finally to Salzburg in Austria, where he was invited by the Prince Palatine, Duke Ernst of Bavaria, who was a great lover of the secret art of alchemy. But Paracelsus was not destined to enjoy the rest he so richly deserved. He died in 1541, after a short sickness, in a small room at the White Horse Inn, and his body was buried in the graveyard of St. Sebastian. At least one writer has suggested that his death may have been hastened by a scuffle with assassins in the pay of the orthodox medical faculty, but there is no actual foundation for this story."

The discovery of ancient texts, and knowledge of the life and studies of the European alchemists had reached England's shores by 1300, and Chaucer (Coghill, trans. 1989) the great writer of this epoch, as in all his work, reflected on these developments which happened to English thinking and society. He is at the cusp of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and his sessions abroad as a young man and diplomat had made him an apt commentator on practices in his native country. In the "Canon's Yeoman's tale" Chaucer shows a scepticism which had begun to infect those who had disregarded common sense, and embarked on the

arduous journey of making gold. The poem contains a hilarious inventory of the gold-making equipment.

Our urinals and our descensories

Violes, crosslets and sublimatories

Cucurbites and Alemyks eek.

which describes the equipment of the deluded Canon and his laboratory assistant, both with leaden visages.

Although gold-making had taken place since the first gold sovereign was struck by Edward III in 1343, for the next hundred years gold-making had become a felony by statute in 1403. This meant that the study and practice of alchemy was once more driven underground.

The first English alchemist was George Ripley, but the heyday of English alchemy was during the reign of Henry VI. During his reign, permission once again was sought for making gold, and there was a revival of the alchemical poems of Ripley and Norton.

The years from 1573 to 1637, which encompass the life of Ben Jonson, the dramatist, were of enormous change in England. Within a hundred years, this small country had experienced a Reformation of the main religion, a Renaissance of classical learning, and the effects of adventure and discovery on trade, to such a degree that the strands of history were interwoven to give us an epoch high in intellectual attainment, material prosperity, and richness of culture and imagination. The religious wars of the mid-16th century were finally healed, for a time, by the imposition by Elizabeth of a common worship and a common prayer. There followed the Golden Age of Elizabeth, which, ushered in through an atmosphere of religious persecution and fear, in fact gave rise to a new civilisation which

meant that the discoveries of the previous era, both geographical, alchemical, and scientific, could be organised for the betterment of the crown and realm. However, it was also a period of high inflation, and the general insecurity meant that people tried all trades in order to make a living.

Queen Elizabeth herself was a believer in magic and alchemy, and she sought the advice and company of John Dee. Dee was appointed astrologer to the Queen, and was called upon to calculate by astrology a suitable date for the Queen's coronation. Elizabeth was so gratified by the results that she promised to make him master of the hospital of St. Katherine of the Tower. She did not keep her word, however, and Dee went off to the Continent to pursue his alchemical studies. After Dee's return to England, the Queen made a special journey to his house in Mortlake to see a crystal gazing-glass he had brought back with him. Shortly afterwards, a comet appeared in the heavens, and Dee was summoned to Windsor to explain its import, which took him three days. On yet another occasion, the Queen urgently requested his presence in order to prevent any evil from befalling her from a waxen image of Her Majesty found in Lincoln's Inn Fields, with a pin thrust through its breast.

It can be seen, that there co-existed, in the Elizabeth world, an accommodation between rational enquiry and scepticism, and magic. Because behind the religious orthodoxy there was a large vein of credulity and superstition, and with the spirit of adventure that existed home and abroad, it was a time when quackery and knavery were the order of the day among the common people.

The last years of Elizabeth's reign were the most productive as regards the arts. Theatres had been founded, and existed both to feed an appetite of savagery, such as bear-

bating, and high sophistication, such as in the dramatic soliloquies of the new self-conscious heroes of the stage, the most notable contributor being Shakespeare, both as an actor and a dramatist

Jonson has been described as the greatest of English dramatists except Shakespeare, the first literary dictator and poet-laureate, a writer of verse, prose, satire, and criticism who most potently of all the men of his time affected the subsequent course of English letters. His early years were not auspicious. Jonson's father lost his estate under Queen Mary, "having been cast into prison and forfeited." He entered the church, but died a month before his famous son was born, leaving his widow and child in poverty. The circumstances of his birth were to affect Jonson's all his life, since his mother soon married a bricklayer, and Ben had to educate himself. He had been lucky enough to attract the patronage of a friend of his father, an antiquarian named William Camden, and whilst unable to continue at Westminster school nevertheless received the basics of a classical education and a thirst for learning which were to last all his life. After a spell at the bricklaying trade, Jonson went to Flanders to fight, but returned to London convinced his vocation lay in being a writer and dramatist. The London he experienced at his coming of age was rich in literary figures, of whom the most eminent, and destined for ever greater fame, was Shakespeare, who was Jonson's senior by a number of years, and who no doubt inspired him as an actor and as a player - Jonson himself has described their relationship as one bordering on idolatry. Jonson married soon after his return from the battlefield. Early on, in the early 1590s, he had befriended Marlowe, who died after a tavern brawl in 1593, and which much have left a great impression on the young Ben Jonson. Marlowe's death has been portrayed as a conspiracy in the movie "Shakespeare in Love" and we shall probably never know the real circumstances. Another dramatist, Greene, who was also Shakespeare's rival in the popular theatre, died, too, in mysterious circumstances. Those who survived, Jonson and Shakespeare, wrote works which had a great

posterity. Shakespeare sought to universalise the whole human condition, while Jonson, always in love with learning, sought to satirise and portray the foibles of the day against such a background. Jonson's actual posterity, like Shakespeare's was sad and undistinguished, a daughter died in infancy, and a son died of the plague, and although we have evidence that his marriage was not happy – he lived apart from his family for a while in the house of Lord Albany, nevertheless his touching epitaphs on his son and daughter show considerable warmth and are a credit to him as a father.

"All that I am in arts, all that I know;" became Jonson's motto. He dedicated his first dramatic success, *Every Man in His Humour*, to Camden. Though Jonson had little formal education, he found favour with the academic authorities and was made Master of Arts by St. John's College, Cambridge. However, his training in warfare in Flanders stayed with him, and he remained bellicose and argumentative all his life, and having confessed to William Drummond, the Scottish poet when he met him as an older man, recalled he had killed an enemy in battle, and carried a war-wound - a fore-shortened arm - all his life.

From allusions in Dekker's play, *Satiromastix*, it appears that Jonson, like Shakespeare, began life as an actor, starting with the company of Philip Henslow, and acting along with Shakespeare. He "ambled in a leather pitch by a play-wagon" taking at one time the part of Hieronimo in Kyd's famous play, "The Spanish Tragedy." By the beginning of 1598, Jonson, still in needy circumstances, had begun to receive recognition. Francis Meres well known for his "Comparative Discourse of our English Poets with the Greek, Latin, and Italian Poets," printed in 1598, and for his mention therein of a dozen plays of Shakespeare by title – accords to Ben Jonson a place as one of "our best in tragedy," a matter of some surprise, as no known tragedy of Jonson from so early a date has come down to us, and must be considered lost. There has been speculation that Jonson had a hand in Shakespeare's works, and this may be the reference to those plays. Jonson's career began to take off in

1598, around this time, but just at that point he killed a fellow actor, and was arraigned on a charge of murder. He pleaded an old custom, “benefit of clergy” and elected to be branded a felon from then on, the initial “T”, for Tyburn, being branded on his left thumb. It is fair to Jonson to remark however, that his adversary appears to have been a notorious fire-eater who had shortly before killed another fire-eater in a squabble. Duelling was a frequent occurrence of the time among gentlemen and the nobility; but it was regarded as an impudent breach of the peace on the part of a player. This duel is the one which Jonson described years after to Drummond, to whom he confessed much. The incident seemed to have shocked Jonson profoundly, because he had a conversion to Roman Catholicism at this point, and remained true to this religious creed for at least ten years.

On his release from prison, in disgrace with Henslowe and his former associates, Jonson offered his services as a playwright to Henslowe's rivals, the Lord Chamberlain's company, in which Shakespeare was a prominent shareholder. A tradition of long standing, though not susceptible of proof in a court of law, narrates that Jonson had submitted the manuscript of *Every Man in His Humour* to the Chamberlain's men and had received from the company a refusal; that Shakespeare called him back, read the play himself, and at once accepted it. Whether this story is true or not, certain it is that *Every Man in His Humour* was accepted by Shakespeare's company and acted for the first time in 1598, with Shakespeare taking a part. The evidence of this is contained in the list of actors prefixed to the comedy in the folio of Jonson's works, 1616. But it may be that all members of the acting company were named, because most of them were shareholders.

From these early tribulations Jonson developed as a major dramatist, though imprisoned again after he was named as co-author in *Eastward Ho* and once again he was in danger of his life, this time being threatened with having his ears and his throat cut. However, it may be that he was given an impetus to write more, for there followed the period in which

his major plays were written – *Volpone*, *Epicene*, or *The Silent Woman*, and of course, in 1610 *The Alchemist*, and his final great comedy, *Bartholomew Fair* – all of which were performed contemporaneously. Then followed a period of exile, and a post of tutor to Sir Walter Raleigh’s son – during which his reputation was consolidated. There had been nothing like Jonson's comedy since the days of Aristophanes. *Every Man in His Humour*, like the two plays that follow it, contains two kinds of attack, the critical or generally satiric, levelled at abuses and corruptions in the abstract; and the personal, in which specific application is made of all this in the lampooning of poets and others, Jonson's contemporaries. The method of personal attack by actual caricature of a person on the stage is almost as old as the drama. Why Jonson choose to attack a personage at the time, Simon Foreman, is not clear. The play, *The Alchemist*, is both an attack on the man and the work of alchemists in general.

It is thought that Jonson based the character of Subtle, the Alchemist, on this man called Simon Foreman, the subject of a pamphlet on alchemical abuse by Nashe. Jonson himself refers to Foreman in *Epicene*. Foreman was a character well known in London at the time for his swindling and cunning.

Foreman was a fellow dwelt in Lambeth – a very silly fellow, and yet had not enough, but to cheat Ladies and other women, by pretending skill in telling their fortunes, as likely they should bury their husbands, and what second husband they should have, and whether they should enjoy their loves. Besides, it is believed, there were meetings at his house, and that the art of Broad was more beneficial to him than that of conjurer, and he was better in one than in the other.. he himself was a cuckold with a very pretty wench to his wife, and two astrologers, who cannot foresee their own destiny -

(Anthony Weldon, *Court and Character of King James*, extant)

The official attitude toward alchemy in the 16th to 18th century was ambivalent. On the one hand, the Art posed a threat to the control of precious metal and was often outlawed; on the other hand, there were obvious advantages to any sovereign who could control gold

making. In "the metropolis of alchemy," Prague, the Holy Roman emperors Maximilian II (reigned 1564-76) and Rudolf II (reigned 1576-1612) proved ever-hopeful sponsors and entertained most of the leading alchemists of Europe. This was not altogether to the alchemist's advantage. In 1595 Edward Kelley, the English alchemist and companion of the more famous astrologer, alchemist, and mathematician John Dee, lost his life in an attempt to escape after imprisonment by Rudolf II, and in 1603 the elector of Saxony, Christian II, imprisoned and tortured the Scotsman Alexander Seton, who had been travelling about Europe performing well-publicized transmutations.

The situation was complicated by the fact that some alchemists were turning from gold-making not to medicine but to a quasi-religious alchemy reminiscent of the Greek Synesius. Rudolf II made the German alchemist Michael Maier a count and his private secretary, although Maier's mystical and allegorical writings were considered extraordinarily obscure and made no claim to gold-making. Neither did the German alchemist Heinrich Khunrath (c. 1560-1601), whose works have long been esteemed for their illustrations, make such a claim.

Behind the self-confidence and arrogance of a brave new world of the Elizabethan renaissance, there was a seething underground of fear and chicanery which enabled those called to the esoteric professions much leeway both in practice and in theory. There is no doubt that Jonson's play reflected the latter view. Jonson's "learned socks" were on in "The Alchemist" – and he portrayed the subject in accordance with the received wisdom of the day. Whatever his own views on the subject, and we may presume that the play mirrors these to some extent.

*Why, now, you smoaky persecutor of nature!
Now do you see, that something's to be done,
Beside your beech-coal, and your corsive waters,*

*Your crosslets, crucibles, and cucurbites?
You must have stuff brought home to you, to work on:
And yet you think, I am at no expense
In searching out these veins, then following them,
Then trying them out. 'Fore God, my intelligence
Costs me more money, than my share oft comes to,
In these rare works.*

Jonson shows a thorough knowledge of the alchemist's art and aspirations, and its lack of success in his day. He is conversant with alchemy in all its stages: calcination, sublimation, solution, putrefaction, distillation, coagulation, and tincture. The symbols of the serpent, the green lion devouring the sun, the grey wolf, the peacock's tail, the union of opposites, the king devouring his son – all are processes in alchemy and are noted in the play. Jung much later on, in the twentieth century, (Jung, 1980) has shown that these symbols were unconscious projections of the alchemist: in the quest for what he called individuation. Iosis and negritude were powerful changes, ritualistic in meaning. The King was gold (Sol), the Queen, silver (Luna) and each of the seven recognised metals had correspondence with a planet – Mercury with mercury, copper with Venus, iron with Mars, tin with Jupiter, and lead with Saturn.

However, Jonson's aim in writing *The Alchemist* was to expose those fraudulent practitioners of the art - the entire play is linked entirely with a spurious claim to making gold. There is no evidence, however, that he himself was anything but sceptic:

*If all ye boast of your great art be true
Sure, willing povertie lives in most of you*
Epigrams

It is probable that fraudsters like Foreman may have caused the deeply sceptical feelings and opinions some writers had at this time, but we cannot be sure if this was rooted in anti-Semitism, for Foreman was a Jew, or whether it was a position on the spectrum of views held at this time. This scepticism and cynicism was not universal among Jonson's

circle of friends and acquaintances, even enemies, the latter with whom he had engaged in a war of the dramatists. In the time of James I, his reputation was highest of all, and his influence felt by nearly all of his contemporaries. He remained friends with Shakespeare until the latter's death in 1616, and Donne, Francis Bacon, George Chapman, Beaumont, Fletcher, Cotton and Sempler were his friends and cohorts in the famous literary tavern of the Mermaid, and later, in the Apollo room of the devil, and St. Dunstan Tavern, where his rules, known as *leges convivales* were inscribed over the mantel piece. His chief patrons were the Sydney family, the Earl of Pembroke, the Countess of Bedford, and the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle. His followers were many, who styled themselves "the tribe of Ben", and consisted of the younger poets Randolph, Herrick and Suckling with a host of others who published verse in that day.

Jonson's friends were as a group, divided along the lines of sentient wisdom, feeling, affections and cynicism – as were his enemies. However, it was not until much later on, when evaluations began to take place, and some of these poets were labelled by Samuel Johnson as metaphysical. Samuel Johnston developed the argument in his famous work, *The Lives of the Poets* where he noted (with reference to Cowley) that 'about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets'. He went on to describe the far-fetched nature of their comparisons as 'a kind of *Discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult semblances in things apparently unlike'. Examples of the practice Johnson condemned would include the extended comparison of love with astrology (by Donne) and of the soul with a drop of dew (by Marvell).

Metaphysical concerns are the common subject of their poetry, which investigates the world by rational discussion of its phenomena rather than by intuition or mysticism. This division of thought into rational and mystic elements widened throughout the following centuries, and has, in the scientific and philosophical worlds, a parallel system of valuation into subject and object, interior and exterior reality, as science began to take experience apart at the seams. Of the poets, Dryden was the first to apply the term to 17th-century poetry when, in 1693, he criticized Donne: 'He affects the Metaphysics... in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign, and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts.' He disapproved of Donne's stylistic excesses, particularly his extravagant conceits (or witty comparisons) and his tendency towards hyperbolic abstraction.

In the 20th century the question was once more taken up by T. S. Eliot (Eliot, 1950) in an essay published in Times Literary Supplement, on 20 October, 1921:

Not only is it extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry, but difficult to decide what poets practice it and in which of their verses. The poetry of Donne, to whom Marvell and Bishop King are sometimes nearer than any of the other authors, is late Elizabethan, its feeling often very close to that of Chapman. The 'courtly' poetry is derivative from Jonson, who borrowed liberally from the Latin, it expires in the next century with the sentiment and witticism of Prior. There is finally the devotional verse of Herbert Vaughan, and Crashaw (echoed long after by Christian Rossetti and Francis Thomson). ..It is difficult to find any precise use of metaphor, simile, or other conceit, which is common to all the poets and at the same time important enough as an element of style to isolate these poets as a group.

It is certain that the dramatic verse of the later Elizabethan and early Jacobean poets expresses a degree of development of sensibility which is not found in any of the prose, good as it often is. If we except Marlowe, a man of prodigious intelligence, these dramatists were directly or indirectly (it is at least a tenable theory) affected by Montaigne. Even if we except also Jonson and Chapman, these two were notably erudite, and were notably men who incorporated their erudition into their sensibility, their mode of feeling was directly and freshly altered by their reading and thought.

The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England (my emphasis) between the time of Donne or Hebert, and the time of Tennyson and Browning. it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think, but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience, it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinicelli, or Cino.

In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden.... But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude. The feeling, the sensibility, expressed in the Country Churchyard..is cruder than that in the Coy Mistress.

The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century, and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced, they reflected. In one or two passages of Shelley's "Triumph of Life", in the second Hyperion there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated.

The relevance of this essay to alchemy lies in the fact that for the first time a clear division is articulated in the public mind between the inner and outer worlds, the arcane and the mundane. Eliot's essay on the metaphysical poets outlines this division quite succinctly, but it was a distinction not elaborated until the twentieth century. In a famous definition Georg Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist aestheticist, described the school's common trait of "looking beyond the palpable" and "attempting to erase one's own image from the mirror in front so that it should reflect the *not-now* and *not-here*". foreshadowing existentialism (Luka/cs, 1975)

The Metaphysical poets introduced a fresh approach to poetry. They rejected the flowery imagery of their predecessors, such as Spenser. Instead they sought to concentrate on clearly defined topics, often of a religious interest. The poems were also characterized by sharp polarities and paradoxical imagery. This imagery is often called metaphysical conceit and T. S. Eliot, made the point that the Metaphysical poets were able to combine reason with passion, showing a unification of thought and feeling. However, Eliot dates the split between feeling and reason, between intuition and learning, from the time of Jonson and his works.

Jonson's life is a sure proof of what a robust character he was, and his love of learning shows how he developed his character in accordance with objective criteria rather than spiritual and intuitive modes. In his dramas, where he concentrates on ideas, and on characters which represent ideas, we find the genesis of the "dissociation of sensibility" and the stylistic manoeuvres which were to affect Donne in an entirely opposite way, since his personal journey had been in the opposite direction to Ben Jonson's. Donne, like Jonson, changed his religion, but in his case, from being a Roman Catholic to becoming a Protestant. Ben Jonson's conversion to Catholicism can be seen as a desire for unity in a sea of troubles. His being involved in a murder had in some important sense affected his inner or spiritual life, as some would say, he had murdered his own soul. Shakespeare wrote about the effect of murder on the personality, when he describes Macbeth's thought "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day".

Eliot, in his essay, mentioned the characteristics of obscure words, and simple phrasing. Now what happened was that words became of the simple variety, but philosophy became more cumbersome later on under the dead weight of Locke and Hume and their followers. So it is to Donne, Jonson's contemporary we must go, if we are to trace in this short piece some of the philosophical divisions of the day, and how the spiritual and inner life was truncated in favour of empirical evidence. As Eliot points out, this affected the way in

which poetry was written, which gave us the work of Milton and Dryden, which had no spiritual qualities. Nowhere was this loss more in evidence than in alchemy, and how from then on the investigation into life's processes became a matter of external observation and verification, with science as we know it now in the ascendant.

The interior was denied altogether, the five doors of sense became absolute, and the inner life of the mystic, religious adherent, or adept, became a matter first of scepticism, then of ridicule, and finally, in our own times, has almost ceased to exist altogether. Strangely enough, this movement came to be called the Enlightenment.

We can trace the beginnings of this loss back to the late Elizabethan age. This had happened because the earlier division of belief had fissured into several strands. The thinker, or sceptical writer, began to ignore the life of feeling, which meant that the affective part of humankind's nature, the spirit, began to crumble in the new quotidian, the division between subject and object, between inner and outer reality, now began an impassable gulf.

Within a few decades, scepticism began to take hold entirely, and the birth of modern science, as we know it, began. Rene Descartes, (1596-1650) coming quickly on the heels of Jonson, is often regarded as the first modern thinker to provide a philosophical framework for the natural sciences as these began to develop. In his *Discourse on the Method* he attempted to arrive at a fundamental set of principles that one can know as true without any doubt. To achieve this, he employed a method called methodological scepticism: he rejected any idea that can be doubted in order to acquire a firm foundation for genuine knowledge.

He was soon followed by Robert Boyle, who, in his book *The Sceptical Chymist or Chymico-Physical Doubts & Paradoxes* published in 1661, (Boyle, 2003) pleaded that chemistry should cease to be subservient to medicine or to alchemy, and rise to the status of a science. Importantly, he advocated a rigorous approach to scientific experiment: he believed

all theories must be proved experimentally before being regarded as true. For these reasons Robert Boyle has been called the founder of modern chemistry. In the form of a dialogue, the *Sceptical Chymist* presented Boyle's hypothesis that matter consisted of atoms and clusters of atoms in motion and that every phenomenon was the result of collisions of particles in motion. He appealed to chemists to experiment and said they should not be limited to the classic four, earth fire, air, and water. The *Sceptical Chymist* is well written, enlivened with touches of humour, as when the alchemists are compared with "*the Navigators of Solomon's Tarshish Fleet, who brought home ... not only Gold, and Silver, and Ivory, but Apes and Peacocks too*", since their theories "*either like Peacock's feathers make a great shew, but are neither solid nor useful; or else, like Apes, if they have some appearance of being rational, are blemish'd with some absurdity or other which makes them appear ridiculous.*" The chief value of *The Sceptical Chymist*, aside from its main message, was the wealth of chemical experiment that showed the chemist how to employ standard terms and nomenclature in chemical explanation and also presented new chemical fact.

The foremost medical texts that would have been available at that time were Friedrich Hoffman's *Fundamenta Medicinae*, which is a general system of medicine, and later, William Harvey's *The Circulation of the Blood*, which is a classic scientific thesis. Harvey demonstrated that in all animals blood is pumped from the heart, circulates around the body and returns to the heart. Surgeons such as Archibald Pitcairn accepted his theory as proven, though it was long before microscopes were sophisticated enough to allow observation of the capillaries that make this circulation possible. Isaac Newton, one of the last alchemists, became the first great astronomer, and also wrote works on alchemy, and is known to have practiced the art.

As I have argued in this essay, Jonson was the first to bring scepticism into the field of belief, and although he remained a religious adherent, his whole impetus now became a deeply cynical approach to mystery and to those who sought enlightenment. So, Jonson as the first sceptic had lampooned the alchemists, and paid no attention to, but had poured scorn on, their individuation projects

Jonson's dramatic technique dwells not in the soliloquies which Shakespeare wrote, but in the configuration of character, often exaggerated, and delineated in a way which would fit into observation and empiricism. That is why the references to alchemy in the eponymous play have nothing to do with the inner life of the alchemist, but instead the physical and exterior trappings – the quotidian with its boring recount of money and pettiness. The exalted aim of the real alchemist was lost.

This can, in turn be linked, to the abuse of those who sought the means of magic, and tried to turn it into a profitable enterprise. The number of times money is mentioned in the play would be quite tedious, save that Jonson mentions it in the context of foreign coins most of the time. .

*SUB. O, I did look for him
With the sun's rising: 'marvel he could sleep,
This is the day I am to perfect for him
The magisterium, our great work, the stone;
And yield it, made, into his hands: of which
He has, this month, talked as he were possess'd.
And now he's dealing pieces on't away. --
Methinks I see him entering ordinaries,
Dispensing for the pox, and plaguy houses,
Reaching his dose, walking Moorfields for lepers,
And offering citizens' wives pomander-bracelets,
As his preservative, made of the elixir;
Searching the spittal, to make old bawds young;
And the highways, for beggars, to make rich.
I see no end of his labours. He will make
Nature asham'd of her long sleep:*

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COINS REFERRED TO IN JONSON'S "ALCHEMIST"

ANGEL, gold coin worth 10 shillings, stamped with the figure of the archangel Michael.

BLANK, originally a small French coin.

COMMODITY, "current for --," allusion to practice of money-lenders, who forced the borrower to take part of the loan in the shape of worthless goods on which the latter had to make money if he could

CROSS, any piece of money, many coins being stamped with a cross.
CROSS AND PILE, heads and tails.
CRUSADO, Portuguese gold coin, marked with a cross
DENIER, the smallest possible coin, being the twelfth part of a sou.
DRACHM, Greek silver coin.
GAZETTE, small Venetian coin worth about three-farthings.
GROAT, fourpence.
GUILDER, Dutch coin worth about 4d.
HANDSEL, first money taken
IMPRESS, money in advance

MOCCINIGO, small Venetian coin, worth about ninepence

NOBLE, gold coin worth 6s. 8d.

PISTOLET, gold coin, worth about 6s.
PIECES OF EIGHT, Spanish coin: piastre equal to eight reals.
PORTAGUE, Portuguese gold coin, worth over 3 or 4 pounds.
PORTCULLIS, "-- of coin," some old coins have a portcullis stamped on their reverse
RING, "cracked within the --," coins so cracked were unfit for currency.
SESTERCE, Roman copper coin.
SLIP, counterfeit coin,
SPUR-RYAL, gold coin worth 15s.
TALENT, sum or weight of Greek currency.
THREE-FARTHINGS, piece of silver current under Elizabeth