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**SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY AND THE FUNCTION OF IMAGE:
COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM IN MICHAEL MAIER'S
*ATALANTA FUGIENS***

MA Thesis in Medieval Studies

Central European University

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(Romania)

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Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU

Chair, Examination Committee

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I, the undersigned, **Florin George Călian**, candidate for the MA degree in Medieval Studies declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 25 May 2009

Signature

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INTRODUCTION

The alchemist is the most praiseworthy of men: I mean the one who changes something negligible or contemptible into something of value.¹

Scholasticism with its infinitely subtle argumentation, Theology with its ambiguous phraseology, Astrology, so vast and so complicated, are only child's play in comparison with Alchemy.²

The topic of this research is the result of the puzzlement that one usually finds when looking at alchemical images. If one carefully analyzes them, they create the impression of being the product of a disturbed mind or, even stranger, of a Surrealist artist. Alchemical images seem to be less telling when it comes to connecting them with alchemy's apparently direct heir, chemistry. This thesis is an attempt to elucidate the possible framework within which one may look at alchemical imagery and make some sense of it.

My study is circumscribed by the field of history of the occult sciences, within which my attention falls particularly on the function of images in alchemical texts. For understanding how images functioned in alchemical treatises, the current thesis has as primary source a problematic alchemical work published in 1617 in Latin, entitled *Atalanta Fugiens, Hoc Est, Emblemata Nova de Secretis Naturae Chymica*, by Michael Maier (1569–1622), physician to Emperor Rudolph II in Prague. In order to comprehend the role and the function of the image in *Atalanta fugiens*, I follow one of the central themes of alchemy as it is represented in the images, namely, the theme of *coincidentia oppositorum*.

For understanding the role of image in the alchemical treatise *Atalanta fugiens*, it is mandatory to demarcate the place of alchemy: is it part of an esoteric doctrine or only a kind of proto-chemistry? One of the main arguments of my thesis is that alchemical imagery is difficult to understand only through the lens of the history of chemistry and its meaning is best circumscribed if one considers alchemy not only as solely laboratory practice, but as spiritual practice as well. In consequence, in the first chapter I review the debated relations between alchemy and chemistry, arguing, in opposition to the tendency from the history of science, that alchemy is part of Western

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, Letter to Georg Brandes, May 23, 1888.

² Albert Poisson quoted by John Read, *From Alchemy to Chemistry* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1995), 64-65 (hereafter Read, *From Alchemy*), 73.

Esotericism and, as a result, it has an essentially religious and spiritual background. The chapter analyzes the current research in the field, in particular the thesis that alchemy is part of chemistry and that its symbols are only metaphors for laboratory research. My aim here is to underline that with such a thesis and methodology it is difficult to study treatises such as *Atalanta fugiens*, especially their imagery.

The analysis of alchemical imagery is not a field amply covered by scholars, but an overview of the main theories in the field should help in finding some instruments to clarify how an alchemist understood the function of images in his books. At this point I will take into account the methodology of researching emblem books, following Ernst Gombrich, whose theory is discussed and used in developing the methodological framework for the study of the images in *Atalanta fugiens*. My analysis of images follows the patterns set by the typology of Gombrich in his functional triad: *deductive*, *revelative*, *magic*.³ I launch the hypothesis of whether one may speak about revelative imagery in the case of the emblems from *Atalanta fugiens*.

In the last chapter my attention turns to three emblems (VIII, XXI, XXX) of Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*, taking as a principle of analysis the theme of *coincidentia oppositorum*. The analysis develops around the representation of this theme, and on the way in which Maier understood *coincidentia oppositorum* in its imagistic rhetoric, with reference to the esoteric discourses that accompany the emblems. I also suggest some contextualization problems of the images in the larger field of emblem studies on the one hand, and in alchemical representations on the other hand.

The main aim of my research is to find out to what extent alchemy, as presented in *Atalanta fugiens* and as a speculative science, developed the function of image beyond that of images as presented and used in sciences (as schemes and discursive ways of explanation and representation), and, moreover, of images relevant for the aesthetic aspect alone (which is so representative for the Renaissance). Was the function of image for Michael Maier a spiritual one or, using the terminology of Gombrich, a *revelative* one?

³ Ernst H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae. Philosophies of Symbolism and their Bearing on Art" in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance II* (London: Phaidon, 1972), 123-95.

CHAPTER I. SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY VERSUS CHEMISTRY

For many in the twenty-first century, the word “alchemy” conjures up images of medieval zealots rummaging through ancient books and scrolls in dark hot basements, seeking the secrets of transmutation in the dim firelight of brick furnaces and archaic laboratory equipment with strange names – athanor, horn of Hermes, cucurbit.⁴

This chapter is a discussion of the current debate concerning the nature of alchemy – focusing on two major directions: spiritual/speculative and esoteric alchemy versus alchemy as laboratory practice. This is an important issue for understanding the research on alchemy for the early modern period and, in consequence, the position of Michael Maier’s opus, *Atalanta fugiens*, as a case study concerning spiritual alchemy⁵ and its imagery.

One of the branches of understanding alchemy interprets it as the ancestor of what one calls today chemistry. The authors that contribute to this conception usually come from scholarly fields that require training in chemistry or the history of science. Historians of science have tried to affiliate alchemy with general studies of science. The history of alchemy is studied as part of the history of science, so alchemy is pre-chemistry; in this case the accent is laid on the laboratory, as alchemy is perceived as science.

A second approach, situated in an almost antithetic posture from the scientists, comprises a wide range of nuances of interpreting alchemy under a relatively common comprehension that I would label “spiritual alchemy”. In this respect it is considered that alchemy can be seen as part of religious behavior (M. Eliade⁶), as a projection of psychological content to the level of matter (C. G. Jung’s atypical interpretation of

⁴ Mark S. Morisson, *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of the Atomic Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3 (hereafter: Morisson, *Modern Alchemy*).

⁵ I use the modern term “spiritual alchemy,” and not occult, philosophical or speculative alchemy from two reasons: it is a term that is established as covering the speculative and non-laboratory practice. In this study “spiritual” is in many cases synonym with esoteric, that means that it is about a special knowledge of the ultimate principle that govern the physical and metaphysical realities. The knowledge of these realities was a “spiritual” one and implied more than laboratory research. Concerning the use of spiritual alchemy see for example: Morisson, *Modern Alchemy*, 135-183; Daniel Merkur, “The Study of Spiritual Alchemy: Mysticism, Gold-Making, and Esoteric Hermeneutics,” *Ambix* 37 (1990): 35–45; Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix: Spiritual Alchemy and Rosicrucianism in the Work of Count Michael Maier (1569-1622)* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), passim (hereafter: Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*).

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) (hereafter: Eliade, *The Forge*).

alchemy in psychological terms⁷), as part of Western esotericism (A. Faivre⁸), or even as a hermetic tradition (J. Evola,⁹ T. Burckhardt¹⁰), or as a hermeneutic tradition (U. Eco¹¹). The immediate observation after such an enumeration would be that the history of alchemy lacks a methodology of its own and that the scholars who study it import the tools of their training for understanding alchemy. Emerging from the enumeration above, the complexity of alchemy has led to different definitions of it, making it relatively difficult not to encounter the risk of a one-sided understanding. There is also the obscure pseudo-research part of the Western esoteric industry, extended through theosophists, spiritualists or New Age enthusiasts.

For the present study I will review the approaches of Jung and Eliade as representatives of spiritual alchemy and the critique of their thesis by historians of science, particularly in the works of William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe. The most recent attitude of the branch of the history of science is basically a critique of psychoanalytical approaches and those from the field of the history of religion and Western esotericism. I will present the standpoint of the position which argues that alchemy is the pre-history of chemistry, but also the problematic approach of the thesis that sustains the spiritual character as the essence of alchemy.

This preliminary discussion is mandatory, especially in the case of an alchemist such as Michael Maier. His work seems difficult to be understood through the lens of the laboratory, if one would advocate that his work is describing chemistry. Can one use the methodology provided by the history of science, by the history of esotericism or maybe one provided by both of them?

⁷ His research on alchemy can be found in *The Collected Works of Carl Gustav Jung*, 20 vols (London: Routledge, 1981, first edition 1953) (hereafter: Jung, *CW*): vol. 12: *Psychology and Alchemy*; vol. 13: *Alchemical Studies*; vol. 14: *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (hereafter: Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*; Jung, *Alchemical Studies*; Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*).

⁸ The relation of alchemy with Western esotericism is analyzed especially in his *Toison d'or et alchimie* (Milan: Archè, 1990) and *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1996).

⁹ Julius Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1995) (hereafter: Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*).

¹⁰ Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy, Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (London: Stuart and Watkins, 1967) (hereafter: Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy*).

¹¹ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 18-20 (hereafter: Eco, *The Limits*). Eco does not make explicit reference to alchemy, but the principles of the hermetic tradition are seen as principles of hermeneutics. Also, Hereward Tilton understands the position of Eco as “the history of alchemy as the history of the interpretation of alchemy,” see Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 18.

1. Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade and spiritual alchemy

For Carl Gustav Jung, alchemy is not only part of the pre-history of chemistry, that is, only laboratory work, but it is also an essential part of the history of psychology, as the history of the discovery of the deep structure of the psyche and its unconscious. Jung underlined the importance of the symbolic structure of alchemical texts, a structure that is understood, as in the case of mythology, as a way independent of laboratory research in itself. His works are peculiar pieces perceived from the perspective of the historiography of alchemy because Jung interprets the symbolism of alchemy as a projection of internal psychological conflicts. Using this hypothesis as departure point, Jung analyzed the dreams of his patients through the symbolism of alchemy.

Alchemy reflects thus a psychological content that is projected at the level of matter. In this interpretation, the *opus alchymicum* is a “reality” of the psyche, not of the physical world. These ideas offered an alternative for understanding alchemical images and their functions. In alchemical imagery one may find a mirror *par excellence* for psychic realities, realities that have a mythological and religious character:

The personal unconscious, as defined by Jung, is a reservoir of disowned contents and processes which can be experienced as separable parts in normal space and time, and which have location. In the process of projection, the parts of the personal unconscious are experienced as existing ‘in’ the person, or they are projected ‘out of’ the person and ‘into’ another person.¹²

Jung operated with a distinction between laboratory and what is not laboratory. The second term of the distinction refers to what is part of secret knowledge, in a word, that is esoteric. The occult processes were in fact part of the psychological transformation of the alchemist, and the laboratory was the externalization of an internal state of the psyche.

Jung’s interpretation emphasizes that there is a strong connection between the end of alchemy and the rise of chemistry, and the borderline between these two disciplines is drawn among the speculative and psychological features of alchemy and the positivist character of chemistry. It is noticeable that the decline of speculative imagery in alchemy is closely linked with the development of the new science of chemistry. He considered that if the principles of alchemy were proved to be “an error”

¹² Nathan Schwartz-Salant, *The Mystery of Human Relationship: Alchemy and the Transformation of the Self* (London: Routledge, 1998), 4.

by chemistry, the spiritual aspect remained a part of the psyche that “did not disappear.”¹³

Before Jung’s psychological research, Herbert Stanley Redgrove, chemist, member of the Chemical Society of London, developed a similar idea by arguing that “the problem of alchemy presents many aspects to our view, but, to my mind, the most fundamental of these is psychological, or, perhaps I should say, epistemological.”¹⁴

One should observe that Jung’s departure point in studying alchemy had a pragmatic feature; he did not merely speculate about it, but got to alchemy after he studied the dreams of his patients. His activity as a physician is well-known and was important for psychological research on the unconscious, implicitly on its alchemical content. The theory of projection is central to his understanding of alchemy. To know the content of the unconscious one should study a projection, and, for it, alchemical texts were projections of psychological content. Therefore, his research is extremely positivistic; he analyzed dreams with the help of alchemical texts in which he thought that he could indicate possible meanings of the dreams.

The work of Jung in the field of alchemy is significant. He spent half of his life attempting to elucidate the meaning of alchemical texts. His work is recognized for his extensive research on the body of alchemical texts and Jung made some important manuscript discoveries that are of great use for other branches of study in the historiography of alchemy.¹⁵

In the case of M. Eliade, alchemy is part of religious behavior and his aim in research on alchemy is somehow wider than proposed by Jung as he tries to catch with an anthropological eye “the behavior of primitive societies in their relation to Matter,”¹⁶ and “to pierce through to the mental world which lies behind them.”¹⁷ Because “to collaborate in the work of Nature, to help her to produce at an ever-increasing tempo, to

¹³ Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 37.

¹⁴ Herbert Stanley Redgrove, *Bygone Beliefs: Being a Series of Excursions in the Byways of Thought* (London: William Rider and Son, 1920), 149 (hereafter: Redgrove, *Bygone Beliefs*).

¹⁵ For example, the text attributed to Thomas Aquinas, *Aurora Consurgens*, was partially discovered by Jung in the monastery on the island of Reichenau, Lake Constance. His collaborator later found complete manuscripts of the text in Paris, Bologna, and Venice, see Marie-Luise von Franz, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980), 177-178, and eadem, *Aurora consurgens: A Document attributed to Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966).

¹⁶ Eliade, *The Forge*, 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.

change the modalities of matter – here, in our view, lies one of the key sources of alchemical ideology.”¹⁸

In *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, Eliade offers a theoretical background for understanding alchemy from the perspective of the history of religions. In Eliade’s view, alchemy is a spiritual technique and can be understood not as an important moment in the history of science but as a kind of religious phenomenon with its own particular rules: “alchemical experience and magico-religious experience share common or analogous elements.”¹⁹

For Eliade, “the alchemist is the brotherly savior of Nature”²⁰ and the “*opus alchymicum* had profound analogies with mystic life.”²¹ In this regard, Eliade gave the example of the disciple of Paracelsus who considered that the alchemist tasted the “first fruits of Resurrection in this life and had a foretaste of the Celestial Country.”²² In support of that, Eliade speaks about marriage, death, and the life of metals as an essential part of alchemical practices.

2. The Critique of Spiritual Alchemy

2.1. Alchemy as experimental activity

The “ignorance” of the material aspect in the study of the history of alchemy has been identified by historians, especially by historians of science, for whom the core of alchemy resides particularly in its material aspects and on laboratory work. The critique against the spiritual and religious interpretation of alchemy formulated by William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe is one of the rejections from the field of the history of science. Their thesis is at the moment moderately wide-spread among the historians of chemistry and also of alchemy. It may be described as an attempt to introduce a kind of relativism into the field of researching alchemy, and their main thesis is that alchemy does not have a strong enough spiritual component to place it within the scope of the history of religions or similar fields of research, but through its laboratory practice it does have a place in the history of science. This position was launched strongly in 1998 with a provocative article, “Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historiographic Mistake,”²³ and reinforced in 2001 with a second more substantial

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 165.

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

²¹ Ibid., 165.

²² Ibid., 166.

²³ William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, “Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historiographic Mistake,” *Early Science and Medicine* 3 (1998): 32–65.

paper entitled “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy,”²⁴ that developed largely around the question about the reasons why the spiritual interpretation is not in conformance with historical reality.²⁵ In the latest issue of *The Cambridge History of Science*, Newman²⁶ fortifies this position revisiting the same ideas.

Principe and Newman affirm that there was no distinction between alchemy and chemistry (*alchemia* and *chemia*) in the seventeenth century, and the usage of both terms creates “confusion among historians of science” and that it would be better to use the term *chemia* (chemistry) for the Early Modern period. Besides this terminological issue, in their view, there is no connection between early modern alchemy and the Western esoteric tradition. They judge that the reception of alchemy as a separate discipline from chemistry devolves from inadequate constructions of its historical context that “consequently have little resemblance to the topic as known and practiced in the early modern period.”²⁷ Their purpose is to “deny the validity of interpretations that artificially, unwarrantably, and most of all, ahistorically introduce a chasm between ‘alchemy’ and ‘chemistry’.”²⁸ Thus they discard the idea that alchemy in the seventeenth century had broken off from chemistry²⁹ and they consider alchemy as a phenomenon mainly bound to experimental activity. In the field of scholarship on alchemy this thesis has been received without significant reserve, for example:

It is therefore a healthy response for historians such as William R. Newman to remind us that alchemists were *chiefly* concerned with physical processes and material goals.³⁰

²⁴ William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy,” in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT] Press, 2001), 345-431 (hereafter: Newman and Principe, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”).

²⁵ Even if the topics of the articles are quite different, Principe and Newman deal with them together as a whole, refer to them as references concerning their rejection of spiritual alchemy.

²⁶ William R. Newman, “From Alchemy to “Chemistry,” in *The Cambridge History of Science*. Vol. 3: *Early Modern Science*, ed. Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 497-517.

²⁷ William R. Newman, Lawrence M. Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire: Starkey, Boyle, and the Fate of Helmontian Chymistry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), xiii (hereafter: Newman and Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*).

²⁸ Newman and Principe, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy,” 417.

²⁹ In an earlier publication Principe also put forward the experimental character of alchemy, saying that “it should be pointed out that the fact that some phenomena described in alchemical texts – even those dealing with the *arcane maiora* – can be successfully reproduced in the modern chemical laboratory” Lawrence M. Principe, *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and His Alchemical Quest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 161.

³⁰ Leah DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009), 105. Emphasis mine.

Even when concerned with works with such a profoundly mystical and alchemical character as the one of Jakob Boehme, they say:

Even if Boehme's work were taken as evidence of the 'spiritual alchemy' promoted by esoterics and occultists, it would remain to be proven by historical argument that he falls into the mainstream of early modern alchemical thought, and that extrapolations about alchemy in general could be reliably or usefully made from him.³¹

2.2 An ahistorical approach

From a historiographical point of view and for a part of the scholars, the most problematic issue in the Jungian approach is that he does not have a clearly defined historical approach. He puts together medieval and Renaissance alchemical images and ideas in an almost infra-historical understanding. His differentiation between medieval and Renaissance alchemy is seen as pointing to the difference between unconscious and conscious mystical implications of processes for an alchemist. He is not interested in the "history of alchemy" as part of historiography; for him, alchemy is the science that in a way can stand beyond its manifestation in a historical moment. This poses serious problems for historical approaches, because "he found no difficulty in linking together ideas from different times and cultures, and in viewing these ideas as arising, not from any specific historical conditions, but rather from underlying universal dispositions within the psyche itself."³²

Principe and Newman, in their rejection of Jung – focused especially on early modern alchemy – follow the critique of medieval alchemy launched by the art historian Barbara Obrist.³³ Jung's perspective is "a perspective which, she laments, had acquired the status of a self-evident truth and was no longer questioned by historians of alchemy."³⁴ She considers that the Jungian conception "does not take into account the specific political, social and intellectual contexts of the periods and societies in which alchemy has functioned."³⁵ For her, "alchemy is not a trans-historical myth, but a construct which is culturally produced."³⁶ In this context, Principe and Newman build their argument not only on Obrist's critique of the Jungian approach, but also on the

³¹ Newman and Principe, "Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy," 399.

³² John James Clarke, *In Search of Jung: Historical and Philosophical Enquiries* (London: Routledge, 1992), 51.

³³ Barbara Obrist, *Les débuts de l'imagerie alchimique (14e-15e siècles)* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1982), 14-36 (hereafter: Obrist, *Les débuts*).

³⁴ Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*: 8

³⁵ Ibid.

writings of an important historian on medieval alchemy, Robert Halleux, who had similar ideas about Jung's interpretation.³⁷

2.3. The influence of occultism on spiritual alchemy

Principe and Newman undermine the spiritual conception of alchemy and usually formulate their ideas against Jung and Eliade. The latter's hypotheses are not considered part of scholarly research, as they "were directly influenced by late nineteenth-century occultism."³⁸ Consequently "in spite of their origins outside of properly historical studies,"³⁹ their ideas of spiritual alchemy "have all permeated the historiography of alchemy to such an extent that many historians have adopted them without being aware of either their origins or their unsuitability."⁴⁰ Therefore, the understanding of alchemy as basically spiritual, distinct from "chemistry," is "an ahistorical formulation which postdates the early modern period and was fully developed only in the context of nineteenth-century occultism."⁴¹

After a review of the spiritual interpretation of alchemy by authors such as Mary Anne Atwood (1817-1910), Ethan Allen Hitchcock (1798-1870), and Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942) as representatives of the esoteric school with impact equally on "the general and the learned perceptions of historical alchemy," Principe and Newman consider that authors such as Julius Evola (1898-1974) and Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) "extended the movement through the twentieth century."⁴² In this context, "the prevalence of the esoteric interpretation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems to have had even greater indirect effects"⁴³ on modern research on alchemy. Thus "the currency of the notion of an internal alchemy whose goal was the transformation of the soul cannot have failed to influence the construction formulated by Carl Gustav Jung, with which it shares an emphasis on psychic states and spiritual self-development."⁴⁴

An element that Principe and Newman use to reinforce their arguments against Eliade, and in consequence against spiritual alchemy, is, as in the rejection of Jung,

³⁶ Urszula Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light. Geometry and Optics in Late Renaissance Alchemical Illustration* (Leiden: Brill 2000), 10 (hereafter: Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*)

³⁷ Newman and Principe, "Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy", 406.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 417.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 396.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

marked with biographical elements. They sustain the peculiar idea that “in his student years, he was a devotee of Rudolph Steiner’s ‘Anthroposophy’.”⁴⁵ While in the case of Jung the biographical element might have some kind of relevance, in the case of Eliade it seems that the biographical element is only a bibliographical issue, mandatory for someone dealing with the history of religion. Eliade in the *Foreword* of his book says: “my purpose in the present work has been totally different from theirs [historians of science and technology].”⁴⁶

3. Critique on the thesis of William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe

What is it that makes the ideas of Principe and Newman not fully justified? First of all, their attitude seems to be dramatically inflexible in the rejection of spiritual alchemy, a thing which is difficult to sustain in the case of many alchemical texts as, for example, *Aurora Consurgens*, the *Ripley Scroll* or *Atalanta fugiens*. Also, their manner of presentation is fallacious; they peak up that Jung was a kind of “victim” of the occultism of the nineteenth century. There are extensive studies on Jung, but they used a strange book as authority, the one of Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult* which comes rather from tabloid literature than from the academic world.⁴⁷ Much of their thesis concerning the Jungian conception of alchemy is based on “Richard Noll’s fundamental study,”⁴⁸ and also on an additional volume by Noll, called *The Aryan Christ*, on the cult around Jung.⁴⁹

Principe and Newman affirm that the conceptions of Jung and Eliade are disseminated through a “common perception” of alchemy. I would argue the contrary, namely, that it is difficult to understand how a Jungian image-archetype works and what

⁴⁵ Newman, Principe, “Some Problems in the Historiography of Alchemy,” 404. They also revisit the idea in Newman, Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*, 36, where they affirm that: “Eliade [was] immersed in the anthroposophy of Rudolph Steiner.” It is not the place here to critique the easy manner of making this kind of assumption without any bibliographical references, but I add only that indeed, Eliade read several books of Steiner -- Mircea Eliade, *Autobiography: 1907-1937, Journey East Journey West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 86 -- and “during his university years... acquired an interest in Anthroposophy... for its combination of the spiritual and the logical in its approach to religious material,” David Cave, *Mircea Eliade’s Vision for a New Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7, but was never “devoted” or “immersed” in it. Also, a close reading of his *Autobiography* and *Journal* clearly show his reserved attitude towards anthroposophy.

⁴⁶ Eliade, *The Forge*, 7.

⁴⁷ Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁴⁸ Newman and Principe, “Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy”, 404.

⁴⁹ Richard Noll, *The Aryan Christ* (New York: Random House, 1997), 25–30, 37–41. Both of Noll’s books support the idea that Jung believed himself to be an “Aryan Jesus” and that he can be compared

a psychological interpretation of alchemical stages presupposes with the tools of “common perception.” Also, it is improbable that Eliade’s idea that the alchemist tried to recreate at the level of matter the primordial conditions when God created the world was so widespread in the common perception of alchemy. The ‘common perception’ is of “medieval zealots rummaging through ancient books and scrolls in dark hot basements, seeking the secrets of transmutation in the dim firelight of brick furnaces and archaic laboratory equipment.”⁵⁰ The alchemist in ordinary perception is a man of the laboratory, and only a few are familiar with the ideas of Eliade or Jung. Only through esotericism or the traditionalist thesis of Evola or Burchardt is a spiritual interpretation of alchemy spread. But what is important, and Principe and Newman did not observe when saying that Eliade and Jung are victims of the occult interpretation, is that Evola and Burckhardt rejected the Jungian thesis.⁵¹ The Jungian conception is not acceptable for the esoteric school because of his psychological interpretation of alchemy, which somehow left alchemy without its metaphysical components and placed it in the psyche, as a product of it. Therefore, it is not esoteric knowledge that has its root in a transcendent reality. For religious temperaments Jung is too positivist in approaching religion and for the scientist too spiritual in approaching the history of science. Jung seems to be caught by the pseudo-spiritual movements, typically for New Age adepts who are militant for syncretism, the theory of synchronicity (also elaborated by Jung) and ultra-spiritual attitudes. Jung’s perspective as part of New Age spirituality, with its integration of alchemical symbolism, is nevertheless a misunderstanding and vulgar simplification of his thesis.

Hereward Tilton, a scholar whose research is mainly focused on Michael Maier and early modern alchemy, taking into account the thesis of Principe and Newman, considers that there are “a number of methodological and factual errors in their analyses.”⁵² Tilton underscores that they are not so accurate in their review of the Jungian critique, underlining that Robert Halleux, the author used by Principe and Newman for rejecting Jung, eulogized “Jung’s scrupulous adherence to the fruits of

with pseudo-spiritual leaders such as David Koresh or Jim Jones. I consider that these kinds of studies are irrelevant for scholarly research.

⁵⁰ Morrisson, *Modern Alchemy*, 3.

⁵¹ Evola considered that Jung was too modern in his psychological approach, see Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*; Burckhardt, also an adept of tradition, rejected the psychological interpretation of alchemy, see Burckhardt, *Alchemy*.

⁵² Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 10.

erudition concerning the dating and authorship of texts”⁵³ and “contrary to Principe and Newman, Halleux’s opinions on the matter of medieval alchemy are diametrically opposed to those of Obrist.”⁵⁴ He considers that “the misappropriation of Halleux by Principe and Newman could be explained as a simple matter of error in translation.”⁵⁵

As a result, Tilton adds that reading Principe and Newman, “newcomers to the subject are liable to gain a false impression concerning the acceptability of certain conceptions in the academic milieu.”⁵⁶ Therefore,

if we follow Principe and Newman in counterposing a positively valued ‘correct chemical analysis’ carried out by ‘serious historians of alchemy’ with a negatively valued ‘analysis of unreason’, we not only run the risk of committing a violence against the texts at hand, but we also perform a disservice to contemporary scholarship on the subject of alchemy.⁵⁷

The difficulty implied in the Principe-Newman theory, as Tilton argues against their misconception, is that alchemy is “a subject study in the field of the history of Western esotericism,” and, in consequence, “the term ‘alchemy’ becomes entirely indispensable.”⁵⁸ If Jung’s distinction between “spiritual” alchemy and “physical” chemistry, also used by modern writers on the history of Western esotericism, is false, as Principe and Newman are trying to argue, then all contemporary studies on Western esotericism should review their subject of studies, and also, alchemy should not be part of the interest of religious studies.

To emphasize why Jungian studies should not be neglected by scholars, I want to quote from one of the scholars, contemporary with Jung, Walter Pagel, a reputed historian of medicine, who wrote an important review of Jung that underlined, among other things, the accurate scientific Jungian approach. He notes:

It obviously succeeds: (1) in placing alchemy into an entirely new perspective in the history of science, medicine, theology and general human culture, (2) in explaining alchemical symbolism, hitherto a complete puzzle, by utilizing modern psychological analysis for the elucidation of an historical problem and – vice versa – making use of the latter for the advancement of modern psychology; and all this in a scholarly, well documented and scientifically unimpeachable exposition.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.. Tilton underlines that commenting on the texts of pseudo-Arnoldus de Villanova, Halleux talked about a “close connection of religion with alchemy in the medieval period,” while Obrist said that “nothing allows us to speculate on the religiosity of an author when he uses a consciously rhetorical process” (Obrist, *Le Debuts*, 21).

⁵⁵ Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2.

If not the whole story of alchemy, he has tackled its “mystery,” its *Nachtseite*, i.e., the problem most urgent and vexing to the historian. Engaged in this enormous task, he is prone to belittle the role of alchemy as a precursor to science and its actual foundations in serious philosophical, notably neo-Platonic, speculation. Everything seems to be psychology and symbolism⁵⁹

It should also be noticed that the Jungian interpretation of alchemy was not without an echo; nowadays there is an intensification of Jungian studies. The most important translator of Jung into French, Étienne Perrot, is also the translator of *Atalanta fugiens*.⁶⁰ As a consequence, Perrot’s studies are influenced by the thought of Jung. He takes into consideration the principle of analytic psychology developed by Jung, that the human psyche shares the same structure as alchemical elements.⁶¹ Also, Hildemarie Streich, a Jungian psychotherapist, has made important studies on the symbolic structures from *Atalanta fugiens* and its relation to music and psychology.⁶²

4. Alkimia speculativa and approaching Michael Maier

A contemporary of Jung, Stanley Redgrove⁶³ made a distinction between metallurgical and spiritual alchemy. He explicitly declared that:

the writings of alchemists must not be understood as dealing with chemical operations, with furnaces, retorts, alembics, pelicans and the like, with salt, sulphur, mercury, gold and other material substances, but must be understood as grand allegories dealing with spiritual truths.⁶⁴

The distinction that is used even today in scholarly research argues the following: “it is now clear that alchemy was a scientifically and spiritually serious pursuit.”⁶⁵ Or, another voice:

alchemy perfection in the sixteenth century promised much more than producing gold from base metals. The successful alchemist gained

⁵⁹ Walter Pagel, “Jung’s Views on Alchemy”, *Isis* 39, No. 2 (1948): 48. Also quoted in Tilton, *The quest for the Phoenix*, 5.

⁶⁰ Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugitiva* (tr. Étienne Perrot) (Paris: Éditions Dervy, 1997).

⁶¹ The translation is the aftermath of preliminary studies, such as *Les trois pommes d'or. Commentaire sur l'Atalanta fugitive de Michel Maier* (Paris: La fontaine de pierre 1981)

⁶² Hildemarie Streich, “Musikalische und psychologische Entsprechungen in der Atalanta Fugiens von Michael Maier,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 42 (1973), 361-426. Ibid., “Musikalische Symbolik in der Atalanta Fugiens von Michael Maier,” in *Symbolon: Jahrbuch für Symbolforschung* N. F. 3 (1977), 173-184. Also Hildemarie Streich made the introductory essay of the English edition of *Atalanta fugiens* (Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens: An Edition of the Fugues, Emblems, and Epigrams*, (Grand Rapids, MI : Phanes Press, 1989).

⁶³ H. Stanley Redgrove, *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern* (London: William Rider and Son, 1922).

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵ Morrisson, *Modern Alchemy*, 3.

control of life's forces and uncovered secret wisdom – the essence of all truths and religions.⁶⁶

Therefore I would suggest that a more moderate thesis, such as that of Bruce T. Moran, a historian of chemistry who argued that alchemists and early chemists switched thoughts and methods until alchemy gradually lost its spiritual or religious aspect and became chemistry at the time of the so-called scientific revolution,⁶⁷ is more practical and proper for studying an author such as Michael Maier. This position is closer to Eliade's suggestion that chemistry "was born from the disintegration of the ideology of alchemy,"⁶⁸ or, a similar thought, that there is "an almost perfect correlation between the rise of science and the decline of magic."⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the roots of the spiritual/laboratory distinction can be found in medieval alchemy and not in nineteenth century occultism, as Principe and Newman suggested. Roger Bacon, in cap. XII of *Opus tertium* (1267),⁷⁰ seems to be the earliest alchemy author to make the distinction between *alkimia operativa et practica* and *alkimia speculativa*.⁷¹ The first was dedicated to a mundane purpose, the making of gold, while the other was *scientia*, metaphysical knowledge. An early description by Petrus Bonus of Ferrara in *Pretiosa margarita novella* (1330) stands as another testimony for the fact that it is not only a science; it supports the idea that alchemy has a double character – it is a *science* (the terrestrial aspect), but also a *donum Dei* (that means that it has a non-terrestrial aspect). In this context Petrus made the connection of *lapis* with Christ, which means a *lapis divinus*.⁷² In the Renaissance, the distinction was sharper than in the Middle Ages, and one sees an abundance of speculative alchemical literature.

⁶⁶ Sally Metzler, "Artists Alchemists and Mannerists in Courtly Prague" in Jacob Wamberg, *Art and Alchemy* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 131.

⁶⁷ Bruce T. Moran, *Distilling Knowledge: Alchemy, Chemistry, and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁶⁸ Eliade. *The Forge and the Crucible*, 9.

⁶⁹ Charles Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1.

⁷⁰ Roger Bacon, "Opus tertium," in Roger Bacon, *Opera quaedam hactenus inedita. I Opus tertium, II. Opus minus, III. Compendium philosophiae* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1859), 39-40.

⁷¹ *alkimia speculativa, quae speculatur de omnibus inanimatis et tota generatione rerum ab elementis.... alkimia operativa et practica, quae docet facere metalla nobilia, et colores, et alia multa melius et copiosius per artificium, quam per naturam fiant.* Roger Bacon also talks about a *medicina* of metals that is also a *medicina* of the body, an elixir of extensive life. *Medicina* became thus the ultimate way of making perfectible things.

⁷² Leah DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009), 109.

A de-sacrilized conception of alchemy as a discipline that only precedes chemistry and is “quite alien to the image of alchemists as primarily seekers of an *unio mystica*”⁷³ is invalid, considering the fact that there are many authors who called themselves alchemists or chemists and wrote about alchemy in a manner that does not have only a relation with laboratory or metallurgical operations, such as Vilanova, Ripley, Fludd, Maier, Boehme, and others. It is difficult to accept that spiritual alchemy has “very little reference to the historical reality of the subject.”⁷⁴

However, Principe and Newman, in a book published in 2002, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*, revised their opinion to a certain extent; they do not “deny that alchemy is replete with a singular lushness of symbolism and overlapping levels of meaning or that it presents important resonances with religious speculations.”⁷⁵ This does not mean that “alchemy is nothing but the manipulation of such symbolism or texts without reference to laboratory activities.” This assumption is true, but with serious exceptions, especially where alchemy is connected with cabala,⁷⁶ with moral life,⁷⁷ spiritual life,⁷⁸ divine inspiration, the similitude theory of sympathy and correspondences between what is down and what is above or, in Michael Maier’s case, with musical fugues. This religious and esoteric spider-web is

because Renaissance alchemy believed that the changes in the external world moved in parallel with those in the soul, as throughout the occult sciences – cosmology, psychology, astrology, numerology – a continuous two-level model is used.⁷⁹

Therefore, could one explain the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (*Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz anno 1459*), published in Strasburg in

⁷³ Newman, Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*, 38.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Many relations of alchemical imagery with cabala, theological discourse, and Christ-Anthropos are thoroughly analyzed in Urszula Szulakowska, *The Sacrificial Body and the Day of Doom: Alchemy and Apocalyptic Discourse in the Protestant Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2006) (hereafter: Szulakowska, *The Sacrificial Body*)

⁷⁷ “After all, the alchemical operation was to be valid also for them; it was a religious function requiring of the alchemist a pure, often ascetic life,” Thomas Steven Molnar, *God and the Knowledge of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 86.

⁷⁸ For example the acrostic of Basile Valentin present in many alchemical emblems and cited in many alchemical treatises: V.I.T.R.I.O.L. (*Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem*. “Visit the interior of the earth and by rectifying find the hidden stone”), beside its possible connection with the matter, has an important spiritual meaning, a “*descensus ad inferos*,” which may be linked with “saturnine melancholy” and the symbolism from Durer’s *Melancholia*; see more in Eliade, *The Forge*, 162.

⁷⁹ Brian Vickers, *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 129.

1616 and attributed to Valentin Andreae, only through the methodology offered by Principe and Newman stating that in the seventeenth century there was no difference between alchemy and chemistry? The *Chymical Wedding* is an important Rosicrucian manifest with many alchemical occurrences and with an influence on later alchemy. In 1617, the author of *Elucidarius Major*, Radtichs Brotoffer, considered that *Chymische Hochzeit* was allegorical alchemical writing;⁸⁰ and that Michael Maier would be the person “responsible for putting an alchemical stamp on Rosicrucianism.”⁸¹

Beginning with the Renaissance, but also before it, many alchemists were also physicians, and they were under the influence of Paracelsian medicine, a medical-alchemical conception that was closer to a sacred than a secular understanding of the body.⁸² The mystical conception of the body linked alchemy strongly with Christianity. Szulakowska⁸³ has shown that Christian eschatology was an intimate part of the alchemy of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and Tilton has concluded that “there exists an ideological congruence in the history of esotericism pertaining to matters of alchemy.”⁸⁴

Thus, an emphasis on the laboratory side of alchemy⁸⁵ cannot cover the complicated state of Renaissance alchemy and the obvious influence of Neoplatonism, Cabala or any other type of spiritual science. Consequently, the questions that are reached by Western esotericism

cannot be fully answered on basis of the objective or positivistic techniques of traditional approaches to the history of science. We also need help from religious studies and historical anthropology. The

⁸⁰ Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order* (York Beach: Weiser Books, 1988), 32.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Concerning that, Pagel noted: “A study of Neo-Platonism will reveal much serious philosophy in Paracelsus - where not more than “symbolism,” and at best psychological insight, appears to be the net result of his labours. “*In natura quidem intueri nihil aliud est quam esse tale et tale quiddam facere.*” Passages like this from Ficinus’ commentary to Plotinus express concepts fundamental to Paracelsus, which constitute a genuine philosophy culminating in the elimination (“pneumatisation”) of matter. Such an idealism has a legitimate claim to independence - whatever its historical or psychological affiliation with “symbolism” or “mysticism.” It is just as significant for the understanding and historical appreciation of Paracelsus and alchemy as psychology is.” Walter Pagel, “Jung’s Views on Alchemy,” 48.

⁸³ Szulakowska, *The Sacrificial Body*, passim.

⁸⁴ Tilton, *The quest for the Phoenix*, 253.

⁸⁵ Even Maier used the name *chemia* or *chymia* for the noble art, and *alchemia* for the vulgar and common practitioners; I will use the English term alchemy, so that I will not to create a confusion in the already established terminology, which uses the term *alchemy* when referring to the work of Maier, see Tilton, *The quest for the Phoenix*, 235-236.

concept of self-fashioning also seems useful, leading us, to some extent, to the territory of psychology as well.⁸⁶

My purpose in this study does not involve the laboratory work of Maier, if there was any at all, but his spiritual consideration of alchemy and his cultural approach, stressing the function and understanding of alchemical imagery. The question is how best to approach such a text as *Atalanta fugiens*. Is it part of the history of science or part of Western esotericism? Anyway, a sharp distinction is hard to be define. As I will maintain below, the role and function of images in *Atalanta fugiens* marks the speculative and spiritual face of alchemy. This is close to the imprint that Paracelsus left on alchemy, who considerably influenced Maier, and who considered that “the discipline’s worth is to be evaluated in terms which have nothing to do with the ennobling of metals.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ György E. Szönyi, *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), xiii (hereafter: Szönyi, *John Dee's Occultism*).

⁸⁷ Massimo L. Bianchi, “The Visible and the Invisible. From Alchemy to Paracelsus,” in *Alchemy and Chemistry in 16th and 17th Centuries*, ed. Piyo Rattansi and Antonio Clericuzio (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 17.

CHAPTER II. MAIER, ATALANTA FUGIENS AND MYTHOALCHEMIE

Maier may have been the deepest of the ‘Rosicrucians’.⁸⁸

1. The life and work of Count Michael Maier

Michael Maier,⁸⁹ of a melancholic temperament,⁹⁰ was “the most prominent alchemical physician in Germany since Paracelsus,”⁹¹ poet, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Medicine and personal physician of Emperor Rudolf II (1552/1576-1612) until the death of the emperor. Relatively ample details are known about his life from his *De Medicina Regia et vere heroica, Coelidonia*,⁹² a recently discovered book. One of the ideas of this book, an autobiography, relevant in the context of spiritual alchemy, is that his life should be decoded and had meaning through alchemy.

Michael Maier – son of Johann Maier, an official of the Duchy of Holstein⁹³ – was born to a Protestant family in Kiel, Holstein, in northern Germany in the summer of 1569.⁹⁴

Maier spent four years studying medicine and philosophy at Rostock (starting in 1587, the year in which his father died), and after that at Frankfurt/Oder (where he received a *magister atrium*-title), and Padua (1589-1591), there receiving the title of *Poet Laureate*. In this period his intellectual ambitions were quite remote from Neo-

⁸⁸ Frances Amelia Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2002), 116 (hereafter: Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*).

⁸⁹ The most important bio-bibliographical aspects can be found in the first monograph on Maier (first published in 1910), still an important reference, James B. Craven, *Count Michael Maier, Doctor of Philosophy and of Medicine, Alchemist, Rosicrucian, Mystic 1568-1622: Life and Writings* (Berwick: Ibis Press, 2003) (hereafter: Craven, *Count Michael Maier*). Other studies are: Hereward Tilton, “The Life and Work of Count Michael Maier (1569-1622): Understanding Christian Alchemy in the German Calvinist States,” *Theology and Religion* 1 (1999): 23-42; the exceptional studies on the life of Maier, by Karin Figala and Ulrich Neumann, “*Author Cui Nomen Hermes Malavici*,” New Light on the Biobibliography of Michael Maier (1569–1622)” in *Alchemy and Chemistry in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, ed. Piyo Rattansi and Antonio Clericuzio (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 121-147 (hereafter: Figala and Neumann, “*Author Cui Nomen Hermes Malavici*”); Ibid., “Michael Maier (1569-1622) New Bio-bibliographical Material” in *Alchemy Revisited*, ed. Z. R. W. M. von Martels (Leiden: Brill Archive, 1990), 34-50 (hereafter: Figala and Neumann, “Michael Maier”); Ulrich Neumann, “Maier, Michael” in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, Band 15 (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1987), 703-704 (hereafter: Neumann, “Michael Maier,” *NDB*).

⁹⁰ Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 41.

⁹¹ McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History*, 32.

⁹² This is the “first” book published by Maier (Prague, 1609) and it contains a detailed *curriculum vitae*. The only copy that is known now is in Copenhagen, the Royal Library, see Figala and Neumann, “Michael Maier,” 35.

⁹³ Johann Maier’s father was probably Petrus Meier (d. 1590), a gold embroiderer in the service of Heinrich Rantzau, the Danish governor of Schleswig-Holstein, see Neumann, “Maier, Michael,” *NDB*, 703.

Platonism or hermetism and focused rather on mathematics, logic, physics, and astronomy. Starting from 1590, Maier began practicing as a physician, although he was lacking an academic degree. In 1592 Maier received a doctorate title in Philosophy from the University of Frankfurt/Oder. Between 1592 and 1596 he worked in Königsberg under the guidance of Severin Goebel, a friend of his mother.⁹⁵ In 1596 he was at the University of Bologna. In the same year, he took his doctorate in medicine at Basel. At Königsberg and Danzig he worked again as a physician, and was enrolled at the University of Königsberg in 1601. His increasing attraction to alchemy is known from that period.

In 1608 he went from Holstein Prague, and on 19 September 1609 he became body physician (*Leibartz*) in the service of Emperor Rudolf II, an emperor who was more interested in hermetic arts than political issues,⁹⁶ and “patronized alchemy as a language of meditation,”⁹⁷ and was I “interested in the metaphysical dimension of alchemy.”⁹⁸ After ten days, on 29 September, Rudolf II conferred on him the title of Imperial Count Palatine⁹⁹ with all the specific privileges (he received three titles: Physician, Count Palatine, and Knight Exemptus). At court, Maier was the private secretary of the emperor, a member of the Imperial Consistory, and part of the diplomatic mission. Maybe as a consequence of his envoy mission, Maier, in 1611 and 1612-1614 traveled extensively, initially in the region of Saxony, afterward to Amsterdam and England, where he stood almost five years. In that period he also

⁹⁴ According to a single monograph, (Craven, *Count Michael Maier*), now a classic study, Maier was born in 1568, in Rendsburg. The year (1568) was based especially on the copperplate illustration of *Atalanta fugiens* and *Symbola Aureae Mensae* (1617), see Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 35.

⁹⁵ Severin Goebel was a well-known physician in Königsberg and Gdansk. It is supposed that Goebel financed the studies of Maier.

⁹⁶ Rudolf II, also called “the German Hermes,” was considered a “wizard Emperor” who “trode the paths of secret knowledge with an obsession bordering on madness,” see R. J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 2 (hereafter: Evans, *Rudolf II*). An important study on his temperament and the psychological problems of his son can be found in H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Mad Princes of Renaissance Germany* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 125-143.

⁹⁷ Pamela H. Smith, “Alchemy as a Language of Mediation at the Habsburg Court,” *Isis* 85, No. 1 (1994):3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁹ This title was obtained two months after the publication of *Medicina regia*, a thing that may have facilitated the decision of Rudolf II, see Figala and Neumann, “Michael Maier,” 42.

entered the court of James I, king of England and Ireland, where he met Robert Fludd¹⁰⁰ and Sir William Paddy¹⁰¹ (doctor to King James).

In April 1611, Maier went to offer his services to Landgrave Moritz¹⁰² of Hesse-Kassel (1572-1623), where in 1619, as in the case of Rudolf II, he became his personal physician. In that period (1611) Maier traveled westward, to Muhlhouse, where he “stayed as a guest with Christoph Reinhard, Doctor of Laws and Town syndic.”¹⁰³ *Atalanta fugiens*, written in 1617, is dedicated to him.

After spending almost five years in England, we find him back in Germany where he published eleven books. In 1620, he moved to Magdeburg to practice medicine for Duke Christian Wilhelm (Archbishop of Magdeburg and primate of Germany), where he died in 1622 at the age of 54. Despite his successful career, the most productive period, when he proved his profound interest in the hermetic tradition and mythology, began at the age 46, between 1614 and 1620,¹⁰⁴ a period that overlapped with the Rosicrucian manifesto, *Confessio Fraternitatis*. Although his involvement in the Rosicrucian movement¹⁰⁵ will not be developed in this study, I want

¹⁰⁰ For a relevant analysis of the differences and similarities between the mythological preoccupation of Maier and the theological and cabalistic interest of Fludd see Craven, *Count Michael Maier*, 10. Also, Szulakowska (in *The Alchemy of Light*, 153) makes a sharp distinction: the work of Maier “emerges from the context of courtly humanism... while Fludd addressed a learned, international audience of natural philosophers and theologians.”

¹⁰¹ Maier’s first opus, *Arcana arcanissima*, is dedicated (manuscript dedication) to William Paddy.

¹⁰² Moritz, also called “the learned”, had a vivid interest in iatrochemistry and alchemy. Kassel was a place where many pansophists and alchemists found refuge in. Cf. Figala and Neumann, “Michael Maier”, 42). Maier’s *De Circulo Physico Quadrato* (1616) is dedicated to Moritz.

¹⁰³ Figala and Neumann, “Michael Maier,” 42.

¹⁰⁴ He wrote and published many works, such as: *Arcana Arcanissima* (1614) (hereafter: *Arcana*), *Lusus Serius* (1616), *De Circulo Physico Quadrato* (1616), *Atalanta Fugiens* (1617), *Examen Fucorum Pseudo-Chymicum* (1617), *Jocus Severus* (1617), *Silentium Post Clamores* (1617), *Symbola Aurea Mensae Duodecim Nationum* (1617), *Themis Aurea* (1618), *Tripus Aureus* (1618), *Viatorium, hoc est, De Montibus Planetarum septem seu Metallorum* (1618), *Tractatus de Volucris Arborea* (1619), *Verum Inventum* (1619), *Septimana Philosophica* (1620), *Civitas Corporis Humani* (1621), *Cantilenae Intellectuales de Phoenice Redivivo* (1622). After his death, many works remained in manuscript. Only *Ulysses* (posth., 1624) was published immediately. *Symbola Aurea Mensae* was republished under the title *Subtilis Allegoria super Secreta Chymiae* in successive editions of *Museum Hermeticum* (1678, 1749). Before 1614, Maier wrote: *These de epilepsia* (1596), *De Theosophia Aegyptiorum* (1608/9), *Hymnosophia, seu meditatio laudis divinae* (1609), *De medicina regia et vera heroica, Coelidonia* (1609). A detailed bibliography of the works of Maier can be found in Ivo Purš, “Michael Maier: jeho život a dílo v Recentní literatuře” (Michael Maier, his life and work in recent literature) *Studia Rudolphina* 2 (2002): 63-64, and in Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 257-259. Some scholars think that “his erudition was profound, but his writings were diffuse, obscure, and completely uncritical.” John Read, *From Alchemy to Chemistry* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1995), 64-65 (hereafter Read, *From Alchemy*).

¹⁰⁵ Besides Yates’ fundamental study on the Rosicrucian movement, there is little scholarly research that tries to see what is Rosicrucian and what is not in Maier’s works and images. Nevertheless, there are many pseudo-scholarly researchers that have underlined only the Rosicrucian aspect and link it with fantasist theories. Yates’ book made a revolution in scholarly approaches to the role of magic, alchemy, and esotericism in the Renaissance. For Yates, the spring of modern sciences is strongly linked with the

to quote the opinion of Yates that “this man [Maier]... certainly believed in the existence of the Rosicrucians and believed that he was himself one of them.”¹⁰⁶

His intellectual life was typical for a Renaissance humanist, full of alchemical ambitions, but also because of his broad interest in other domains of research..¹⁰⁷ Still, “all of Maier’s interests and talents, ... [were] only like planets circling around the central Sun of Alchemy.”¹⁰⁸ In that period the Platonism of Ficino, the dignity of man drawn by Mirandola, the Enochian language of Dee and Kelley, or the magic of Agrippa were almost a common way of thinking for an intellectual in Europe, and “an ardent desire for a spiritual revival was sweeping over the intellectuals of Europe. As at the present day, the people were in a state of spiritual revolution.”¹⁰⁹

Maier’s influence on Isaac Newton is noticeable. Next to Eirenaeus Philalethes (George Starkey, d. 1665), Michael Sendivogius (1556–1636), and Jan de Monte Snyder, Michael Maier was one of the preferred alchemists, *authores optimi*¹¹⁰ of Isaac Newton (1643-1727). Newton believed that alchemical writings “if properly interpreted, would reveal the wisdom handed down by God in the distant past.”¹¹¹ Like Maier himself, he considered that there “was a close connection between spiritual and experimental domains.”¹¹² Newton “seems to have been particularly interested,”¹¹³ in Maier; the “interest in Maier’s writings also supports the view ... that his alchemy cannot be seen solely in connection with his chemical experiments but was also a link between his religious beliefs and his scientific aims.”¹¹⁴ One of the earliest of Newton’s

Renaissance obsession for magic. The Rosicrucian movement is perceived as an intellectual movement that tried to bring together a high level of knowledge, similar to academic environments today. Her study provides the basic background for contextualizing Maier’s approach. However, “her view has been criticized by a number of Renaissance scholars, who argue that Yates’s general scenario is misconstrued,” by Brian Vickers or Carlos Gilly, a biographer of Rosicrucianism, who stressed that the illustrious magician John Dee, “did not have such a central role” in Rosicrucian movement, contrary to what Yates argued. See James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 164-165.

¹⁰⁶ Frances Yates, *Selected Works. Volume III. The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge, 1999), 324.

¹⁰⁷ He was considered “un spirit *encyclique*,” a good synthesis of the wide preoccupations that can be found in his works is illustrated in Jacques Rebotier, “L’art de musique chez Michel Maier,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 182, No. 1 (1972), 29-51.

¹⁰⁸ Joscelyn Godwin, “A Context for Michael Maier’s *Atalanta Fugiens*,” *Hermetic Journal* 29 (1985): 29.

¹⁰⁹ Karl R. H. Frick, *Introduction of Musaeum hermeticum reformatum et amplificatum* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1970), ix.

¹¹⁰ I. Bernard Cohen and George E. Smith, “Introduction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Newton*, ed. I. Bernard Cohen and George Edwin Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 24.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 256.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Karin Figala, “Newton’s alchemy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Newton*, ed. I. Bernard Cohen and George Edwin Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 375.

manuscripts, from about 1669, includes extracts from an important book by Maier, *Symbola Aureae Mensae* (Keynes MS 29).¹¹⁵ As Yates noted, “Newton had entered that world of Maier’s alchemical revival, had studied the alchemical sources which it brought together, and had pored over the strange expression of its outlook in the alchemical emblems.”¹¹⁶

2. *Atalanta fugiens*, an atypical book

“*Atalanta Fugiens*, an orgy of philosopher's eggs,
dragons biting their tails, sphinxes.
Nothing was more luminous than a secret cipher;
everything was the hieroglyph of something else.”¹¹⁷

The book *Atalanta fugiens*¹¹⁸ (hereafter: *Atalanta*), “an exceedingly curious one,”¹¹⁹ published in 1617,¹²⁰ is a synthesis of alchemical thinking. It tries to embrace in a single object – a single substance (a universal panacea), a *lapis*, a hieroglyph (Dee), or an emblem – the intimate essence of the world. With its fifty emblems, epigrams, allegorical discourses and musical scores it is the first alchemical *Gesamtkunstwerk* in that it comprises music, images, poetry, and prose together piece. As is stressed on the frontispiece of the book, all the senses are involved in the contact with this alchemical

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 374-375. The manuscript Keynes Ms. 32 also contains the abstracts of five works by Maier (from the early 1690s), one of which is *Atalanta fugiens*, see *Newton Manuscript Catalogue*. For more information see John Harrison, *The Library of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 188-189 and Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The Janus Faces of Genius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 122-123.

¹¹⁶ Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 257.

¹¹⁷ Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, tr. William Weaver (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1997), 195.

¹¹⁸ *Atalanta fugiens, hoc est, Emblemata Nova de Secretis Naturae Chymica, Accommodata partim oculis & intellectui, figuris cupro incisis, adjectisque sententiis, Epigrammatis & notis, partim auribus & recreationi animi plus minus 50 Fugis Musicalibus trium Vocum, quarum duae ad unam simplicem melodiam distichis canendis peraptam, corresponsdeant, non absq; singulari jucunditate videnda, legenda, meditanda, intelligenda, dijudicanda, canenda & audienda: Authore Michaelae Majero Imperial. Consistorii Comite, Med. D. Eq. ex. &c. Oppenheimii, Ex typographia Hieronymi: Galleri, Sumptibus Job. Theodori de Bry, M DC XVII.* The first edition is very rare. Almost all scholars use the edition from 1618, which is based on the previous one. The following edition dates from 1687 under the title: *Secretioris Naturae secretorum scrutinium chymicum: per oculis et intellectui accurate accommodata, figuris cupro appositissime incisa, ingeniosissima emblemata, hisque confines, et ad rem egregie facientes sententias, doctissimaque item epigrammata, illustratum.* This version is without the musical scores and is one of the most popular editions. The fact that it was published without musical scores shows us that the book shortly began to be perceived as an emblem book, while the musical scores were left aside as being a curiosity and inessential for grasping the meaning of the book. This edition was used by Jung and Eliade in their studies. The next edition, also without musical scores, is the German translation made in 1708 under the title *Chymisches Cabinet, derer grossen Geheimnissen der Natur.* The edition of the *Chymisches Cabinet* was re-published in 2007: Thomas Hofmeier, *Michael Maiers Chymisches Cabinet. Atalanta fugiens deutsch nach der Ausgabe von 1708* (Berlin: Thurneysser, 2007).

¹¹⁹ Redgrove, *Bygone*, 175.

¹²⁰ That very year Maier proved to be extremely prolific, as he published five books.

treatise: *partim oculis et inteflectui... partim auribus et recreationi ... videnda, legenda, meditanda, intelligenda, dijudicanda, canenda et audienda*. Thus, each gate providing the senses a way to enter the content of the book is open and aims at the same result. In this respect, *Atalanta* is a book¹²¹ that requires a rather contemplative exercise and which seems to lack a direct connection with laboratory work, “providing a series of meditations on the spiritual significance of alchemy.”¹²²

2.1. The myth of *Atalanta* and the hermeneutics of alchemy

The phenomenon that marks the most striking difference between alchemy and science lies in the analogies and correspondences between myth and the processes of transmutation, and this fact is frequently illustrated through the parallels drawn by alchemists between processes and myths. Alchemists studied myth and matter with the same interest. Moreover, for an alchemist the myth holds the key for understanding the processes which matter undergoes. In alchemy, myth occupied the place of the true and noble science. For Maier, alchemy is a metaphysical science that talks about the eternal principles which govern all reality, both spiritual and material. One of Maier’s attempts was to explain the genealogy of mythology, especially Greek. His hermeneutics attempted to reconstruct the entire mythical space through alchemical principles. For example, in an episode of fascination with Egyptian mythology, “the death and resurrection of Osiris were used by Maier and by Newton as a symbol for the alchemical process.”¹²³ The use of myths as analogies for alchemical realities developed a particular kind of alchemy that chose a mythological reading of alchemy as a guiding line and applied alchemical patterns to understanding myth; this is referred to in scholarly literature as *Mythoalchemie*.¹²⁴

¹²¹ The modern editions, especially in the English-speaking area, only partially reproduce the contents, and they are confined to presenting only the images, the text, or the image and text without the musical scores. The most important version has been edited by de Jong, and is in fact a study in which the author reproduces all the images at the end of the book, without musical scores and the *Praefatio ad Lectorem*. To my knowledge, there is no published English translation of the discourses. In my studies I followed the Latin text and de Jong’s summary as well as the transcription, posted on Adam McLean’s Alchemy Website (<http://www.levity.com/alchemy/atalanta.html>) of a seventeenth-century English translation found in the Sloane collection at the BL (Sloane 3645).

¹²² Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 156.

¹²³ Figala, “Newton’s alchemy,” 377.

¹²⁴ I preserve this term due to the lack of a corresponding word in English. See Friedmann Harzer, “Arcana Arcanissima: Emblematic und Mythoalchemie bei Michael Maier” in *Polyvalenz und Multifunktionalität der Emblematic / Multivalence and Multifunctionality of the Emblem*, ed. Wolfgang Harms and Dietmar Peil (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), 319-332.

It should also be noted that the “application of classical mythology to alchemy reached its zenith in the early seventeenth century;”¹²⁵ and the work of Maier exemplarily displays this tendency. His first published book, *Arcana Arcanissima* (1614), was an immersion in Classical mythology¹²⁶ with the help of alchemy and here one can find the future program for *Atalanta*. The underlying principle for the composition of the book was the idea that myths should be understood as allegories of alchemical processes. The title of the book in its entirety sheds light upon his ambitions:

Arcana arcanissima, hoc est, Hieroglyphica AEgyptio-Graeca: vulgo necdum cognita, ad demonstrandam falsorum apud antiquos deorum, dearum, heroum, animantium, & institutorum pro sacris receptorum, originem, ex uno AEgyptiorum artificio, quad aureum animi et Corporis medicamentum peregit, deductam: unde tot poetarum allegoriae, scriptorum narrationes fabulosae et per totam encyclopaediam errores sparsi clarissima veritatis luce manifestantur, suaeque tribui singula restituuntur, sex libris exposita

In *Atalanta*, Maier uses the myth of the Greek goddess to illustrate that the goal of classical mythology was to talk about alchemical realities. The story relates how the father of Atalanta, a king, wanted to have his daughter married, but she insisted on remaining indifferent to marriage. Atalanta approved getting married only if the suitor could win a running competition against her. The father agreed, and several suitors died while trying to outrun her. Hippomenes, in other places referred to as Melanion, requested the help of Aphrodite, receiving from the goddess three golden apples which he had to throw in front of Atalanta so that he could slow her down. After the victory of Hippomenes, the story goes on, saying that after they had consummated their nuptial union in one of the temples of Cybele, the goddess or Zeus transformed them into lions. There is also a version that Aphrodite metamorphosed them into a lion and lioness because they did not pay her due respect.¹²⁷ The whole story is illustrated on the frontispiece of the book (Appendix, ill. no.1), while the metamorphosis into lions was the subject of *Emblema XVI, Hic leo, quas plumas non habet, alter habet*, where the

¹²⁵ Read, *From Alchemy*, 63-64.

¹²⁶ Here one can see Maier's interest in mythology and hermetism, the book being “a combination of scientific and hermetic research with a particular sensitivity to literature, humanistic rhetoric, and classical mythology, often treated satirically,” see György E. Szőnyi, “Occult Semiotics and Iconology: Michael Maier's Alchemical Emblems” in *Mundus Emblematicus: The Neo-Latin Emblem Books*, ed. Karl Enenkel, Arnoud Visser (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 304 (hereafter: Szőnyi, “Occult Semiotics and Iconology”).

¹²⁷ An important feature for Maier. In the second book of *Arcana*, Maier tried to put the Golden Apples of the Hesperides and the Golden Fleece as symbols for gold.. This is not the vulgar gold of the alchemists; it is a universal panacea, God's gift.

winged lion that stands for Mercury is in a play fight with Sulphur, the wingless lion (Appendix, ill. no. 16).¹²⁸ It is curious that the title of the book points directly to Atalanta's run, but the book in itself does not even mention Atalanta. The myth is displayed only in the *Epigramma Authoris* (page 2), *Epistola Dedicatoria* (page 4), and *Praefatio ad Lecotorem* (page 9).¹²⁹

Antoine Faivre talks about the “reductionist trend” in reducing mythology “to the processes and elements involved in the *Magnum Opus*,”¹³⁰ and refers to a tradition that preserved myths as hidden stories from antiquity through the Middle Ages until Renaissance alchemy. But only after the Middle Ages was the myth thought to be related to alchemy; for example, Jacob Tollius (1626-1696), philologist and alchemist, in a book published in the same year as Newton's *Principia* (1687), asserts that the true meaning of myths was related to alchemy.¹³¹

In addition, one should also bear in mind that there was a strong relation between myth and image. As a result of imaging the image of a poem or a myth can be seen as the poem and the myth themselves, and the creative function of the image is to create stories. The image in alchemy is a *via regia*, also much like the myth that is beyond the discursive exposition and logic of rationality. These are unities that are close to ecstatic and mystical experiences, and it was stressed that “the imagery of alchemy was closely bound up with mythological conceptions.”¹³²

2.2. The structure of the book

At first glance, the book seems to be a compilation of various alchemical ideas that are put together to create a deliberately complicated work. It is difficult to say if it is an artistic vision (in the modern meaning of the word) or the elaborate consequence of prolonged research in alchemy. Is it an experimental product, as it puts together image, text, and music, or is it a coherent and logical system, a kind of *summa*

¹²⁸ It is important to notice that, the theme of the lions is present independently of the myth of Atalanta, as *spiritus* and *anima*, in *De Lapide Philosophico Triga Chemicum*, attributed to Lamspring and published in 1599 in Prague. The book is not illustrated, but it is most probably that Maier had access to this text. Interestingly enough, the printed editions of *De Lapide Philosophico*, in 1625 and also in 1678 in *Museum Hermeticum*, seems to reproduce Maier's lions from the Emblem XVI (Appendix, ill. no. 15). It is more probable that it reproduces the lions from *Atalanta's* frontispiece.

¹²⁹ Could this absence of Atalanta from the content of the book be a clue that the title refers especially to musical scores? Because only there Atalanta and the run are always present.

¹³⁰ Antoine Faivre, “An Approach to the Theme of Golden Fleece in Alchemy,” in *Alchemy Revisited*, ed. Z. R. W. M. von Martels (Leiden: Brill Archive, 1990), 250.

¹³¹ Jacob Tollius, *Fortuita: In quibus, præter critica nonnulla, tota fabularis historia Græca, Phœnicia, Ægyptiaca, ad chemiam pertinere asseritur* (Amsterdam: Janssonio-Waesbergios, 1687). The book has no reference to Maier's *Atalanta* or *Arcana arcanissima*.

¹³² Read, *From Alchemy*, 61.

alchemica? For de Jong, it seems “highly improbable that *Atalanta fugiens* was the product of the imagination of a creative artist.”¹³³ Rather the style in which Maier presented his ideas was a product of the “visual spectacle and musical entertainments of the court.”¹³⁴

The order in the book can have a meaning: the first is the musical score as a *Fuga*, followed by an *Emblema* (with motto, picture, and *Epigramma*), ending with *Discursus*, that is, a kind of explanation of the *Fuga* and *Emblema*. It is a rhythmic distribution: each group (*Fuga – Emblema – Discursus*) of the fifty¹³⁵ presented in the book invariably occupies four pages. On the left page is the fugue, the right has the emblem which is followed by two pages of commentary under the title *Discoursus*.

The musical scores

Through the bizarre presence of musical scores in a printed treatise, *Atalanta fugiens* authenticates the spiritual character of music and its relation to the occult sciences.¹³⁶ There is no testimony from the author himself concerning the choice of the musical scores, only hypotheses.¹³⁷ They may be perceived as a musical experiment following a Pythagorean rationale rather than an aesthetical one. One can say that alchemical principles employed in the structure of the fugues have a function that goes beyond the mere delight of hearing. This function must serve a religious and magical purpose since the music, and especially the fugues, because of the rules of

¹³³ de Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta*, x.

¹³⁴ Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 153.

¹³⁵ The number is certainly not without meaning. Several of Maier's books follow a certain numerical pattern: *Viatorium, hoc est, De Montibus Planetarum septem seu Metallorum*, 1618, (presents emblems of the seven planets); *Septimana Philosophia*, 1620 (focused on seven days); *Symbola aureae mensae* (concentrate on twelve nations). See Joscelyn Godwin, “The Deepest of the Rosicrucians. Michael Maier (1569-1622)” in *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment Revisited*, ed. Ralph White (Hudson: Lindisfarne Books, 1999): 121 (hereafter: Godwin, “The Deepest of the Rosicrucians”). One may speculate concerning the number fifty that it can be correlated with Shakespearian plays and Greek tragedies, there fifty standing for the fifth acts; or, that there is a relation between the number five and quintessence (the fifth essence).

¹³⁶ There are important studies on the musical scores from *Atalanta fugiens*, for example: Christoph Meinel, “Alchemie und Musik,” in *Die Alchemie in der europäischen Kultur und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Christoph Meinel (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), 201–27. Franz Liessem, *Musik und Alchemie* (Tützing: H. Schneider, 1969). Another study concerns the relation between the musical fugues and alchemy of David Yearsley, “Alchemy and Counterpoint in an Age of Reason,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51 (1998): 201–43, unfortunately Maier's book is not so discussed. I think that the question concerning the musical education of Maier is still unresolved. The problem is more delicate taking in account that his fugues were compared with the high level of Bach's fugues.

¹³⁷ As hypotheses there are: the music was performed at the court of Rudolf II; as an accessory for laboratory practice; as part of a theatrical play, etc. The following presumption is notable for laboratory practice: “Maier intended these alchemical ‘incantations’ to be sung by an alchemic choir at critical moments during the coction of Philosopher's Stone, under the simultaneous influences of prayer and the heavenly bodies.” Read, *From Alchemy*, 73. One could say that its function is similar to that of talismans.

counterpoint,¹³⁸ rely in the highest way on carefully thought-out mathematical and metaphysical principles.¹³⁹

There are illustrations, for example in the well-known frontispiece of Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (Hannover, 1609), where, in a picture executed by Jan Vredeman de Vries, alchemical processes are associated with musical instruments and music was part of a "symbolic landscape of the occultists,"¹⁴⁰ a *laboratorium* and an *oratorium* at the same time. About the virtue of music, Thomas Norton, the English alchemist whom Maier edited in his *Tripus aureus* (1618), wrote in 1477: "Joyne them together also *Arithmetically*, By settle Numbers proportionally... Joyne your Elements *Musically*."¹⁴¹ In consequence, John Read adds that alchemists "may sometimes have carried out these operations to the accompaniment of musical chants in their religious devotions."¹⁴²

Each musical score has three melodic lines, where Maier notes at the beginning:

- *Atalanta seu vox fugiens* (first voice)
- *Hippomenes seu vox sequens* (second voice)
- *Pomum obiectum seu vox Morans* (third voice)

Each voice symbolically corresponds to the volatility, flightiness, and fugitiveness of Mercury (Atlanta), Sulphur's virtue (Hippomenes), and Salt (the golden and delaying apples of the Hesperides).¹⁴³ Also, these melodic lines correspond with the triplet: spirit – soul – body. Atalanta can stand for Nature and for Alchemy herself, while Hippomenes is the alchemist desiring to understand Nature or the science of alchemy. As in the Hegelian triad, "every fugue has three voices and is sung three times,"¹⁴⁴ and not four or five voices as it should be, taking into account that musical scores are based on the *cantus firmus* of Gregorian chants. The structure is formed by two canonical parts over a *cantus firmus* that is inspired by an eleventh- or twelfth-century *Christe Eleison*. Through the golden apples of the Hesperides, the alchemical

¹³⁸ "One of the most challenging exercises in counterpoint," see: Godwin, "The Deepest of the Rosicrucians," 120.

¹³⁹ An important study on the magic of music is Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Unfortunately, Tomlinson did not take into account the musical scores of *Atalanta*.

¹⁴⁰ Evans, *Rudolf II*, 214. An author whose "engravings are intended to excite the imagination of the viewer so that a mystic alchemy can take place through the act of visual contemplation" Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 9.

¹⁴¹ Quoted from Read, *From Alchemy*, 71.

¹⁴² Idem.

¹⁴³ Carolien Eijkelboom, "Alchemical Music by Michael Maier," in *Alchemy Revisited*, ed. Z. R. W. M. von Martels (Leiden: Brill Archive, 1990), 98.

Salt, Maier illustrated the way of catching Mercury (Atalanta) that is in eternal polarity with Sulphur (Hippomenes). The parallelism of the alchemical triad with the myth of Atalanta seems to be interpreted in different ways by different scholars. For example, Lyndy Abraham says that Sulphur is symbolized by the golden apples.¹⁴⁵ If one assumes this, then also the music should be thought of in another way: *cantus firmus* would not be only *Pomum Morans*.¹⁴⁶

I would argue that Maier's alchemical conception is illustrated in the structure of the music. The relation of Mercury and Sulphur (as a unity of opposites) with the third element, which is Salt, apparently expresses his Paracelsian¹⁴⁷ understanding and the way in which the alchemist should research the spiritual and natural levels, and, even more, how to achieve the Great Work. These three fundamental principles of Renaissance alchemy should be present in *Atalanta's* iconography as well.

The illustrations

In this study the emphasis is also be on the images found in the emblems. The illustrations (woodcuts) were engraved by either Theodor de Bry or, probably, by his son-in-law, Matthäus Merian the Elder, as L. H. Wüthrich has argued in his study for the facsimile edition.¹⁴⁸ It is considered that these emblems "set the style for alchemical illustration for the next three centuries, replacing the earlier Christological motifs."¹⁴⁹

The image-emblems do not seem to have followed a rigorous order. Except for some of them, such as the first and the second image, which announced the patron of alchemy, Hermes, and the statute of Nature, and the last one, which announced the achievement of *opus alchemicum*, it seems that one can change the order of the emblems. One can begin to look or to read from each place represented in the fifty

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.

¹⁴⁶ One of the modern editors of *Atalanta*, Joscelyn Godwin, converted the fifty canons into modern score notations, see Joscelyn Godwin, *Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens (1617). An Edition of the Fugues, Emblems and Epigrams* (Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 22) (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1989). The edition, now a rarity, was published in 250 copies with a seventy-minute recording of the complete canons. A reviewer of the edition compared the recording with Machaut, Gesualdo or Stravinsky; Douglas Leedy, "Atalanta Fugiens: An Edition of the Fugues, Emblems and Epigrams by Michael Maier; Joscelyn Godwin," *Notes* 47, No. 3 (1991), 737.

¹⁴⁷ Paracelsus attached to the Aristotelian four elements a new conception about matter – *tria principia* or *tria prima* – adding two medieval principles of matter (sulfur and mercury) a third element, which is salt, with an enormous influence on alchemy.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens hoc est Emblemata nova de secretis naturae chymica Authore Michael Majero*, ed. Lucas Heinrich Wüthrich (Kassel: Barenreiter-Verlag, 1964), 13-15. Also, de Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta*, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Szulakowska, *The Sacrificial Body*, 21.

emblems, because the book may not have a true beginning and an end, only a seeming one.¹⁵⁰

What is typical for Renaissance alchemical imagery in *Atalanta* is the widely ranging anthropomorphic illustration (only nine emblems lack the company of humans); there are even suggested processes of a higher level of abstraction. The presence of human images as mediators for non-human processes can be understood as metaphors and allegories or, in contrast, in terms of identity – there is no difference between alchemical processes and human existence: to look at nature or at human life has the same function as understanding an alchemical principle; a wise alchemist will learn from both. Also, the abundance of human associations with alchemical processes is, as Barbara Obrist has stressed,¹⁵¹ something specific for Renaissance alchemical illustrations, being, in a way, in contrast with medieval imagery that displayed the life and birth of metals in the womb of the earth.

The discourses

The discourses are unusual for an emblem book. They are filled with many references to important authorities on alchemy and they provide explanation for the content of the epigrams. For this reason, two pages are allocated to each of them, while for one musical score and emblem one page each is sufficient; they seem to be of secondary importance in the economy of the book. These two pages of text that are allotted to each emblem may be a sign of the mannerism which dominated the seventeenth century, reflecting Maier's desire from the frontispiece of the book to stimulate all the senses.

For this reason, I would argue, the quantitative richness of the text may be a testimony for the author's desire to exhaust not only all the possibilities of knowledge through the senses, but also all meanings expressed in the images. The discourses seem to be dictionary articles of alchemical themes, with historical references, but even so they are filled with obscure passages. Maier's argument could be decoded clearly through the discourses, but even so they do not seem to follow a coherent order and may be easily interchanged with regards to their places in the book.

¹⁵⁰ An exhibition of the book (2005 by Daniel E. Kelm) was made by presenting the book as a Möbius band, with only the illustrations. In the description provided on the artist's site, it is asserted that: "The book is constructed as a Möbius strip, a circular band with a half twist that allows the viewer/reader to see all the illustrations on both sides by simply passing the images through her/his hands one by one without needing to turn it over."

(http://www.smith.edu/artmuseum/exhibitions/kelm/book_neo_emblemata_nova.htm, 05/07/2009)

The role of music is contemplative and not a *Deckname* for laboratory work, as Principe and Newman think regarding the obscure language and images of alchemy; it is spiritual and artistic. In *Atalanta*'s iconology the spiritual and contemplative function is related to the alchemist viewer, because "there is little sign of the laboratory or workshop"¹⁵² in the book. And as Tilton observed,

in Maier's alchemical works *Decknamen* refer not only to chemical processes narrowly conceived in the manner of Principe and Newman, but also to a process of personal transmutation from a base, earthly state into 'a more noble, more spiritual, more moral, or more divine state' – i.e. a 'spiritual alchemy'.¹⁵³

Thus, the weight of *Atalanta* consists of myth – music – image (strongly and intimately interconnected). The image (as a prototype expressing mythical content, because of its allegories) and the methodology for studying alchemical iconography is the topic of the following chapter.

¹⁵¹ Barbara Obrist, "Visualization in Medieval Alchemy," *Hyle* 9, No. 2 (2003), 131-170 (hereafter: Obrist, "Visualization in Medieval Alchemy").

¹⁵² Pamela H Smith, book review of the German reprint of *Atalanta*: "Thomas Hofmeier. *Michael Maiers Chymisches Cabinet. Atalanta fugiens deutsch nach der Ausgabe von 1708*, Berlin and Basel, Thurneysser, 2007," *Medical History* 53, No. 1 (2009): 141–142.

¹⁵³ Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 234.

CHAPTER III. THE POWER OF THE IMAGE

The scientific study of images is effortless
compared with the study of books.¹⁵⁴

1. Image functions

There is a strong relation among spiritual alchemy, myth, and image in *Atalanta*. But alchemical images are not ordinary images. An image usually illustrates or reflects a thing as a copy that, nevertheless, must be as faithful as possible to its prototype. The ideal case is the picture made with the help of a camera, when the resulting image is almost an identical copy of the reality, up to the point when one may have paintings that partially copy or suggest reality or even try replacing reality. An image may also meet a wide range of expectations, from mere identity with the rendered reality up to non-identity, or even a substitute for reality.

Alchemical imagery is somewhere in the middle: it may use the narrative character of reality and at the same time its target goes beyond that. Alchemical images are *analogies* of other realities. An analogy is a substitute, a proposal for an alternative way of conveying meaning, something that is not the object of representation, but is one of the means of representation from a large possible palette of items. Thus, one can represent an alchemical “reality”, such as that of *coniunctio*, through different types of analogies: with human marriage, with an androgen or the sun and the moon, etc. Even if a general survey of alchemy images might prove to reveal a certain liberty of expression, alchemical imagery obeys its own rules of representation. The central rule for conveying such a visual representation is that an alchemical image, unlike writing, its corollary, must articulate easily and instantaneously a variety of meanings that encompass different layers of reality.

One of the most important issues in alchemy is its abundance of symbols that are indeed *Decknames*,¹⁵⁵ and often have an ambivalent character: simple signs and yet

¹⁵⁴ A remark of the preeminent historian of medieval literature, Robert Curtius quoted by E. H. Gombrich, *The Uses of Images. Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication* (London: Phaidon 1994), 265.

¹⁵⁵ In this respect Newman tries to say that all symbols are simple signs as they are used in today's chemistry, *Decknames* being “cover names” for “mineral substances” used by alchemists, the conclusion underlying distinction and opposition or laboratory reality or Jungian symbols. See William R. Newman, “‘Decknamen or pseudochemical language?’ Eirenaeus Philalethes and Carl Jung,” *Revue d'histoire des sciences*, 49 (1996), 159–88.

not only conventional signs, but also “transcendental” signs that have an esoteric meaning in themselves. For Mayer, working on this matter is at the same time working on the meaning of symbols. One cannot make a clear distinction in the work of alchemists between matter and what seems not to be part of matter concerning esoteric knowledge.

In alchemical iconography one may decode the presence of a discourse that tries to build suggestions, allegories, metaphors, symbols, and, ultimately, signs. These results, with which one may be familiar especially as literary constructions, all indicate different levels of reading images; e.g., one can represent a process through a metaphor or a symbol.

Relating to the use of figurative categories in Renaissance alchemy, I took into consideration what would be appropriate for Maier’s book; iconography uses a symbolic language that illustrates material and spiritual realities in a metaphorical way (or, better said, physical and metaphysical realities). The most used terms concerning alchemical imagery are allegory and symbol, both of them being defined together, one related to the other. It is considered that the symbol is used “to explore the unknown and – paradoxically – to communicate with the incommunicable, the partial discovery of these unfathomable truths being achieved through symbols.”¹⁵⁶ Regarding allegory, as a representation through another reality of an idea (anthropomorphic allegories in Maier’s case), it is considered to create a space between an allegory and an idea; this is why it is considered that “allegorical images neither symbolize nor represent the Platonic idea.”¹⁵⁷ Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* is one of the best examples for the Renaissance use of allegory as a didactic function.¹⁵⁸ His book has also been used also as a guide to the symbolism in emblem books. In the case of symbol, one may talk about the *symbolic function* that can be split up into both its real and its symbolic components. First, one finds the object in itself, in isolation; second, one finds the object linked to its utilitarian function, to its concrete or factual reality.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Routledge, 1993), xl (hereafter: Cirlot, *A Dictionary*).

¹⁵⁷ E. H. Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 11 (1948), 180 (hereafter: Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae”). The article was republished in Id., “Icones Symbolicae. Philosophies of Symbolism and their Bearing on Art” in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance II* (London: Phaidon, 1972), 123-95 (hereafter: Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae. Philosophies of Symbolism”). For this methodological chapter I used especially the first version, which is a synthesis of Gombrich’s ideas that were developed later in the amplified version issued in 1972. For more specific information I used also the second version.

¹⁵⁸ Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae. Philosophies of Symbolism,” 139-145.

¹⁵⁹ Cirlot, *A Dictionary*, xxxvi-xxxvii.

One may also speak of symbolic analogy that in alchemy obeys the principles enunciated in *Tabula Smaragdina*, which can be synthesized in the following manner:

- (i) the common source of both worlds;
- (ii) the influence of the psychic upon the physical world;
- (iii) the influence of the physical world upon the spiritual.¹⁶⁰

Due to the multitude of purposes for which the symbol is used, a rigorous and exhaustive definition of it is hard to grasp. In alchemy, for example, the King stands for the masculine principle, gold, sulphur, stone, spirit, and other things. The vessel can be a green lion, grave, a tomb, a jail, a chicken house, a simple room, even as the *lapis*, etc., while in the case of *coniunctio* the vessel can be a bed or a nest, an egg or a womb, etc. The idea is “to embody multiple meanings so that they could be apprehended at once.”¹⁶¹ The symbol is “by nature” and “essential” rather than by “convention”¹⁶² and “it is not we who select and use symbols or communication – it is the Divine which expresses itself in the hieroglyph of sensible things.”¹⁶³ This, as Gombrich suggested, will create confusion between symbol and referent, a semantic confusion that should be kept in mind when one studies alchemical iconography.

Alchemical illustrations are wide open to several types of interpretation. An important remark made by the historian of science, Sherwood F. Taylor, in a book centered on the involvement of alchemy in the development of chemistry asserts that “we may think that the alchemical picture was a truer expression of what alchemy was about than the alchemical book or recipe.”¹⁶⁴ And, Taylor added, “The picture gave the inwardness of the process, expressing the meaning it had for the alchemist in terms that touched the deepest things in man.”¹⁶⁵ And “the problem of interpretation, though, does not become easier considering the fact that the alchemical tradition in both manuscripts

¹⁶⁰ Cirlot, *A Dictionary*, xxxix.

¹⁶¹ Adrian Johns, “The Physiology of Reading” in Marina Frasca-Spada and Nicholas Jardine, *Books and the Sciences in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 296.

¹⁶² Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae,” 180; Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae*. Philosophies of Symbolism,” 159.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry* (London: William Heinemann, 1951), 158.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 158-159.

and printed book is extremely image-centered.”¹⁶⁶ One could justly say that alchemical thinking is *thinking in images*, but it depends on the existence of the book.¹⁶⁷

The scholarly literature on the systematic study of alchemical iconography uses tools borrowed especially from art history and semiotics for analyzing images. In my research I take into consideration the distinction made by Mino Gabriele¹⁶⁸ among alchemical images:

1. allegorical images with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements;
2. secret language imagery, illustrated by geometrical figures as part of cryptographic and hieroglyphic chippers;
3. illustrations of laboratory work.

Another type of analysis is made by Urszula Szulakowska, emphasizing the role of the semiotic realities involved in alchemical illustrations. Following the idea of Jonathan Goldberg, Szulakowska observes that “the stylistic conflict between naturalism and abstraction in an image produces an ambiguous space.”¹⁶⁹ Using also the semiotic distinctions of Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914)¹⁷⁰ – indexical sign (as natural) as distinct from symbol (as arbitrary) and icon (“a sign which stays for something merely because it resembles it”¹⁷¹) – Szulakowska concludes that seems initially that most alchemical visual signs should be termed “iconic,” since they signify irrational concepts such as the “union of opposites.”¹⁷²

In the case of *Atlanta*, “this is not applicable;” here, the imagery is indexical: “the realistic aesthetic of the Renaissance artist has started to transform an iconic

¹⁶⁶ Jan Backlund and Jacob Wamberg, “Introduction,” in *Art and Alchemy*, ed. Jacob Wamberg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 12.

¹⁶⁷ With a few exceptions (i.e., metals, pottery, etc.), alchemical imagery is related to the existence of the book. *Mutus liber*, a book with only images, is nevertheless a book. It is difficult to say if the *Ripley scroll* can be seen as an alchemical “book.” One of the exceptions to alchemical imagery outside of books is the alchemical gate in the Piazza Vittorio in Rome. See Pietro Bornia, *La Porta Magica di Roma. Studio Storico* (Genova: Phoenix, 1983). It should be noted that, as far as I know, alchemical pottery did not use image decorations. One of the answers could be that the shape of the pottery itself was important (e.g., a text of Albertus Magnus emphasizes that the vessel must “reduplicate natural, subterranean conditions under which metals are generated,” see Obrist, “Visualization in Medieval Alchemy”). The stress on the *shape* of pottery (that has some connection in Arabic alchemy with the shape of Egyptians hieroglyphs) was enough, the shape was an “image” in itself; in a way, the stress on image in Renaissance can be seen as a consequence of the importance of the form of pottery.

¹⁶⁸ Mino Gabriele, *Alchimia e iconologia* (Udine: Forum, 1997), 28.

¹⁶⁹ Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 1. Also see Szönyi, “Occult Semiotics and Iconology,” 314.

¹⁷⁰ Pierce developed a different typology concerning the classes of signs, one of them, which is involved by Szulakowska, is one of the most known (initially launched in 1867 and revised several times): *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*. Each of them calls attention to the diverse manners in which the sign refers to its object: the *icon* (named also likeness) is a sign that refers to the object by a quality of its own; the *index* by a real relation to its object; the *symbol* refers to its object by virtue of interpreting it as such.

¹⁷¹ Pierce’s definition quoted by Szönyi in “Occult Semiotics and Iconology,” 314.

signifier into an index.”¹⁷³ And “the index is not a simulacrum ‘more real than real’,” it is adjusted of the world, “a deliberately composed ambiguity concealing the distinction between reality and artifice.”¹⁷⁴

Because of the nature of alchemical imagery, theories that are on the border of positive research, and speculation, as the Neo-Platonic symbol theory of the art historian E. H. Gombrich, fit the methodology of my study. In alchemical iconography signs are not conventional signs. A visual image has two functions: representation – an object from physical reality, and symbolization – an idea, for example, a lion will symbolize Courage (Panofsky),¹⁷⁵ or, using another terminology, “iconic signs” and “post-language symbols” (Charles Morris).¹⁷⁶ If in the case of representation of objects the process of symbolization is relatively simple, when it comes to *symbolizing* an idea, the situation is more complex. Gombrich insists that “we may be prepared to grant the possibility to another kind of symbolism, not conventional but private, through which an image can become the expression of the artist’s conscious or unconscious mind.”¹⁷⁷

One can have three sources of imagery: *experience* (the illustration is an imitation), *convention* (for example, an allegory that is accepted as a way of “materialization”), and *expression* (individual creation) (see Table 1). These three functions can be linked with three traditions: *didactic* (the expressing of an idea), *revelative* (the image has a peculiar power to express intuitive and metaphysical ideas), and *magic* (the power to influence the reality).

For this study it is important to retain the idea that even if a symbol is only a convention for linguistics, for the history of religion the symbol has a deep relation with the profound structures of human culture and, beyond that, it shares a special relation with reality. Gombrich brings into the discussion the magical practice where, for example, the “fetish” not only “symbolizes” fertility but “has” it, in order to show that sometimes the distinction between to represent and to symbolize “no longer holds.”¹⁷⁸

The Neo-Platonic understanding of the status of the image is the conception that “gains new importance in Renaissance” and “increased rather than obviated the

¹⁷² Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 2.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷⁵ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, reference from Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae,” 164.

¹⁷⁶ Charles Morris, *Signs, Language and Behavior*, Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae,” 164.

¹⁷⁷ Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae,” 165.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

ambiguities involved.”¹⁷⁹ Gombrich notes that the Neo-Platonic conception supposes an “inherent and essential symbolism” that pervaded “the whole order of things” in order to offer “a key to the whole universe.” And “it is here that the doctrine of symbolism links up with the doctrine of esoteric tradition.”¹⁸⁰

EXPERIENCE	TRADITION	EXPRESSION
representation of an object	representation of an idea — allegory	private symbolism — the artist's conscious/unconscious mind

Table 1. Gombrich’s typology of symbolic images¹⁸¹

Consequently, symbols are not chosen arbitrarily, “they based them on their insight into the structure of the universe.”¹⁸² “The sacred symbols of the esoteric tradition which embody the true nature and essence of concepts contain wisdom, as it were, in highly concentrated form,”¹⁸³ and, very importantly, “their interpretation in itself must be left to inspiration and intuition.”¹⁸⁴ It is not only the difference between representation and symbolization which is eradicated, but “even the distinction between the symbol and what it symbolizes.”¹⁸⁵

Central for my research is the distinction between didactic and revelative images to be found in Gombrich’s typology. He identifies three kinds of images – images with a *didactic*, *revelative* or *magic* character. I will argue that in the case of Maier, as in the case of alchemy, one may speak of the *revelative image* and *didactic image*.¹⁸⁶

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 166.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 168.

¹⁸¹ György E. Szőnyi, “The Powerful Image: Towards a Typology of Occult Symbolism,” In György E. Szőnyi (ed.), *Iconography East & West*, Symbola & Emblemata 7, (Leiden: J. Brill, 1996), 252 (hereafter: Szőnyi, “The Powerful Image”).

¹⁸² Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae*,” 170.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 171-172.

¹⁸⁴ Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae*. Philosophies of Symbolism,” 159.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 176. An important remark is made by Goethe, who had a serious interest in alchemy (“a thing of the present, not for the past”), reading from Basil Valentine, Paracelsus, van Helmont, which illustrated the same Neo-Platonic conception specific for the early modern period. He said: the symbol “is the thing without being the thing, and yet the thing: an image concentrated in the mirror of the mind and yet identical with the object.” And Goethe did not stop here with his remark; he made a value judgment in the pure Romantic spirit, saying: “how inferior is allegory by comparison.” Here, through allegory one should understand the didacticism of the Aristotelian understanding of image. Goethe, *Wisdom and Experience*, tr. and ed. by Hermann J. Weigand (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2007), 259.

¹⁸⁶ The terminology has been adopted and used by György E. Szőnyi in several studies such as: “The Powerful Image;” “Architectural Symbolism and Fantasy Landscapes in Alchemical and Occult

DIDACTIC	REVELATIVE	MAGIC
metaphor the Aristotelian tradition	symbolic-intuitive the Platonic tradition	“powerful” esoteric sign the hermetic-occult tradition

Table. 2. Gombrich’s division: traditions of interpreting images divided according to their function¹⁸⁷

The didactic approach to the symbol in the Aristotelian tradition is contrasted with the Neo-Platonic understanding of the use of the symbol. The Neo-Platonists were conscious of the insufficiency of discursive words in comparison to the “direct apprehension of truth” of the mystic vision.¹⁸⁸ Gombrich viewed in Aristotelians the philosophical branch that glorified “the powers of language.”

2. The Renaissance and the act of seeing

Atalanta fugiens, hoc est, emblemata nova Maier informs us from the very beginning. The *Emblematum liber* by Alciatus, published in 1531, is unanimously considered as the birth of the visual genre of emblems. An emblem consists in a rather peculiar composition made up of a motto (*sententia* or *inscriptio*), an image (*eikon* or *pictura*), and an epigram (*subscription*, *elogium*, *descriptio* or *explicatio*), conceived as an answer to the motto. Each emblem is a symbol and incorporates other symbols. Here

Discourse: Revelatory Images,” in *Emblems and Alchemy*, ed. Alison Adams and Stanton J. Linden (Glasgow: Glasgow Emblem Studies, 1998), 49-69 (hereafter: Szőnyi, “Architectural Symbolism”); “Occult Semiotics and Iconology,” 301-323. He underlines that “didactic (Aristotelian) and revelational (Platonic) functions of images were highly relevant and widely exploited in the pragmatics of occult symbolization.” (“Occult Semiotics and Iconology,” 318).

¹⁸⁷ Szőnyi, “The Powerful Image,” 252.

¹⁸⁸ Gombrich’s New-Platonic theory and Ficino’s conception about the place of image meet very well some remarks of Jung who said that “the psyche consists essentially of images.” And he added: “It is a series of images in the truest sense, not an accidental juxtaposition or sequence, but a structure that is throughout full of meaning and purpose; it is a ‘picturing’ of vital activities.” (Jung, “Spirit and Life” in *CW 8, The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 325.) Another issue that can strongly link Gombrich’s observations with Jung’s analytics is to be found in a remark of Gombrich, who asks: “have these esoteric doctrines more than a certain curiosity value?” (Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae,” 182). Gombrich suggests independently of Jung (but very close to his ideas) or any occult influence from Victorian occultism, that “in our dreams we all make no difference between the metaphorical and the literal, between symbol and reality. In the dark recesses of our mind we all believe in image magic.” Because of the same reasoning and observation, Jung linked alchemical imagery with dream activity. In dreams, the reality of the semantic triangle is annihilated and the symbol is itself, and intimate for the psyche. Consequently, the symbol becomes a mirror for the deep structure of psyche. Gombrich, in the revised

I take into account the way in which Claude Mignault, the French commentator on Alciato in 1577, understood the *symbolum* and its relation with the emblem: “a symbol is that by which we infer and recognize something” (*aliquid coniectamus et cognoscimus*), and also the suggestion of Abraham Fraunce¹⁸⁹ that a *symbolum* is a *synecdoche*.¹⁹⁰ In a chapter dedicated to the different meanings of symbols in emblematic books, entitled “The Philosophy of Symbols,” Michael Bath launched the idea that “sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers developed their own continuing discussion of the place of the emblem within the wider economy of symbols.”¹⁹¹ Here Bath, commenting on Abraham Fraunce’s *De symbolis, Emblematicus et Hieroglyphicis* and *Symbolicae Philosophiae Liber Quartus et Ultimus* considers that “*symbolum* is being used as a synonym for *impresa*” (*Et Symbolorum, quae ab Italis Impresas nominator*). Fraunce, remarks Bath, uses the term *symbolum*

not just as a sign by which something is concealed (*quo aliud occultator*), but as the specific term for what the Italians call *impresa*, and English and French call *devise*, he is using the genus for the species (*genus pro specis ponimus*). Moreover, he says that this usage is an example of both *catachresis* and *synecdoche*.¹⁹²

Claude Mignault, who wrote a commentary¹⁹³ on Alciato’s Emblems in 1571, assumed that the emblem is almost like an enigma, and one can say the same thing about many of Maier’s emblems, namely, that they are very obscure, even more than the enigmatic additional discourse.¹⁹⁴

Even by observing the title of the text – *Discourse* – one could suggest that the text is a description (a discourse about what is “announced” in the emblem as a title for

version of his article, pointed that the Neo-Platonic tradition has a link to the writings of Jung (Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae. Philosophies of Symbolism*,” 190).

¹⁸⁹ Michael Bath, *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture* (London: Longman, 1994), 144 (hereafter: Bath, *Speaking*).

¹⁹⁰ *Pars pro toto* or *Totum pro parte*.

¹⁹¹ Bath, *Speaking*, 130.

¹⁹² Ibid., 144. *Catachresis* from Greek *κατάχρησις*, “the incorrect or improper use of a word.” It was specific to Baroque literature and for surrealism and dada.

¹⁹³ Claude Mignault was a professional jurist, but in his commentary he tried to make a scholarly discussion. He wrote perhaps one of the first studies that sees the emblem books as an object worthy of “scientific” research.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Daly made a synthesis of the questions that are important in general for “a systematic theory of the emblem:” “1. What are the content and origin of the pictura; what is its relation to reality, if any? 2. What are the content, origin and purpose of the inscriptio and subscriptio? 3. What functional relationship exists between pictura and scriptura, i.e., between thing (pictured) and meaning (expressed in words)? How is the synthesis effected? 4. What is the overriding purpose of the emblem book?” (Peter Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem. Structural Parallels between the Emblem and Literature in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 7-8. However, Daly pointed the different approach of Maier to the emblem in his *Atalanta*, in comparison with Alciato’s *Emblematum liber* (Ibid., 4).

the discursive part) of the structure of the emblem, and its function is to confer a narration of the moment immortalized in the emblem. The text is an explanation of the image. The image is part of the emblem, and the structure of emblems presupposes a dialectic and dynamic between image and text according to the semantic triangle: *motto* – *picture* – *epigram*.¹⁹⁵

The Renaissance marks the climax of image representation in alchemy, a phenomenon that could be ascribed to the generally increasing interest in visual arts. If in the arts the aesthetic side is more important and typical for the spirit of the Renaissance, in the case of alchemy a metaphysical dimension tended to occupy the central role in constructing alchemical imagery. In the late fifteenth century full and complex images appear instead of the primitive, simplistic visual shapes that defined medieval alchemy.¹⁹⁶

Pictorial stories in alchemy have the particular role of making visible what is not visible, a function frequently present in medieval times: the image must describe and help the *reader*.¹⁹⁷ Even in the case of images, the activity of reading is in a way more important than the activity of seeing, which means: *reading images*.¹⁹⁸ One detail may plead for iconoclasm or iconolatry.¹⁹⁹ Scholastic culture accentuated the force of

¹⁹⁵ If one uses another terminology (*inscriptio* – *pictura* – *subscriptio*) one can see more clearly that the image is situated in the middle, better said, in the center, between two kinds of *scriptio*. William S. Heackscher and Karl-August Wirth provide an analysis of this triadic relationship in an important article on emblems in the *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 5 (Stuttgart: Alfred Druckenmüller Verlag, 1967), 153. Their vision is that the image is a kind of enigma that is announced in the motto (*Wahlspruch*) and is solved in the epigram (*erklärender Text*). In their classification in the *Reallexikon* they situated the *Atalanta fugiens* in the didactic category (other categories being *Heroic* and *Moral-ethics*) and under it in the subcategory *Encyclopedia* (three other types: *Astronomy*, *Alchemy*, and *Music*).

¹⁹⁶ See Obrist, *Le Debuts*, passim.

¹⁹⁷ The famous “per visibilia ad invisibilia” of the New Testament, which refers to the visible world in its correspondence with the transcendent world, was translated later - especially in the Renaissance - to picture (*visible image*) that facilitates the access to esthetic experiences.

¹⁹⁸ Elizabeth Sears, ““Reading” Images,” in *Reading Medieval Images. The Art Historian and the Object*, ed. Elizabeth Sears and Thelma K. Thomas, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 1-7.

¹⁹⁹ Concerning the discourses on the function of images in the Middle Ages see Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, J. Harrell, Cyril Barrett, D. Petsch, *History of Aesthetics: Medieval Aesthetics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006). One of the examples for the didactic character of images represented by the statement of Honorius of Autun (d. c. 1151) in *Gemma animae* I, c. 132: *Ob tres autem causas fit picture: primo quia est laicorum litteratura; secundo, ut domus tali decore ornatur; tertio, ut priorum vita in memoriam revocetur* (Painting arises from three causes: first, because it is the literature of uneducated men; secondly, in order to adorn the house; and thirdly, in order to recall to mind the lives of those who have gone before). An example for the power of images in spite of writing is found in liturgical authors such as Guillaume Durand (c. 1230–1296) who asserts in *Rationale Divinorum officiorum*, I, 3, 4 that *Pictura namque plus videtur movere animum quam scriptura... Hinc etiam est in ecclesia non tantam reverentiam exhibemus libris, quantam imaginibus et picturis* (For the painting seems to move the mind more powerfully than writing... This is why, in churches, we do not accord so much veneration to books as to pictures and paintings), *ibid.* Both Honorius of Autun and Guillaume Durand show the ambivalence in the Western Middle Ages regarding the role of images: a common role, and an important and revelatory role.

writing, but, while it underlined the “distance” from image, it also emphasized its importance for illiterate people, also offering them the opportunity to “read” through images. Renaissance alchemy inherited the idea of the importance of the image in spite of text with a kind of illuminated tendency in the age of printing. The illuminating artist was replaced by the Renaissance engraver. Alchemical representations acquired a different role than the somehow general role of images in other types of books. These could be defined as *revelatory* pictures about one central idea of alchemy, as, for example, that of transformation and *coniunctio*. It is said that “the alchemists reversed the traditional theory of knowledge and image,”²⁰⁰ a theory that was based on the virtue of word and language.²⁰¹

The use of images in alchemy as the highest possible way of indicating metaphysical and physical realities may be rooted in Ficino’s understanding of the power of the image. Ficino and the alchemists of his epoch seemed to think in the same way in some respects concerning the place of the image. For Ficino, the word and, a surprising second phenomenon, music, are assimilated by image and communicated with the soul through images. When speaking about the music of the spheres, “Ficino believed that the echoes of these divine musics were perceived by the ears in the form of images.”²⁰² This is the power of the image that transcends word and sound together. Translating Ficino’s hierarchy in *Atalanta*, one can see the image placed in the center between sound/music and word/writing. More than that, in *Atalanta*, the image can compete with music and not with the word. The competition may be described as between a Pythagorean type of conception, which talks about the superiority of music because of its intimate numerical proportions, and Ficino’s assertion on the power of image that favors the act of seeing; both of them, compared to the word, can express ideas in a way that the word fails to, with the exception of poetry, which operates with images. Maier, in *Poeta Laureate*, was aware of that, and he did not use image, music, and poetry for only alchemical and magical reasons, but because he was also a poet.

Using the distinction offered by Gombrich, one can say that the Middle Ages accentuated the didactic character of the image while in the Renaissance the image

²⁰⁰ Paul Kugler, “Psychic Imaging: a Bridge between Subject and Object” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jung*, ed. Polly Young-Eisendrath and Terence Dawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 81 (hereafter: Kugler, “Psychic Imaging”).

²⁰¹ In this regard Thomas Mitchell notices: “The dialectic of word and image seems to be constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself,” see Thomas W.J. Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 43. Therefore, it depends where the centre of the weight is.

became a way of thinking which aimed to transcend the discursive character of rationality. An increasing development of images with revelatory virtues occurred, especially in esoteric and magical literature. This observation can also be found in a remark of Obrist who, without using Gombrich as reference, arrives at the same conclusions when speaking about alchemical documents from the Late Middle Ages: “Unlike the didactically oriented documents, they continued to carry the body of scholastic Aristotelian natural philosophy along with tenets of the neo-Platonic philosophical tradition regarding the cognitive function of visual figures.”²⁰³

In this framework, the myth of Atalanta and Hippomenes, using a Renaissance Neo-Platonic conception, became “not only a mine of edifying metaphors,” but “in fact another form of revelation,” because the myths “must yield up the same meaning as the contemplation of nature.”²⁰⁴ Maier’s book is a late consequence of Florentine Neo-Platonic thinking, a thinking which stressed that “knowledge through symbols is higher knowledge” and those *seeing* “the truth can no longer err.”²⁰⁵ Thus, the Neo-platonic conception about the function of image could be linked with what Gareth Roberts observed: “alchemy may be seen as articulating quite powerfully two myths cherished or longed for in western European culture: the unity of knowledge and the succession of knowledge.”²⁰⁶

The unity of knowledge, which can be seen in “the unity of one work, one vessel and one Stone,” is also provided by the image, especially in its revelative character. One should presuppose that there are symbols and signs illustrated with intention, which means that there is logic even in the decorative elements of a picture.

The analysis of images should be made through its instruments and not at the same level with the analysis of the text. In this regard, one has to consider that an “unsatisfactory aspect of current alchemical research is that scholars use the same type

²⁰² Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance*, 120.

²⁰³ Obrist, “Visualization in Medieval Alchemy,” 163.

²⁰⁴ Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae,” 169.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 174. This is about a special character of the faculty of seeing; it is not what you see, but what should be seen. Gombrich said that, later, academic classicism preserved some tenets of “the esoteric view of the visual symbol in a strangely watered-down form.” (ibid., 186-187), putting the accent on “not crude reality but the Platonic idea behind it.”

²⁰⁶ Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books: From Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London: The British Library, 1994), 92-93 (hereafter: Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy*). Roberts, using an illustration from Maier’ *Symbola Aurea Mensae* (1617), stressed that here the fundamental dual character of alchemical discourse that is both spiritual and concrete is suggested (Appendix, ill. no.11).

of analysis for both visual imagery and written text.”²⁰⁷ Moreover, “an additional semiotic difference between visual and literary texts is that visual imagery may be symbolic, iconic or indexical, but most literary texts can only be symbolic.”²⁰⁸

Considering that nothing is neutral in *Atalanta*’s iconography, I will describe what is seen, and after that make an interpretation of the two planes (the front and the background) of the picture, trying to bring into discussion the possible layers of meaning and their relevance within the contexts of spiritual alchemy and revelative imagery. My analysis focuses especially on the illustration as the core of the emblem, precisely on the emblematic iconography. I will demonstrate that *Atalanta* was not conceived as a book adorned with illustrated epigrams, but rather as a book with explicit discourses for illustrations. Although the function of emblem books is still a debated issue, in the case of *Atalanta* my hypothesis is that the illustrations are not simple pictures, but they are closer to the function of the image in hermetical or magical books like Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica* or Agrippa’s *De occulta philosophia libri tres*.



Atalanta fugiens is not an emblem book, but a book with emblems and discourses. In consequence, while the text should be understood as an explanation for the images, the images can be considered clues to the obscurity of the text. Maier himself called his explanations discourses, that means he understood that there is a kind of antithesis between the iconography and the discourses, the latter being the explanation which gravitates around the images.

At this point, I would like to formulate the hypothesis that the iconography has a non-discursive function as opposed to the character of the text, which is par excellence discursive (with the exception of the epigram, which through its poetic character creates a non-discursive state of mind and thus creates a kind of image). One can also find images with discursive, that means didactic, functions in Maier’s *Atlanta* – this discursive/didactic character is particularly evident in contrast to the abstract, non-narrative imagery.

Although I do not use the Jungian theory on alchemy in its attempt to find a deep and unconscious structure of the psyche revealed in *Atalanta*’s iconography, I take into account the remarks of Jung on images and the idea that if for an alchemist the image was more than a simple illustration, then it was, as Gombrich insisted, part of

²⁰⁷ Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 3.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

“divine” knowledge. For Jung, the image is “the mediator between subject and object”,²⁰⁹ and “a bridge between ideas and things.”²¹⁰ Still more important is that “what the image signifies cannot precisely be determined, either by appeal to a difference or universal.”²¹¹ In this respect, iconography is a way of thinking, an “imagistic” thinking that competes and completes the discursive thinking through words.

For the analysis of *Atalanta*, a classification under the following distinctions can be applied (the Roman numbers refer to the emblems):

- static (XXX) and dynamic images (XVIII);
- Asian (XXV) and Attic rhetoric (XXI);
- allegorical (XXX) and symbolic (XXI);
- didactic (XI) and revelative (XXI).

My purpose is to see if, with the conceptual tools formulated by Gombrich, alchemical imagery obeys either a didactic intention or whether it has a revelative function specific for early seventeenth century. Concentrating on the *coincidentia oppositorum* I want to find out how this theme was represented in *Atalanta*, through an Aristotelian didactic function of symbol or as Neo-Platonic icon of a higher level of knowledge.²¹²

²⁰⁹ Kugler, “Psychic Imaging,” 89.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² The specific historical questions raised by *Atalanta* are thoroughly discussed by Pamela H Smith. She remarks: “One wants to know more—if such can be known—about the collaboration between Maier and the engraver Matthaus Merian. Was it the printer, Johann Theodor de Bry, who brought the two men together or did they come to him? How much did the book sell for at the Frankfurt fair? In short, how did Maier, Merian, and de Bry conceive of this work—primarily as a work of alchemy, as an emblem-book, or as a picture book?” Smith, “Thomas Hofmeier. Michael Maiers Chymisches Cabinet,” 142.

CHAPTER IV. COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM

Each of us, then, is but a tally of a man, since every one shows like a flat-fish the traces of having been sliced in two; and each is ever searching for the tally that will fit him.²¹³

I am entirely unable to understand all this...²¹⁴

As the study of all the images would require a larger research, I chose as a criterion a representative for selection the theme of *coincidentia oppositorum*, which seems to be close to a revelative function.

One of the recurrent premises in alchemy is that the union of contraries is possible and that it comprises an authentic reality. It is symbolized, among other things, by the image of the philosophical egg, the androgen, the marriage between sun and moon, brother and sister, or king and queen, the absolute stage of the alchemical effort, as the prototype for the union of opposites. Images that have representations of the alchemical *coincidentia oppositorum*²¹⁵ as the central theme aim to depict something that is considered to be abstract in a narrative and pictorial way.

The specific and subsequent guiding questions for this chapter on reading Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* are as follows:

- How was the discourse about the *conincidentia oppositorum* constructed and illustrated in the emblems?
- How can the layers of discourse decode the spiritual component of alchemy? What does Maier offer as original and how does he preserve alchemical themes?
- Can one recognize from the visual proofs how an alchemist perceived his images?
- What kind of meanings could the alchemist find in the symbols?
- Therefore, how can one understand these images in themselves?
- Can they "talk" without the help of the text?
- Are they illustrations for a book that happened to be an alchemical one or are they "aesthetical hieroglyphs" with a revelative function?
- How can one understand them in the economy of a hermetic text?

²¹³ Plato, *Symposium*, tr. Harold N. Fowler (London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 191d-e.

²¹⁴ Yates concerning the meaning of emblem VIII in *Atalanta (The Rosicrucian Enlightenment)*, 115).

²¹⁵ For more on *coincidentia oppositorum* see Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 67-82; Mircea Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*

Coincidentia oppositorum corresponds to a mythical pattern that is used especially in mystical language to express the ultimate reality. This oxymoronic term was attributed to Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440), who used it for defining God being, as Ernst Cassirer emphasized, “nothing but the specific expression of the central intellectual problem of the Renaissance.”²¹⁶ However, this theme goes “well beyond Renaissance predilections.”²¹⁷ Nicholas of Cusa had predecessors in authors such as Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart, and it was a manner to expound the “contradiction” of metaphysical realities, the possibility of neutralization, a mystical union between separated things, etc. The same situation can be found in the hermetic tradition: “In the extensive esoteric-hermetic literature of all ages the union was sought in the reconciliation of opposites.”²¹⁸ More than that, “much of this literature concentrates on the philosophical stone (*lapis philosophorum*) and the methods of its production.”²¹⁹ In alchemy, beyond the fact that *coincidentia oppositorum* means the realization of the *opus*, the finding of the philosophical stone, it also stands for *coniunctio*, situated between *separatio* and *fermentatio* (alchemical stages). It had synonyms in terms as: *mysterium coniunctionis*, *androgyny*, *aqua vitae* (i.e, fire-water), etc. In essence, in Cusanus’ conception of *coincidentia oppositorum*, “we have here a rendering of the Neo-Platonic conception of One in a new interpretation. The One is the ultimate source and origin of everything.”²²⁰

One can get a clearer grasp of how abstract thinking made its way to concrete representations through, for example, the medieval interest in a concept such as *quadratura circuli*.²²¹ But if for medieval times this can be seen as an isolated case, in the Renaissance it became rather a common fact. Eco underlines this difference well, considering that:

Facing the possibility, displayed by a text, of eliciting infinite or indefinite interpretations, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance reacted

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 419-429; also, as one of the most important studies on the subject, Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*.

²¹⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2000), 35.

²¹⁷ Thomas Steven Molnar, *God and the Knowledge of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 87 (hereafter: Molnar, *God and the Knowledge*).

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Ivor Leclerc, *The Nature of Physical Existence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 74.

²²¹ This recurrent theme in medieval thought shows that such a metaphysical problem was perceived as a real thing, difficult to understand but, nevertheless with virtual representations in the concrete world. See more in Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 124, 167. Also, one of the books of Maier points to this problem: *De Circulo Physico Quadrato* (1616).

with two different hermeneutic options. Medieval interpreters looked for a plurality of senses without refusing a sort of identity principle (a text cannot support contradictory interpretations), whereas the symbolists of the Renaissance, following the idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, defined the ideal text as that which allows the most contradictory readings.²²²

In this chapter I will try to explain the constructions of emblems in *Atalanta* that are generally representative for the symbolic destruction of philosophical unity or the relations that lead to the unity of opposite principles.

In 1609, Emperor Rudolf II bestowed on Maier the title of Imperial Count Palatine (*Pfalzgraf*), connected with receiving heraldic insignia.²²³ Maier requested specific symbols: an image which presents an eagle in the air that is linked by a chain with a toad from the earth (Appendix, ill. no.4 and 6). Maier called this a “philosophical symbol” and borrowed it from the book of Avicenna,²²⁴ *Porta Elementorum*, with the following meaning, as Maier wrote in his request:

the eagle to be the volatile part of Mercury and ... toad ... the fixed part of the earth, from both of which together arises the Hermetic Medicine and tincture of the Wise, as I will hereafter explain to Your Majesty.²²⁵

The portrait of Count Michael Maier on page eleven²²⁶ of *Atalanta fugiens* shows a coat of arms where Avicenna’s symbol is depicted, “a toad and an eagle linked by a golden chain – a representation of the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum*.”²²⁷ Johann Daniel Mylius, a disciple of Maier,²²⁸ used the same allegorical symbol (Appendix, ill. no.7) on the frontispiece of *Opus Medico-Chymicum*, a book published in the year of Maier’s death. It is considered that the image of the toad and eagle “refers to the volatile (and therefore ‘aerial’) principle of solid bodies or, otherwise, to the ‘fixing of the

²²² Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 51.

²²³ An important study on his heraldic system is offered by Ivo Purš, and Jaroslava Hausenblasová, “Kontakty Michaela Maiera s Rudolfem II. v Praze roku 1609” (Contacts of Michael Maier to Rudolph II in Prague, 1609), *Studia Rudolphina* 5 (2005): 51-64. In this study, there is a reproduction of the manuscript with Maier’s coat of arms (Appendix, ill. no. 6). Also, a good introduction into the relation between the heraldic system and hermetism is in Rafal T. Prinke, “Hermetic Heraldry,” *The Hermetic Journal* 1989: 62-78.

²²⁴ In *Symbola aureae mensae duodecim nationum* (Frankfurt/Main, 1617) there is a depiction of *Avicennae Arabis symbolum* that illustrates Maier’s coat of arm very well (Appendix, ill. no.3). In his book, Maier insisted that it was a symbol of the Fixing of Volatile

²²⁵ The official manuscript is now in Vienna, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv: Palatinat, Prag, 29. IX 1609. See Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 77.

²²⁶ The copy from 1618 that I used in the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek* (Vienna) does not have this representation, while the facsimile (based also on the edition 1618) from Kassel, 1964, reproduces the picture. I think that the image missing from the beginning of the book is an exception.

²²⁷ Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, 78.

²²⁸ Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 123; Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 179.

volatile’.”²²⁹ The eagle could be the phoenix while the toad²³⁰ is obviously the *prima materia*, a symbol that also found on the Ripley Scroll. It is the fixation of the volatile spirit and at the same time the *coniunctio* of the spirit with the matter.

The cultural environment of the Renaissance “excess” of spirituality and pressure on *coincidentia oppositorum* is again well summarized by Eco. He considers that:

In the framework of a strong Neoplatonism one should consider three basic assumptions, be they explicit or implicit: (i) There is a physical kinship, that is, an emanational continuity between every element of the world and the original One. (ii) The original One is self-contradictory, and in it one can find the *coincidentia oppositorum* (a Hermetic idea, indeed, but which at the dawn of modern times was reinforced...). (iii) The One can be expressed only by negation and approximation, so that every possible representation of it cannot but refer to another representation, equally obscure and contradictory.²³¹

The idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* in alchemy may also be seen as what salvation is in Christianity.²³² A Christian is supposed to know the path to saving his or her soul and to act accordingly. One has a *potentia*, a gnosis, and an *actio* of this knowledge. These steps are present in alchemy through the knowledge²³³ of principles and work in the laboratory. The main problem in the laboratory is to realize the *mysterium conjunctionis*, but also, independent of laboratory work, it is necessary to understand how this mystical union governs all that exists. In contrast to the perception of alchemy as laboratory work, spiritual alchemy proposes a religious interpretation, which means that the illustrations and writing about *coincidentia* can be seen as a theoretical work

²²⁹ Rafal T. Prinke, “Hunting the Black Toad,” *The Hermetic Journal* (1991), 78-90, referring to Mylius, but it is clear that the same pattern can be found in Maier’s heraldic insignia. (hereafter: Prinke, “Hunting the Black Toad”)

²³⁰ On the symbolism of the toad as *prima materia* and its alchemical implication see Prinke, “Hunting the Black Toad.” Also, one can see the toad in the emblem V of *Atalanta – Appone mulieri super mammas bufonem, ut ablactet eum, et moriatur mulier, sitque bufo grossus de lacte* –, where is showed how is put a toad in the woman’s breast, for nursing the toad with her milk (Appendix, ill. no. 5).

²³¹ Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 13.

²³² Especially in the case of Maier, where one of his engravings from *Symbola aurea mensae* (1617) “clearly identifies Christ with the *lapis philosophorum* and the elixir of life.” (Szulakowska, *The Sacrificial Body*, 43) Also, “alchemy conceived the Sponsus (Christ) and the Sponsa (Church) as forming together the image of totality, uniting the spiritual and the material” (Molnar, *God and the Knowledge of Reality*, 88). See also: “Jung has discovered that the identification of the Philosopher’s Stone with Christ is much older than the work of Khunrath and Jacob Boehme... He gives a comprehensive account of its prelude in gnostic redemption mysteries as found in Zosimos, and of its first definite sources such as the treatise by Petrus Bonus of Ferrara (about 1330) and the *Aurora consurgens*” (Pagel, “Jung’s Views on Alchemy”, 46).

²³³ Knowledge itself is more important than work in laboratory: “the ideal situation of the union is then pursued as the final state of absolute knowledge, and knowledge itself becomes union.” Molnar, *God and the Knowledge*, 88.

close to theological works, taking into consideration that “in the mind of alchemists the philosophical stone is equated with the perfect knowledge of God.”²³⁴

The principle of union in alchemy is illustrated through substances such as *sulphur* (fire and air) or *argent vive* (earth and water). The most important motif that is implied by the theme of *coincidentia oppositorum*, however, is the *lapis philosophorum* or the philosophical egg. The *lapis* as a concrete stone and as a spiritual achievement concentrates all possibilities in itself as the element that unifies or creates unity. In many alchemical texts, the *lapis* is understood as the marriage of sulphur (the male principle – red color) with mercury (the female principle – white color), that is Hippomenes and Atalanta.

The principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* is one of the recurrent themes of *Atalanta Fugiens*, unifying what by nature cannot stay together. This yearning for unity is not an exception in alchemy and in Maier’s work.²³⁵ The realization of unity is the ultimate purpose of experiments. “The real subject of Hermetic philosophy is the *coniunctio oppositorum*. Alchemy characterizes its ‘child’ on the one hand as the stone (e.g., the carbuncle), and on the other hand as the homunculus, or the *filius sapientiae* or even the *homo altus*.”²³⁶ The final product puts together what in principle stays separated. For scholars who use an analytical approach to alchemy the problem of *coincidentia oppositorum* is seen as a *reconciliatio* of *animus cum anima*.²³⁷ The

²³⁴ Molnar, *God and the Knowledge*, 85-86.

²³⁵ Redgrove even saw a universal aim of thinking: “The need of unity is a primary need of human thought. Behind the varied multiplicity of the world of phenomena, primitive man..., begins to seek, more or less consciously, for that Unity which alone is Real. And this statement not only applies to the first dim gropings of the primitive human mind, but sums up almost the whole of science and philosophy; for almost all science and philosophy is explicitly or implicitly a search for unity, for one law or one love, one matter or one spirit. That which is the aim of the search may, indeed, be expressed under widely different terms, but it is always conceived to be the unity in which all multiplicity is resolved, whether it be thought of as one final law of necessity, which all things obey, and of which all the various other ‘laws of nature’ are so many special and limited applications; or as one final love for which all things are created, and to which all things aspire; as one matter of which all bodies are but varying forms; or as one spirit, which is the life of all things, and of which all things are so many manifestations. Every scientist and philosopher is a merchant seeking for goodly pearls, willing to sell every pearl that he has, if he may secure the One Pearl beyond price, because he knows that in that One Pearl all others are included.” Redgrove, *Bygone*, 121-122.

²³⁶ Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, 454.

²³⁷ The Jungian idea also had an impact on art history; an article by an art historian argues that “surrealists have lighted upon alchemical engravings with enthusiasm, finding in them the disturbing and incongruous juxtapositions of their own work,” Jan Read, “Alchemical Engravings,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 85, No. 499 (1944): 245. In an article entitled “Alchemy, Androgyny and Visual Artists,” Arturo Schwartz, analytical psychologist and art historian, states that Andre Breton, in *Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not* (1942), affirmed: “It is essential, here more than anywhere else, to undertake the reconstruction of the primordial Androgen.” Arturo Schwartz, “Alchemy, Androgyny and Visual Artists,” *Leonardo* 13 (1980): 58. Arturo Schwartz did not give a reason for this surrealist aim. But it maybe connected with the surrealist reality as a meta-reality, beyond ethics, even

awareness that there is such a pair of opposites that should stay together has its corollary in the understanding that the contents of the psyche are like two entities inside of it: *anima* and *animus*, because each person has embarked on a process with the aim of making human beings aware of their *anima* (in the case of man), or their *animus* (in the case of woman).²³⁸ For this reason alchemists also used another name for *lapis philosophorum*, *Rebis*, to be translated as *duae res*, two principles in *conjunction*, a hybrid entity.

Some studies have denied this *equilibrium* and maintained that Maier's "treatise seems to deny the egalitarian conjunction of opposites upon which the process of alchemical transmutation is theoretically founded."²³⁹ The article of Sally G. Allen and Joanna Hubbs tries to argue that the feminine principle embodied by *Atalanta* enjoys a privileged status in Maier's vision. On the other hand, M. E. Warlick argues that the female, determined by domestic activities, "would appear only at the periphery."²⁴⁰ I consider that both positions try to apply categories of gender studies to a universe in which both genders play important roles.²⁴¹ Their studies are legitimate, and indeed alchemical works such as *Atalanta* can reflect social structures specifically for the Early Modern period, but this issue is not central for my research.

aesthetics, which is the reality of dreams. A dream always is constructed with images, even the diurnal dream is based on *imaginatio*. In this context, the 'image of androgyny' can very well imply neutralization, as Maier's contemporary, Jacob Böhme, said: "the perfect man is conceived of as non-sexual, the male and female elements united in him having, as it were, neutralized each one." (Redgrove, *Bygone*, 171.) It is important to say here that in the *First Papers of Surrealism* by Marcel Duchamp and Andre Breton in 1942 there is an emblem of Maier from *Atalanta fugiens* that is linked with a surrealist photograph. *First Papers of Surrealism* is a catalog for the landmark 1942 Surrealist Show organized by Andre Breton at the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies in New York.

²³⁸ This is one of the main ideas of the Jungian analytical interpretation.

²³⁹ Sally G. Allen and Joanna Hubbs, "Outrunning *Atalanta*: Feminine Destiny in Alchemical Transmutation," *Signs* 6, No. 2 (1980): 219.

²⁴⁰ Marjorie Elizabeth Warlick, "The Domestic Alchemist: Women As Housewives in Alchemical Emblems," in *Emblems and Alchemy* ed. Alison Adams and Stanton J. Linden, (Glasgow: Glasgow Emblem Studies, 1998), 47. She argues that "cosmic, misogynist overtones" generally lack form alchemical emblems, but because of the Protestant Reformation a "social regression" can be noticed in alchemical literature. See also "Moon Sisters: Women in Alchemical Imagery," in *The Golden Egg*, ed. Elmar Schenkel and Alexandra Lembert, (Berlin: Galda and Wilch, 2002), 183-198, 190. In this last article she concluded that „alchemy imagery provides a fascinating mirror to reflect the evolving concepts about female sexuality and appropriate roles for women in society," in a time when the women had "exclusively domestic roles." (Ibid., 196.)

²⁴¹ One can say that the dialectic between masculine and feminine is transparent also in the structure of the book (the equilibrium between number of the images and discourses). The image generally was associated with the feminine principle, and the words with the masculine principle, the images "were fleeting, illusory, impenetrable, associated with dreams, hallucinations, and visions. Language, on the other hand, was given a masculine cast: clear, ordered, logical, intellectual, and theoretical." Helen Roberts, "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Art Indexing in Electronic Databases," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 52 (2001): 912.

The feminine part in alchemy creates *equilibrium*, which is not an inferior principle; it is part of the whole unity – two principles in a unity and not two unequal entities, as one may have in Christianity where good and evil do not form a unity. The split of *one* into *two* was present for the alchemist in many stages of reality. But even though all these entities seem to enjoy a kind of independence they should always be thought of as part of a relation. No principle can exist independently. For an alchemist like Maier, the state of rupture was considered a sin, the reason why he should find the path of reunification. Adam, before the creation of Eve, is an androgen and the final purpose of the union between man and woman (as principles) is to recreate the Adamic state, that of the primordial element. The androgen image includes all the ruptures of all layers of reality, even for metaphysical reality. In this context androgyny represents the ultimate layer of redeeming the matter (or soul).

My attention fell on images where the *coincidentia* is not so obvious, as in the case of the androgen. I chose three emblems for analysis; VIII, XXI and XXX, as representative for the application of Gombrich's typology of the function of images:

- emblem VIII (*Accipe ovum et igneo percute gladio*) because of its composite character: didactic and revelative;
- emblem XXI (*Fac ex mare et fœmina circulum*) for its evident revelative function;
- emblem XXX (*Sol indiget luna, ut gallus gallina*) for its didactic and allegorical message.

The analysis will begin with emblem VIII, continue with emblem XXX, and end with emblem XXI. I chose this order for several reasons:

1. Emblem VIII, as a composite one, is a good start for illustrating some methodological problems, while.
2. Emblem XXX is close to emblem VIII, which needs more background, offered by Maier's text.
3. Emblem XXI is conclusive (and perhaps should be the last in the book), and it also has incorporates themes that are present in the emblems VIII and XXX.

1. Analysis of the emblems

In Maier's book the images are composed by the logic of *synecdoche*. That means that details as well as central themes are *rhetorical* examples for processes that

take place on many layers of reality.²⁴² It is important to decode the message of these images in their hermeneutical and spiritual understanding, as representing the “theology” of alchemy.

I take into account the material aspect (how this imagery illustrates metaphorically realities that are inside of matter) and spiritual achievement (how the imagery guides the viewer to a better understanding of the art as a religious practice). All is suggested in Gombrich’s study and further developed by Szőnyi.

Emblema VIII. Accipe ovum et igneo percute gladio

Descriptio. The picture shows a warrior, that is, Mars, standing and holding a sword in his right hand in front of a fire burning in a chimney on the left. He is trying to strike an egg that is placed on a small table. In the background wall there is a tunnel or passageway. The environment is an urban landscape, in the background there is a Gothic church. The image illustrates the presence of the philosophical egg in a domestic and urban space. At first glance, it is difficult to define the role of this environment. I would argue that, although it seems simply decorative, its function exceeds mere decoration.

²⁴² The functions of details and the background were underlined on many occasions in scholarly researches on emblems. For example, Daniel Russell said: “when the background of an emblem does contain significant elements, they are often metaphorical echoes of the main scene,” or that the “background décor may help express, or at least emphasize” (See Daniel Russell, “Perceiving, Seeing and Meaning: Emblems and Some Approaches to Reading Early Modern Culture” in *Aspects of Renaissance and Baroque Symbol Theory, 1500-1700*, ed. Peter M Daly and John Manning (New York: AMS Press, 1999), 78).

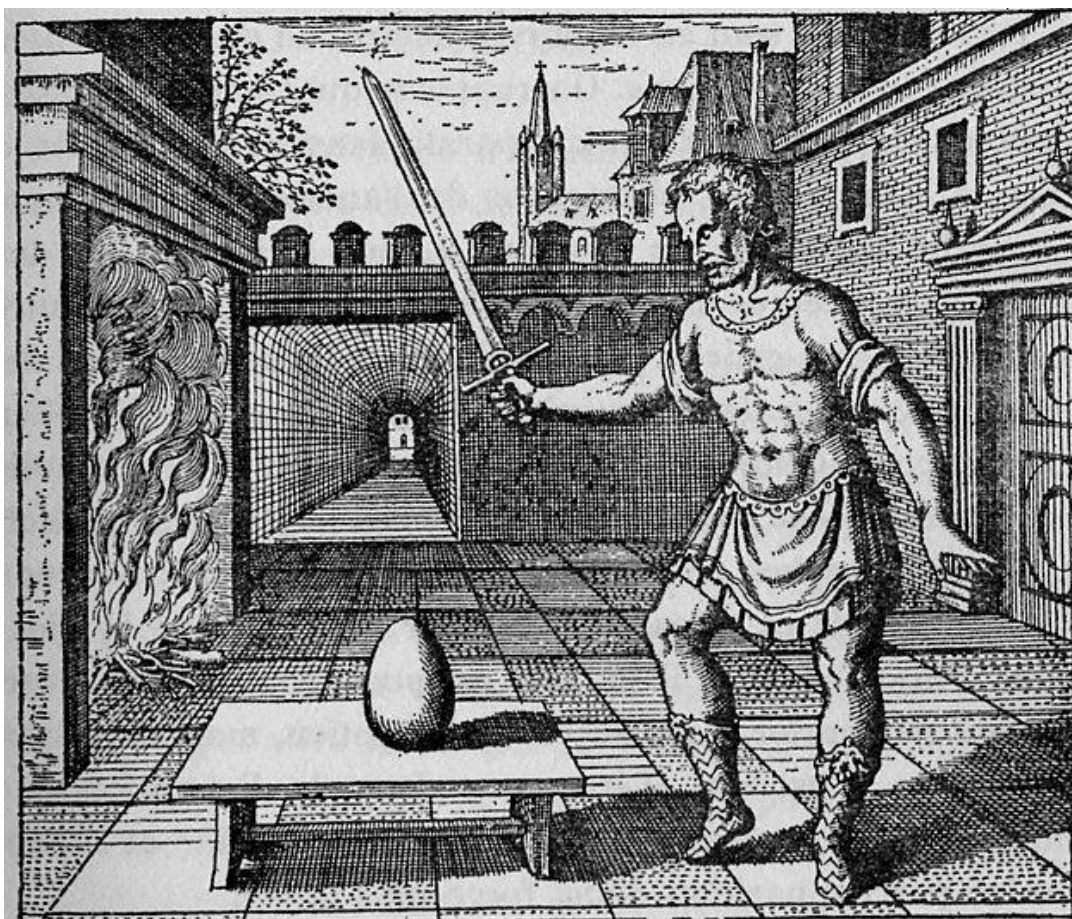


Fig. 1. Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblema VIII

Interpretatio. Front theme. The repetitive and stereotypical character of alchemical imagery can be understood as iconizing. One may see the images as “alchemical icons,” not for worship, but for an understanding that develops at another level than merely seeing.

In many alchemical representations, the primary elements were associated with the image of an egg. It should be understood as the cosmic egg, representing the whole, the unity, and the origin of everything. The most important part of it is the gold-yolk hidden inside. The egg stands for “the chaotic *prima materia* which is destroyed in the Putrefaction, so that new life arises from it.”²⁴³ This was one of the most frequently used alchemical pictograms. An egg or egg-shaped representations were linked in many texts with the alchemical vessel used for the *opus magnum*. This is the reason why in many cases the sealed vessels of the alchemists were also called the Philosopher’s egg. Alchemists used these vessels for the incubation of different substances and they were

²⁴³ Alexander Roob, *The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mysticism* (Köln: Taschen, 2006), 396 (hereafter: Roob, *The Hermetic Museum*).

perceived as the physical place for the union of opposites. According to the spurious letter of Roger Bacon, the philosophical egg is the container of secrets.²⁴⁴

The dance-like gestures of the armed man try to suggest a ritual approach for destroying the egg. To cut and to crack the cover of unity is one of the activities of hermetic philosophy. The egg is situated between the martial philosopher and fire; above it is a double-edged sword.²⁴⁵ The sword is not an ordinary one. For Maier, the presence of secret fire is testimony to the origin of the sword.²⁴⁶ The double-edged sword, taking it as a spiritual symbol, makes one think of a symbol for the double function of the *logos* (like Christ, the *logos*, is referred to as a sword in Apocalyptic imagery) that can tell the truth or can be delusional. The sword represents two potential developments specific to dialects.²⁴⁷ The two edges of the sword embody the possibility of giving life (to liberate the union from the shell), but also of killing what is inside the shell, if the art of striking is not performed properly.²⁴⁸ The philosopher has to break the egg, composed of only two elements, for the birth of the third element. By cracking the shell, the third element will be liberated. Maier, quoting Pseudo-Raymundus Lullus, writes that the “fiery sword is a sharp Lance, because Fire like a Spear perforates bodies and renders them porous and permeable, so that they may be penetrated by Water, and twists their hardness into softness.”²⁴⁹ In my opinion, the presence of fire could also suggest that the paternity of the egg was the Phoenix.

²⁴⁴ Pseudo Roger Bacon gave some descriptions of the philosophical egg: “It is sometimes called the *fusile sulphur* of the Philosophers, sometimes oil, sometimes aerial humor, sometimes the conjunctive substance which fire does not separate, and sometimes camphor – and, in short, it is the Philosophers’ Egg, or rather the goal and purpose of the egg. And this which comes to us from these oils, but is reputed to be among the sinapica, is separated from the water or the oil in which it is purged.” *Roger Bacon’s Letter: Concerning the Marvelous Power of Art and Nature and Concerning the Nullity of Magic*, tr. Tenney L. Davis (Kila MT: Kessinger Publishing, 1992), 43. In another place he says “Take then of the bones of Adam and of the Calx, the same weight of each; and there are six of the Petral Stone and five of the Stone of Union. Let them be ground up together with *aqua vitae* (whose property it is to dissolve all things) until they are dissolved and assated, and the sign of the incineration is that the mixture melts when it is placed upon strongly heated iron.” (Ibid., 48)

²⁴⁵ The idea to break an egg with a sword could derive from an Egyptian tradition, as Maier notes as well: “the Egyptians yearly persecute the Crocodiles’ Eggs with weapons of Iron and destroy them.” Maier, *Discourse VIII*.

²⁴⁶ The presence of the sword makes the representation peculiar, because the sword employs the destruction, which corresponds to *separatio* – the third alchemical stage after *calcinatio* and *dissolutio*.


²⁴⁷ *διαλεκτική τέχνη* (*ars dialectica*): two types of speech (*logos*), a proposition and his counter-proposition.

²⁴⁸ Maier also insisted that the sword can give death and not life: “the Philosophers do indeed smite their Eggs with fire, but it is not with an intent to mortify it, but that it may live and grow up.”

²⁴⁹ Maier, *Discourse VIII*. The quoted fragment is ambiguous and it is difficult to understand what exactly it refers to.

The egg was often considered an image of the universe, the macrocosm.²⁵⁰ At the same time, the egg was a suggestive symbol for the correspondence between what is above and what is below, a perfect example for the *Synecdoche* type of discourse. Frances Yates, following de Jong's interpretation, identified the egg of John Dee, "which symbolized the universe in the *Monas hieroglyphica* and the fire symbolized by the Aries sign in the *Monas*, and expressive of alchemical processes."²⁵¹ Dee emphasizes the fact that the *monad*²⁵² is a hieroglyph or a symbol (or a *synecdoche*, I may add) for the essence of the world.²⁵³ He associated the figure of the *monad* with alchemical processes and established elements of transformation along orbital lines in the egg,²⁵⁴ according to the consistent position of their ruling planets (Fig. 6). The English magician "used the egg as a glyph for the ethereal heavens, because the orbit of

²⁵⁰ In this regard, de Jong conclude this emblem "shows how strongly the alchemists felt a concetion between the forces active in their work and those dominating the Universe" (de Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta*, 100).

²⁵¹ Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 83. For Dee, the monad glyph  has in itself the *summa* of all the signs of the zodiac and represents the whole of being. In theorems IX and X he described the monad sign as: moon – the upper part, sun – the circle, the four elements – the cross, and down *ignis* – as the sign of Aries. Later, another polymath, Atanasius Kircher, identified the root of Dee's monad in the *Ankh* – the Egyptian sign of life. Here the relation between the monad and the egg, through the sign of *ignis*, and the perfect form of the egg, is proof for Yates that Maier not only wants to transmit an alchemical message through his emblem, but also a Rosicrucian one, the monad being present in the Rosicrucian Manifesto *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*. Szönyi underlines that the monad "represents oneness but one can derive from it all numbers, all letters, in fact all (alphanumeric) systems of information." Szönyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 161-174, 167.

²⁵² John Dee was one of the most important Renaissance polymaths. He was Queen Elizabeth's astrologer, translated Euclid's geometry, and authored important hermetical treatises. In his twenties he took lectures on algebra at the University of Paris. He is the first person who tried to apply Euclidean geometry to navigation systems. His library was one of the greatest in England. He is famous for his *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564), a highly esoteric work that gravitates around a glyph that can explain everything (through 24 theorems, which is also the structure of the book) and is seen as the core of existence. The English translation is published in C. H. Josten, *Ambix* 12 (1964), 84-221. In *Theorem XVIII* of his book Dee says that the monad is one of the "the most secret mysteries." and criticizing alchemical practice he adds: "you will note that the miserable alchemists must learn to recognize their numerous errors and to understand what is the water of the white of egg, what is the oil of the yoke of egg, and what we mean by calcined egg-shells. These inexpert impostors must learn in their despair to understand what are meant by these and many other similar expressions. Here we have shown almost all the proportions which correspond to Nature herself. This is the same Eagle's Egg which the scarab formerly broke because of the injury which the cruelty and violence of this bird caused to timid and primitive man, for this bird pursued some of them who were running to the cavern where the scarab dwelt, to implore his aid." For my analysis Yates' association of Maier's egg and Dee's monad-egg is important. Although, Yates noticed an influence from Dee in this image, "she did not connect Emblem VII specifically to Dee's *Mathematical Preface*" (Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 77), an issue that is very important in the construction of several of Maier's emblems.

²⁵³ Dee's representations contrast with the narrative manner of Maier, the monad and other pictorial images being geometrical, abstract, and simple.

²⁵⁴ For a long discussion of the "cosmic alchemical egg" and the monad see Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 63-64. Szulakowska interprets Dee's monad as an emblem, "a condensation of a discursive text in a unique sign" (Ibid., 64).

the planets within it forms an oval,”²⁵⁵ and described the egg as a central yolk made up of the Sun,²⁵⁶ Mars, and Venus (gold, iron and copper) and an albumen made up of Jupiter, Saturn, the Moon and Mercury (tin, lead, silver, and quicksilver). The process of transformation is realized when the yolk encloses the albumen through the process of revolution (which is illustrated by Dee in the form of a spiral).

By this means the great metamorphosis of the egg was accomplished; the albumen was absorbed during a great many revolutions round the heliocentric orbits, and was enveloped in this same yellow liquid. The hieroglyphic figure shown here, of this art, will not displease those who are familiar with Nature.²⁵⁷

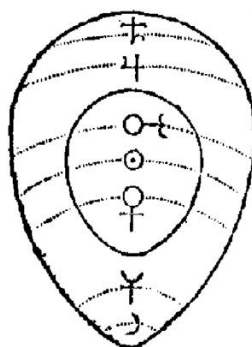


Fig. 2. Egg-shaped diagram. John Dee, *Monas hieroglyphica*.

Interpretatio. Rear plan. The perspective point of the image lies in the square of the background, which suggests a kind of perspective. The framework of the action of striking the egg is also in perspective. Maier did not give a reason why this image should have a tunnel perspective, but this composition offers two centers of interest in the image: the egg and the rear perspective, both being linked. The eye goes through the egg into the end of the tunnel, which makes the picture hypnotic; thus, all its elements work to reveal the hidden meaning of the philosophical egg.

The text itself explains only the alchemical principles that are invoked in the dynamics of the image, but do not refer to the surrounding decoration and the place where the ritual work happens. Are they secondary aspects? Szőnyi considers that “In the representations of alchemical allegories the architectural elements, such as castles

²⁵⁵ Roob, *The Hermetic Museum*, 106. Roob underlines, in association with the glyph-egg of Dee, that for the mystical poet William Blake the eye was also “inscribed within the form of the cosmic egg” (ibid.).

²⁵⁶ The “great work” of the sun that is in “antithesis” with the “small work” of the moon.

²⁵⁷ Dee, *Monas hieroglyphica*, *theoremata XIII*.

and gardens, gates ..., primarily function in relation to the elaborate process, happening, story, *mythos*, which is taking place in the form of a narrative.”²⁵⁸ Yates observes that “the perspective symbolizes, I believe, architecture and its allied mathematical subjects when one remembers that music is supplied by Maier to accompany the ‘egg’ emblem, one realizes that it contains all the elements summed up in the *Monas Hieroglyphica*.”²⁵⁹ She continues by showing the difficulty in understanding these pictures: “I am entirely unable to understand all this, nor how it would be possible to work out a mathematical problem in terms of this kind of alchemy.”²⁶⁰ For Szőnyi, the emblems that contain architectural issues can be linked with a *mandala* type of image. He considers that

most important are the TEMPLES or *temenos*, the CASTLES and FORTRESSES, with characteristically important parts, such as the TOWER, the STAIRWAY and the GATE. This latter often connects the building to a GARDEN, another important scenery of occult philosophical happenings.²⁶¹

Many of these architectural structures are presented in this emblem and in other emblems of Maier. The alchemist chose to place his motifs in a citadel environment. Therefore “many of the usual iconographic elements on these representations can be considered hidden *mandalas*.”²⁶² The parallel between *revelative* image and *mandala* is almost mandatory for Szőnyi because

representations of occult cosmic correspondences and theosophical enlightenment tend to be of revelative nature, the viewing of which should result in an intuitive illumination, similar to the effect that is expected from the use of mandalas.²⁶³

To sum up, the ground-plan suggests a cosmic participation with an important revelative effect for an alchemist. For this reason an alchemical image is very close to a mystical one, and the architectural elements serve as more than a scenic element.



Maier’s innovation was the connection that he makes between the sword and the egg; the sword is present in other alchemical images,²⁶⁴ but not together with an egg.

²⁵⁸ Szőnyi, *Architectural Symbolism*,

²⁵⁹ Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 83.

²⁶⁰ Ibidem.

²⁶¹ Szőnyi, “Architectural Symbolism,” 54.

²⁶² Ibidem,

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ e.g., *Splendor Solis* (alchemical illuminated manuscript dated 1532-1535, created possibly by Albrecht Glocken in Nuremberg), where the presence of a double-edged sword is linked with the cutting of a

Also, the presence of an egg in alchemical images is usually associated with the hermaphrodite²⁶⁵ in order to show unity and not division, as in the case of Maier. For example in the illustrated manuscript by Lamspring, *De lapide philosophorum* (1607),²⁶⁶ the sword is associated with the *Putrefactio* (Appendix, ill. no. 12). In *Dyas chymica tripartite*, a compilation of alchemical treatises published by Lucas Jennis (1625), which republished Lamspring's book, the illustration is a little different (See Appendix, ill. no. 13, the illustration from 1625 republished in *Museum Hermeticum*, 1678). In Lamspring's book, the image illustrates a type of St. George, the hero who kills a dragon. The alchemical version of the fight with the dragon exemplifies the conflict between the two principles, and, even more important, the killing of the serpent, as *putrefactio* or *fermentatio* stage of the *opus*.

I would argue that this image is a *revelative* one which also includes didactic elements that confer ambivalent features on the image; the image is at the same time an *icon* and an *educational* object. It is an icon for the alchemist who knows the particular meanings of the elements that form the image, while for a student this image is used for instruction as it is a metaphor for the purification process that the matter must undergo.

Emblema XXX. Sol indiget luna, ut gallus gallina

Descriptio. The depiction shows a sun-headed man and a moon-headed woman who are standing together on the shore of a body of water. The moon-headed woman points to a cock while a hen is at her feet. The sun-headed man makes acceptance gestures that are not echoed in the position of his feet, which are in a closure posture.

human body. In the seventh key of Basil Valentin, the presence of the sword stays for the regulation of the fire (Appendix, ill. no.14).

²⁶⁵ Also in *Splendor Solis*, where the hermaphrodite has in one hand the philosophical egg, while in the other hand he has the cosmos with its four elements.

²⁶⁶ As I mentioned above, the first edition of Lamspring's book from 1599 does not have illustrations, but the manuscript from 1607 added fifteen illustrations.

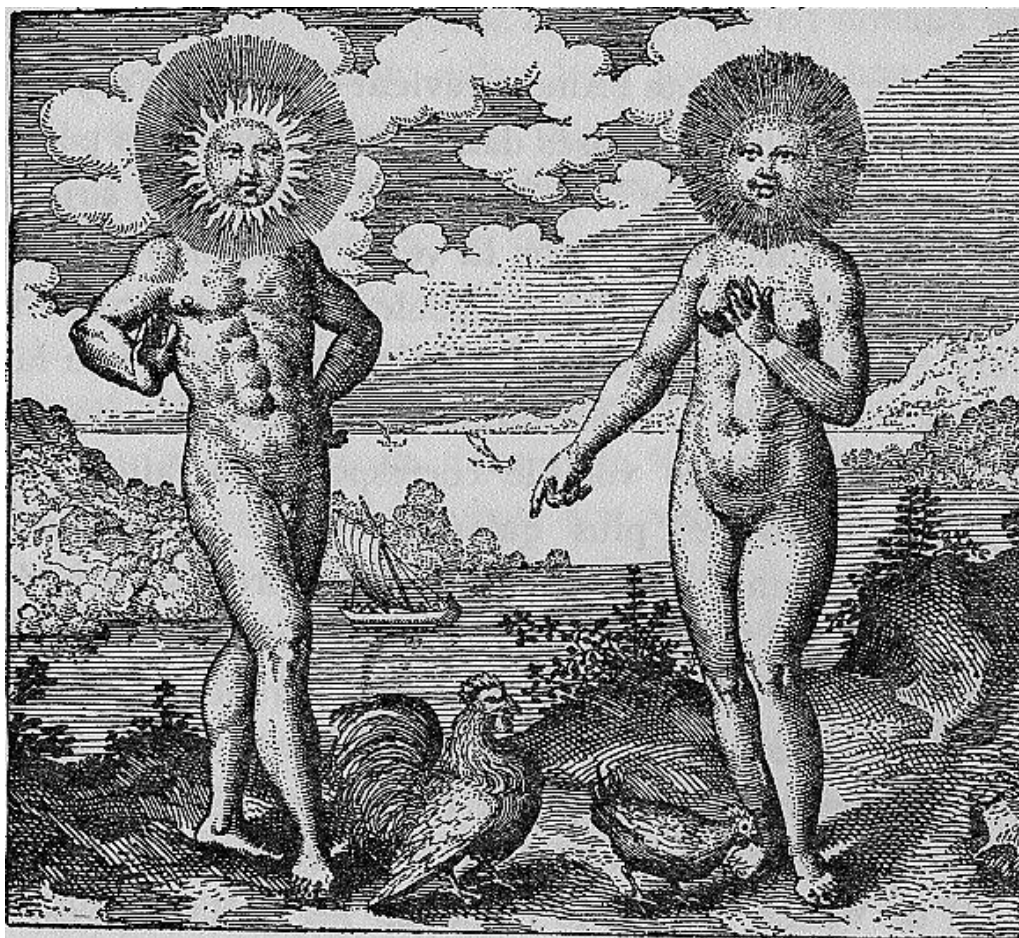


Fig. 3. Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblema XXX

Interpretatio. Front theme. Although there is no egg present in this visual representation, in the textual description Maier again brings the theme of the egg into the discussion; it seems that the image here cannot stand alone without the help of the text. The egg, he says, is called Latona, after the mother of Apollo and Diana. Sol, Luna and Latona, the triadic entity that is present for the realization of the work, are a pretext for a parabolic discussion by Maier, as he says that they:

agree with Chemical subjects and so do the Cock and Hen, for these two come out of Eggs and do likewise produce eggs, from whence their Chickens may be Hatched. So likewise the Philosophers have their Eggs, which will pass into birds of the same kind if they are nourished with a temperate heat such as the heat of a Hen that sets, remaining upon them continually.²⁶⁷

In the textual part, Mayer underlines the similarity of natural and philosophical eggs, the latter denoting a spiritual existence. The egg keeps the parents' virtues because without its roots, it would only be a simple egg. Maier adds to the discussion an idea of

²⁶⁷ Maier, *Atalanta*, Discourse XXX. (seventeenth century translation, provided by Adam McLean's website <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/atl26-0.html>).

Avicenna that “no Eggs should be taken by the Artist unless they were of such Hens as had been trod by a Cock.”²⁶⁸ Thus he emphasizes the linearity and necessity of the counterpart, which means that: “the Female subject is of no Value without the virtue of the Male, and so on the contrary that the Cock is of no use without the Hen.”²⁶⁹

The gestures are meaningful. First of all, the moon-woman points to the cock, meaning that she is showing the principle that formed her. If one interprets the gesture of the man as being accepting, one can see the same idea, with the meaning that he accepts the presence of the feminine principle. The fact that the moon-headed woman is situated to the left of the man connects to the medieval tradition that links the left side with the feminine principle. In this image there is a kind of a story, a dialogue between the principles that accentuates the idea that what is happening on the animate level one should also find in the transcendental realities.

Interpretatio. Rear plan. The environment suggests that all of nature partakes in the same reality. The “great chain of being” is marked in three levels of existence: the *rear* plan – nature, the *animate* plan – marked by the presence of domestic birds, and *human-like beings* – hybrid entities with human bodies and celestial heads that mark both the dignity of man and the anthropomorphic character of the sun and moon. The background again shows duality. The line of the horizon is both a separation and unification between the sky (with its volatile elements – fire and air) and earth (with its fixed elements – water and earth). Everywhere an essential duality is revealed.²⁷⁰



The interdependence of principles is the core of this emblem. The discourse started with the name of Avicenna²⁷¹ who had said in his *Liber de Anima*: “the Female subject is of no Value without the virtue of the Male, and so on the contrary that the Cock is of no use without the Hen.”²⁷²

One cannot think of the sun without the moon, light without a shadow. Strong attraction and the necessity of *conjunctio* are elements of alchemical thinking. “It is necessary to

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ The gesture could remind the viewer of the famous *School of Athena* by Raphael, which has in the center one of the grounding dualities of western culture: Aristotle pointing downwards, while Plato indicates the heavens. Emblem XXX could also be read as an alchemical version of an eternal duality.

²⁷¹ In *Atalanta*, Avicenna is quoted in only two places. Here, as in the case of Maier’s coat of arm, it is obvious that Avicenna is used as an authority for *coincidentia*.

²⁷² British Library, MS. Sloane 3645, transcribed by Hereward Tilton.

unite Sol and Luna as cock and hen.”²⁷³ The alchemist should meditate on the state of *conjunctio*. The domestic birds stand for celestial human beings as part of the rhetoric of *Synecdoche*. The two layers (the animal level and the principal-human level) present the interconnection of principles at each stage of reality, and the fact that the binary elements are signs or part of principles that are incarnated: both Sol and Luna, and the cock and hen also represent chemical subjects. I think that this image is a variation of a type that one could find in the book published in the same year as *Atalanta*, called: *Symbola aureae mensae* (1617). There, Hermes is present, who, with the help of fire, puts the Sun and Moon together; I think, not as a didactic image, but a revelative one, especially because of the shape of the fire.

The two genders should be put together in order to favor the *ars alchemica*. The message of the image seems to be that nature can say everything, she²⁷⁴ is not silence, she talks, and one has to learn her language. This attitude of following the steps of nature is important in the alchemical process of the realization of the egg. Because of the “presence” of an egg, the emblem should be connected with the moment of the creation of the egg, that is, *conjunctio*. The next stage is androgyny. There, the egg is the end of the process, while in emblem VIII; the presence of the egg suggested the beginning or the middle stage of the process. Maier seems to have followed the illustration from *Aurora consurgens*²⁷⁵ where the cock and the hen alone stand for the egg, and the egg in its turn for *work*.

But why is this necessity of unity (of sun-man-sky and moon-women-earth in this case) important for alchemists? And what can this image reveal? The equilibrium of it springs powerfully before one’s eyes:

- compositional (because of the symmetries: two human-celestial entities who correspond with the background plan);
- by the layers of correspondence (in nature – sky and earth; in the animal realm – birds; human and celestial beings).

But, again, why is there a need to put them together? In this regard, “Jung legitimately raises the question why the alchemists felt disunity in themselves, although they were supposedly Christians.”²⁷⁶ A kind of answer is proposed by the Catholic philosopher

²⁷³ De Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens*, 218.

²⁷⁴ In Maier’s work nature appears as a woman (conf. *Emblema XLII*). The title of the book underlines the feminine character of nature.

²⁷⁵ Alchemical illuminated manuscript from the fifteenth century attributed to Thomas Aquinas.

²⁷⁶ Molnar, *God and the Knowledge*, 86.

Molnar, who stated that alchemists “intended to improve the Christian religion with the help of what they regarded as an older, purer tradition....”²⁷⁷

What is more important in this depiction is what is absent – the egg. Through the birds, the philosophical egg is invoked. The principles are present, in balance or not, but they are still not part of *coincidentia*, and only the egg represents its incarnation. Therefore, emblem XXX illustrates *coniunctio*, the egg being the result of union, while emblem VIII presents the stage of separation that should occur before it. Thus one can observe circularity: the egg is at the beginning and at the end, it is the object of a ritual cut and the product of union. If for Yates, the egg of the emblem VIII was connected with the shape-egg of Dee, one can say that the egg in emblem XXX, following the Rosicrucian implications stressed by Yates, is the “lovely great snow-white egg” of the sixth day of *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz*.

Maier uses here birds that cannot fly, which means that the conjunction is not only part of the celestial and spiritual world. The illustration of *Emblema VII* (Appendix, ill. no.10) shows only birds, now the sky’s birds. Here, I believe, that Maier must have had access to the illustrations of a manuscript of Lamspring, *Tractatus de lapide philosophorum* from 1607 (Appendix, ill. no. 9).²⁷⁸ *Atalanta*’s print emblem VII gives the impression of a copy, even having the same number in the order – *septima figura* in Lamspring and *Emblema VII* in Maier’s book. De Jong, commenting on the source of the motto, says that Maier used the motto of Lamspring.²⁷⁹ Therefore, one can assume that Maier, or Merian the Elder, used Lamspring’s manuscript.²⁸⁰ In the scholarly literature, as far as I know, there is no mention that Maier had access to the manuscript from 1607, but it is sure that the edition from 1625 of “the little known treatise,”²⁸¹ *De lapide philosophorum*, and its reissue in the edition of *Museum hermeticum* in 1678, are influenced²⁸² and bear the stamp of the imagery in *Atalanta*.

²⁷⁷ Ibid..

²⁷⁸ MS. M I 92 dated 1607 preserved at Universitätsbibliothek Salzburg. There is also another manuscript, dated for 16th century preserved at Zentral Bibliothek Zurich, MS. P 2177.

²⁷⁹ de Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta*, 91.

²⁸⁰ There is also another version of this manuscript, an earlier one, from the sixteenth century, that is preserved at Vienna, Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. MS 10102. One can assume that Maier used one of this two, but as I know only the Zurich, my argumentation is build only on this one.

²⁸¹ Szulakowska, *The Sacrificial Body*, 71.

²⁸² For example Walter Pagel in his de Jong’s review said: “This is not to be doubted with regard to Lamspring’s text printed well ahead of Maier-but the illustrated edition appeared only seven years after the *Atalanta*.” Walter Pagel. “Review of Michael Maier’s *Atalanta Fugiens*: sources of an alchemical book of emblems, by H.M.E.de Jong” *Medical History*, 17, No. 1 (1973): 102.

As in the case of Lampspring, images VII and XXX are allegorical. What is not so evident in the case of emblem XXX is its underlying revelative character.²⁸³ The verticality of the celestial-human bodies creates a frame, as in the case of the architectural symbolism that permits the viewer to transcend the narrative character of the image. The most powerful indication for its potential as a revelative image is the abundance of symmetries. Even if there are no geometrical symmetries, the consistent equilibrium forces the image toward a cognitive Neo-Platonic function.

Emblema XXI. Fac ex mare et fœmina circulum, inde quadrangulum, hinc triangulum, fac circulum et habebis lap. Philosophorum

Descriptio. The image illustrates an alchemist (a hermetic philosopher and geometrician), standing in front of a wall. He is drawing a circle with what is seems to be a large compass. The center of the circle is tangent with the central circle. Inside of the large circle that is already finished, one can see a circle in a square that is in its turn placed in a triangle surrounded by the large circle. In the minuscule circle one can see a naked man and woman. On the ground in front of the wall are a protractor, a cross or a set square, and a tablet with geometric diagrams.

²⁸³ The same idea illustrated in emblem XXX is a recurrent theme in *Atalanta*. First of all, it begins with the frontispiece of the book, the metamorphosis of Atalanta and Hippomenes into lions, it continues with the same idea in the emblem XVI, where the same lions and the same principles appear (Appendix, ill. no. 16), and after that one can follow the pattern in emblem XLVII, where the principles are presented as a wolf and dog (“The enmity between lion and lioness which Maier discusses in the discourses on his emblem, is the same as the enmity between wolf and dog.” See de Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta*, 145.), but in all these illustrations allegory is used as the proper way to make the relation between principles comprehensible, while in emblem XXX the allegory, because among other things of hybrid entities, the allegory is surpassed.

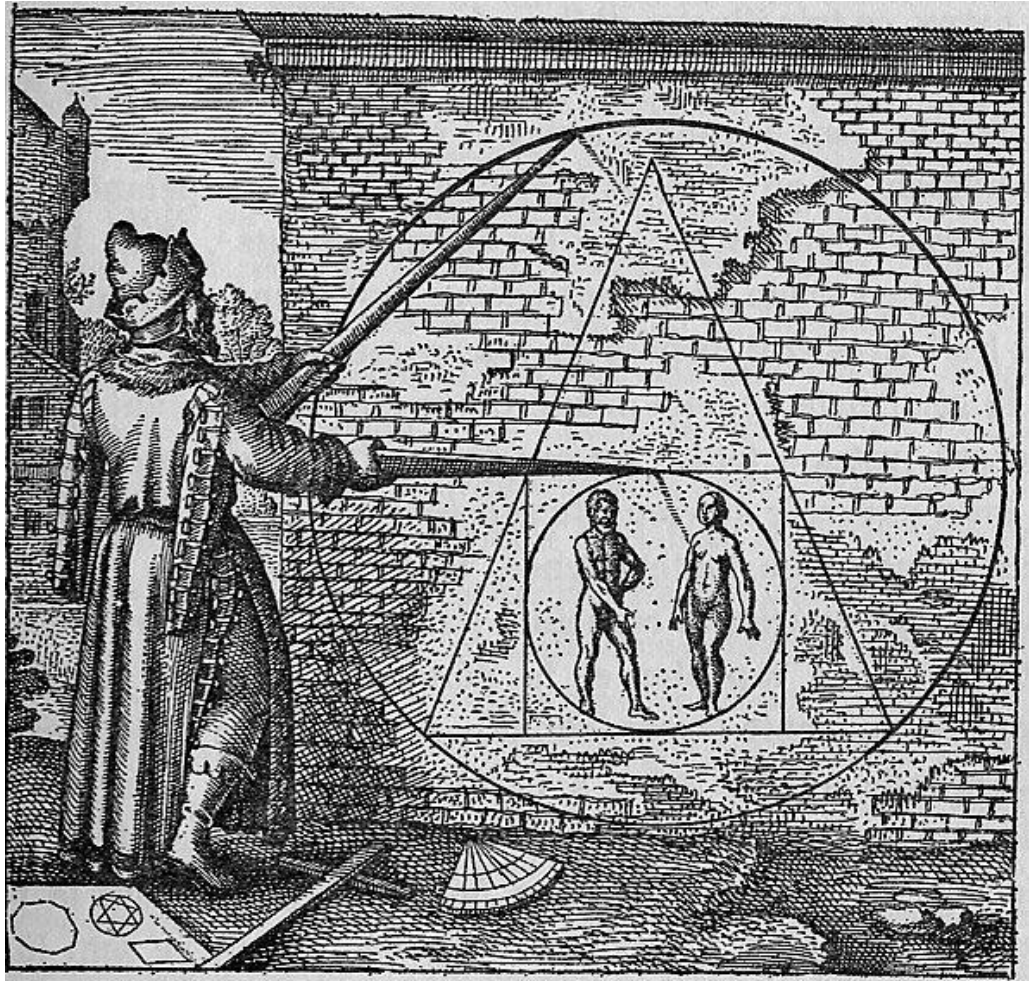


Fig. 4. Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, Emblema XXI

Interpretation. Front theme. The minuscule circle, which seems to be the essence of the image, is surrounded by both polygons and the large circle. The circle, triangle, and square together form a mystical cosmogram.²⁸⁴ The human figures seem to be a reduplication of Emblem XXX. The differences are in the gestures; now the male figure has the role of indicating, while in the case of Emblem XXX the female figure was the one who pointed to the cock. The gesture of indicating is significant in both cases.

The geometrical figures are not mere ordinary figures, but are chosen as principles and magic symbols. The circle, in particular, in the Renaissance had the power of creating a difference between worlds: sacred and profane, magic and non-magic (as in the case of Faust conjuring up the devil, or Dee and Kelly conjuring up the

²⁸⁴ Szőnyi, "Occult Semiotics and Iconology," 316.

dead).²⁸⁵ Therefore, the presence of two circles can invoke *the magical exaltation through a powerful sign*.

At first glimpse one could say that this image is the alchemical version of the Vitruvian man.²⁸⁶ The square (the four elements), the triangle (salt, mercury and sulphur) and the circle (the circularity or the cyclical process) stand as testimony and ways to create the *habebis lapis Philosophorum*. The circle that comprises the number of becoming (*two* – the two principles, male and female) is present above both the male and the female, at the beginning of the process, and at the end, after the dissolution and union of the four elements and three principles. Therefore, the circle is present at the beginning and at the end, before the elements and principles, and above everything.²⁸⁷ One can illustrate the numerological situation through a ranking of the five numbers: 2 (the human figures) – 1 (the circle) – 4 (the square) – 3 (the triangle) – 1 (again the circle). If the quintessence is not illustrated in this numerical order, it is sure inside the square, where the four elements symbolized through the square are united with the help of the circle and form a geometrical figure of five elements, thus symbolizing the quintessence. In the area where the human figures are situated one may locate the quintessence.

Interpretatio. Rear plan. The landscape is not so richly developed as the landscapes in the previous emblems and as in many other emblems of the *Atalanta*. The whole action is happening at the front, here the background could be a simple decorative element. On the left side one can see part of a house and a tower, while the rugged old wall may be an architectural piece of a building. This is perhaps a northern European Renaissance town.²⁸⁸ If the tower is not a decorative element, but an architectural motif that facilitates the revelative function of image, then it can be correlated with the verticality of the man, and the verticality of the opening of the compass. It is also the element that breaks the claustrophobic character of the front plan.



Here, in “one of Maier’s most cryptic emblems,”²⁸⁹ is the definitive geometrical and abstract representation of *unio mistica*. If in the case of the rest of the emblems the

²⁸⁵ See Szönyi, *John Dee’s Occultism*, 288.

²⁸⁶ Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man is a *cosmografia del minor mondo* that corresponds perfectly with the desire of Maier and his Rosicrucian friend Fludd. It is also a recurrent theme in Western art and esotericism that obsessed artists as Dürer or William Blake.

²⁸⁷ The same idea may be found in Herbrandt Jamsthaler, *Viatorium spagyricum* (Frankfurt, 1625). One of the differences here is that the principles are not inside, but outside of the geometrical relation.

²⁸⁸ Szönyi, “Occult Semiotics and Iconology,” 316.

allusion to the *lapis* is lacking or is indirectly suggested, here the reference to it is direct. One can say that in this emblem one may find the expression of the essence of Maier's alchemical research which had started with his second alchemical book, *De Circulo Physico Quadrato* (1616). Each figure has its proper meaning and is related to another. The circle represents the one, as *unio mistica*, while at the same time it corresponds to chaos.²⁹⁰ Again, it seems to be an influence of or a similar idea to Dee's mathematical conception²⁹¹ that considered mathematics as a thorough *artes*, the most beautiful art.

One of the associations²⁹² that should be made is the one with the seventh image of Basile Valentin's *Twelve Keys* (Appendix, ill. no.14).²⁹³ Initially, like *De lapide philosophorum* of Lamspring, Basile Valentin's book was published in 1599 without illustrations. Maier edited the book in his compendium *Tripus Aureus* published by Lucas Jennis in Frankfurt in 1618, republished by Jennis also in *Musæum Hermeticum* (1625), and, as expected, one finds it also in the edition of 1678. Therefore, emblem XXI may be Maier's version of the illustration for Valentin's influential book. In Valentin's illustration one can see a character that patronizes a key. The character is obviously an allegory, but the key is not. It differs from Maier's illustration: there the philosopher is not an allegory but he is the alchemist himself. The philosopher shows (and his didactic gesture expresses clearly) how to create (or to draw) the *lapis*. I think that this represents the influence of the magic character of the sign in alchemical imagery. In the illustrations of both Valentin and Maier one can recognize patterns from Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, where the circle has particular magical power.

The revelative character of this image is obvious, as Szőnyi has pointed out: "it does not contain a narrative-based allegory."²⁹⁴ Here the "discursive logic is abandoned and the iconic elements of the picture result in an intuitive understanding of cosmic or supernatural truths."²⁹⁵ All these occur because of the geometrical character of the emblem. In the *Discourse*, Maier develops the idea from the last verse of the epigram: *dogma Geometriae si capis omne scies*. Here he openly criticizes Plato concerning his anamnesis theory:

²⁸⁹ Szőnyi, "Occult Semiotics and Iconology," 316.

²⁹⁰ Cf. *Tripus aureus* (1618), 407.

²⁹¹ Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 296.

²⁹² The iconographical and intellectual background of these types of illustrations is very well analyzed in Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 284-299.

²⁹³ See Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light*, 155.

²⁹⁴ Szőnyi, "Occult Semiotics and Iconology" 317.

We do not deny that there are some sparks of notions and mere powers imprinted in us, which must be reduced into act by institution, but we utterly deny that they are such or so great as to be the Summaries of Arts and Sciences without any precedent instruction.²⁹⁶

One reason for that is: “If Geometry is so easy and natural to children, how comes it to pass that Plato did not know the Quadrature of a Circle.”²⁹⁷ The origin of this knowledge is not important in itself, but in the act of transmitting sacred knowledge from an initiate to a pupil. One of the riddles in the time of Plato was to make a square with a perimeter equal to the circumference of a circle.

As in the case of emblem XXX, the stress is on the man and woman who symbolize *one*. The difference is that here there is no allegory with the zoomorphic layer but, on the contrary, an “allegory” with the geometric layer. If in emblem XXX the necessary relation between the two principles is presented, here one can see the way to put together the male and female principle. The manner is presented in a revelative way, but in the light of the content of the discourse, the image became didactic: “reading” the content of the image meaning the layer and the stages for the lapis, is the cognitive effort of the viewer.

Another ambiguity, a geometrical one this time, is that the compass of the geometer is from circle to circle or from square to circle: the way of making the stone is from unity to unity or from the four elements to unity. Taking into consideration that the quintessence also stood for marriage (of man and woman, sky and earth) one can see here that the relation is between the five elements (the quintessence: the four elements of the square and the fifth element of the marriage) and unity (the great circle). Through geometry Maier illustrates the passion of Neo-Platonic Renaissance thinking for *one*.

The triangle that follows the circle-square is, for Maier, a symbol for the body, spirit and soul. Maier points out that the square should be reduced to the triangle, that is: “Body or earth in the Blackness of Saturn, the Spirit in the Lunar whiteness as water, and the Soul or air in the Solar Citrinity;”²⁹⁸ a reference to the three fugues of the musical scores and their power of transmutation.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 318.

²⁹⁶ Discourse XXI, Transcription made by Hereward Tilton after the translations in British Library MS. Sloane 3645 (Adam Mclean’ website <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/at121-5..html>).

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

The end of the process is marked by the transition from a triangle (three elements) to unity: “Then the Triangle will be perfect, but this again must be changed into a Circle.”²⁹⁹ If until now a kind of coherence can be found, the last sentence returns the “natural” logic (square – triangle – circle, i.e., 4 – 3 – 1), with Maier saying:

that is, into an invariable redness, by which operation the woman is converted into the man and made one with him, and six the first of the perfect numbers is absolved by one, two having returned again to an unity in which there is Rest and eternal peace³⁰⁰

The problem is, why six? And why is it a perfect number? Again, the discourse is cryptic, and the solution is not in the emblem. There should be some logic behind the presence of the number six, but the discourse and the image do not help too much. Thus, one should turn to the tradition of six, a number connected with individuality and the creation of man (on the sixth day). If the number six stands for man, then its solution into one has a kind of meaning: the woman (which was broken from man) will now return to Adam, who is the same as one.

But when taking into account the gesture of the man inside the center of the small circle the revelative function is reversed into a didactic one. In the center of this “European Mandala” there is a point that makes the mandala not a static point (for contemplation), but gives it a dynamic intensity, that starts a story or a discourse. The revelative function is apparent, while the didactic function is developed especially when the “linearity” of the process is underlined. Here, the analysis of the image can “destroy” the revelative character, as a story inside of it, but in the case of emblem XXX an analysis of the image created through similarities reveals the possibility of a revelative function. The revelative character of emblem XXI can be converted into a didactic one. Therefore, I consider that in the *seventh key* of Basil Valentine, the revelative character is more fixed than in Maier’s case.³⁰¹

2. Ambiguities and Questions

What does all this mean? Mercury-Atlanta is running and Sulphur-Hippomens is trying to catch her, to enter harmony with her. In a laboratory way, one can say that these illustrations together with their comments are metaphorical representations or

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

Decknames. Then, why use all these obscure ways of expression? As I suggested, parts of the images can be seen as revelatory with respect to metaphysical knowledge with a “theological” content.

The representations of *coincidentia oppositorum* do not follow a necessary pattern in these three illustrations; it is exemplified through different types of images and, in consequence, has different functions: revelative-didactic (VIII), didactic-revelative (XXX), revelative-didactic-magic (XXI). There is a kind of competition between the illustrations made through concrete human imagery and abstract, non-human imagery (especially geometric figures). As I tried to stress, the geometrical imagery has a peculiar status in the landscape of anthropomorphic emblems. Although it is a non-balanced competition between the two means of representation, one can say that the revelative and cosmological effect is stronger in the cases when the geometric and abstract symbols are emphasized.

I would argue that alchemical images should be considered as part of a religious behavior and the function of these images does not follow the patterns of visual renderings of scientific processes, but is an essential element of a spiritual behavior, comparable to Orthodox icons. The emblems can be seen as lay icons. Mario Praz argued that “seventeenth century man did not stop at the purely fantastic cherishing of the image: he wanted to externalize it, to transpose it into a hieroglyph, an emblem.”³⁰² In *Atalanta fugiens* there seems to be an obvious effort to create an emblematic narrative which would translate the idea of a hieroglyph (sacred sign). Indeed, Praz “sees the emblem as a type of visual conceit, using the techniques and many of the topics which characterize Petrarchan love poetry, Mannerist and Baroque *agudeza*, and Metaphysical conceits.”³⁰³ Maier’s emblems are in direct link with the hieroglyphs of Dee and “Idea Hieroglyphica” of Kircher. Johannes Baptista von Gebhardt, a collaborator of Kircher, noted in a “commonplace book written between 1667 and 1673” about *character noster Hermeticus Hieroglyphicus* the very significant

³⁰¹ But also here, in Basil’s key, the image has a strong didactic potential: if one looks carefully at the triangle the story can be seen as a triangle that has covered and curbed the water which is inside the phial, the key representing in fact a hermetic phial.

³⁰² Mario Praz, in his *Studies in Seventeenth Century Imagery* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1975), 15.

³⁰³ Michael Bath, *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture* (London: Longman, 1994), 4.

observation that Kircher borrowed from Maier and others his conception concerning hieroglyphs: *haec omnia Kircherus depromsit ex Maiero et aliis*.³⁰⁴

Each illustration has its logic and nothing is in it by chance. The coherence of the antagonistic elements inside of them is a specific blend of Renaissance artistic conception. This internal logic is tributary to the content.³⁰⁵ Also, the images obey an aesthetic logic. One could say that in many situations for the woodcutter the aesthetic principle goes beyond the alchemical one.

In the case of Maier's emblems, one may observe that the "metaphysical conceits" are in competition with the aesthetic issue. *Atalanta fugiens* is "a book of emblems in which spiritual alchemy reached a high point of artistic expression."³⁰⁶ The emblems are very attentively and accurately made, a fact which hints that one of Maier's purposes was not only to create alchemical emblems, simple symbols that illustrate alchemical principles, but also to create beautiful emblems. Usually, alchemical imagery did not pay too much attention to aesthetic qualities³⁰⁷ because the focus was laid exclusively on meaning. With Maier, the quality and significance seem to share equally. Maier's emblematic images seem to be a tribute to the idea that what one illustrates has the same importance as the manner in which one makes the illustration, and priority went to this latter seductive character of the image. One can say that there is a "frivolous" aspect to these images because they try to "seduce" on an aesthetic level, not only to capture a spiritual meaning. This aesthetic aspect can also stand as a way of suggesting Maier's desire to get to the intellect by means of the senses; the aesthetic aspect is addressed to the senses, where the idea can thus be caught better.

The language of alchemy is poetic and imagistic,³⁰⁸ imagistic and scriptural. In *Atalanta Fugiens*, Maier seems to think through images (poetic images). Each

³⁰⁴ Carlos Gilly, "Hermetism for Tourists: Athanasius Kircher Makes a Museum Piece out of Hermes", in *Magia, alchimia, scienza dal '400 al '700. L'influsso di Ermete Trismegisto/Magic, Alchemy and Science 15th-18th centuries. The Influence of Hermes Trismegistus, Vol. I*, ed. C. Gilly and C. van Heertum (Florence: Centro Di, 2005), 503, 507.

³⁰⁵ Regarding that it was considered: "the genuineness of the description of reality... is... dependent on the inner logic of the approach, on the mutual conformity of the elements of the work, to a greater extent than on the conformity of these elements with the external reality," see Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

³⁰⁶ Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 70; "a book much sought after for the beautiful illustration to its enigmatic text" Eadem. 82

³⁰⁷ With some important exceptions, the quality could always be improved, for example: *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550) and the *Exposition of the Hieroglyphical Figures* (1612), attributed to Nicholas Flamel. For a sophisticated and gentle quality see the account of *Ripley Scroll* or *Splendor Solis*.

illustrated story expresses a spiritual reality in a poetic way. There is not only an aesthetic of the image, but also a kind of prosody inside of them. As a poetic-image, the illustration does not compete with the text of the epigram; it is only the imagistic face of the poem scripted in the epigram. One can see a similiarity: the epigram stays as a visual representation facilitated with the help of the word, while the image stays as a poem because of its narrative features. For this reason and because of the ambiguous revelative-didactic function, Gombrich's concept of revelative image should be integrated with the specification that a revelative character is possible even in the context of narrative images. In short, the image functions on several levels, that is, revelative, narrative, *seductive*. All these levels are not displayed in succession. They can very well be simultaneous or in stages. For example, in the case of the sword-egg emblem, an alchemist can understand spontaneously a mystic reality (the revelative function), and after that follow the story (the narrative character of the image) or be caught by the harmony and aesthetic symmetries (the aesthetic character). Regarding the nature of ambiguity, Gareth Roberts concludes that "Alchemy's characteristic mode of discourse is to express its truths in binary figures of language: paradox, enigma, equivocation and allegories which say one thing and mean another."³⁰⁹ What do "binary figures" mean? Roberts says that "binary antithesis is complementary and exists only in the service of final unity." He uses the motto of Maier' *Symbola Aureae Mensae* (Appendix, ill. no. 8) which declares that "All are united in one which is divided into two parts," for reinforcing the binary character of alchemical speech, for example the *theoretica* and *practica* or *solve* and *coagula*. One can see an ambiguous character in the distinction operating between *didactic* and *revelative* in *Atalanta*. A revelative image, as is XXI, can be reversed into a didactic one.

The emblems analyzed make the running of Atalanta incarnate in her dynamic character. Even each depiction is a "photographic" moment, the story is in action: the warrior is cutting the egg in that moment, the sun is in a dialog with the moon, and the geometer is in the process of squaring the circle. This is the *running* of Atalanta.

³⁰⁸ 'Imagism' and 'imagistic' also exist as terms relating to some trends of avant-garde poetry (especially Eliot, Erza Pound, Hilda Doolittle) that was influenced by haiku way of making poetry.

³⁰⁹ Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy*, 92. Eco, using the term "overcoding," said about the polyvalence of meaning the following: "the interpreter of the text is at the same time obliged both to challenge the existing codes and to advance interpretative hypotheses that work as more comprehensive, tentative and prospective form of codification." See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 129.

At the same time, each depiction is a petrified story: the warrior is in an eternal fight with the egg, the sun and moon cannot be separated, the geometer is at the climax of squaring the circle. We can suppose that Maier was aware of this ambiguity between static and dynamic; the language of alchemy predisposes one to this kind of double discourse. In other words, the alchemists, through their depictions, managed to realize an image that is at the same time didactic and revelative, a *coincidentia* at the level of imagistic discourse.³¹⁰ I understand these images as a “theology” of alchemy, having an obvious “theological” message in the way that they express a metaphysical conception about man and the world.³¹¹

³¹⁰ An idea not so remote from that of Szőnyi, who asserts that “the meaning” is “generated in the dialogical space between the work and the addressee,” concluding that “it will be impossible to classify” the emblems from *Atalanta* (Szőnyi, “Occult Semiotics and Iconology” 318).

³¹¹ Maier is part of the “reformation” current: the need of Renaissance esoterism to “reform” the magic, to resurrect the old traditions (as for example Neo-Alexandrian hermetism, Neo-Platonism) and, most important, to reform the Christian religion, into a “religion” of Cristian Rosenkrantz.

CONCLUSIONS

In alchemical imagery one has the impression that the obvious meaning of an image is just the door to another meaning which has preeminence. For this reason a distance remains between the viewer and the image. How does the alchemist interpret it? My research does not solve this question, but suggests possible answers. For us, without a cultural alchemical background, these images remain cryptic. Beyond this background, the image manifests its true meaning precisely through its revelatory character: when the alchemist is seeing, for example, a sword-egg image, there is an undeciphered message that, even if not expressed, remains in the tension created by the anomalous association of sword and egg. What is transmitted is something that is not only part of a cultural background but a message that also implies a spiritual outlook.

My analysis indicates the speculative and spiritual character of Maier's alchemy. The images analyzed could also translate the chemical processes to be found in an alchemical laboratory. The degree of sophistication and the wide-ranging use of allegories and symbols point to spiritual knowledge rather than to material transformation. The direct link with the pragmatic side of alchemy is shadowed by the author's own hermeneutical efforts when describing alchemical stages.

Some of the images analyzed can be seen as "eternal" alchemical images. Maier preserved alchemical tradition and was also an innovator. He does not innovate so much in the sense that one does not find other themes or representations, for the motifs are almost the same. There is innovation in the way of representation, as I underlined, specific for the early seventeenth century, but, most importantly, in the way of the alchemical motifs are connected, e.g., the image of the egg and the sword.

The illustrations analyzed present three different types of narration: a violent process (to "kill" the egg), a universal harmony (on all layers of reality), and the attaining of the *lapis* (in the most problematic manner, through squaring the circle). What holds them together is their function. I would argue that the perception of their function very much depends on the viewer. First of all, they are beautiful emblems; therefore they have an aesthetic function. Second, they transmit an alchemical message, and thus they have a didactic function. And finally, these pictures were, for a Renaissance alchemist, uncommon pictures, they are revelatory. Their message for a Renaissance person who was deeply involved in the world of alchemy was revealed

suddenly. There are also many other categories through which one can define their function, and the question could be raised whether Gombrich's methodology is the most appropriate.

What is observable is that the *Atlanta* has a stress on image more than Maier's other works. In the economy of the book, the image occupies a middle place, between what is beyond, namely the faculty of hearing, and what is "under," the faculty of rational discourse. As general conclusions I would state that:

- The semantics and structure of the iconography is not constant. The anthropomorphic iconography is broken by geometric imagery that puts the viewer in the front of an image with a non-didactic character, and with a revelative and spiritual one.

- It seems highly probable that Maier used the full illustrated manuscript of Lamspring from 1607 (or another earlier edition of it), not only the printed edition without illustrations from 1599.

- The alchemical iconography of *Atalanta fugiens* is representative of Renaissance spiritual alchemy (XXI), but it also has elements that link part of the illustrations with medieval conceptions (as in XXX), and, furthermore, is innovative as well (VIII).

- The imagery of *Atalanta* is a parallel world to that of the written word which obeys its proper rules: these are illustrated metaphysical principles.

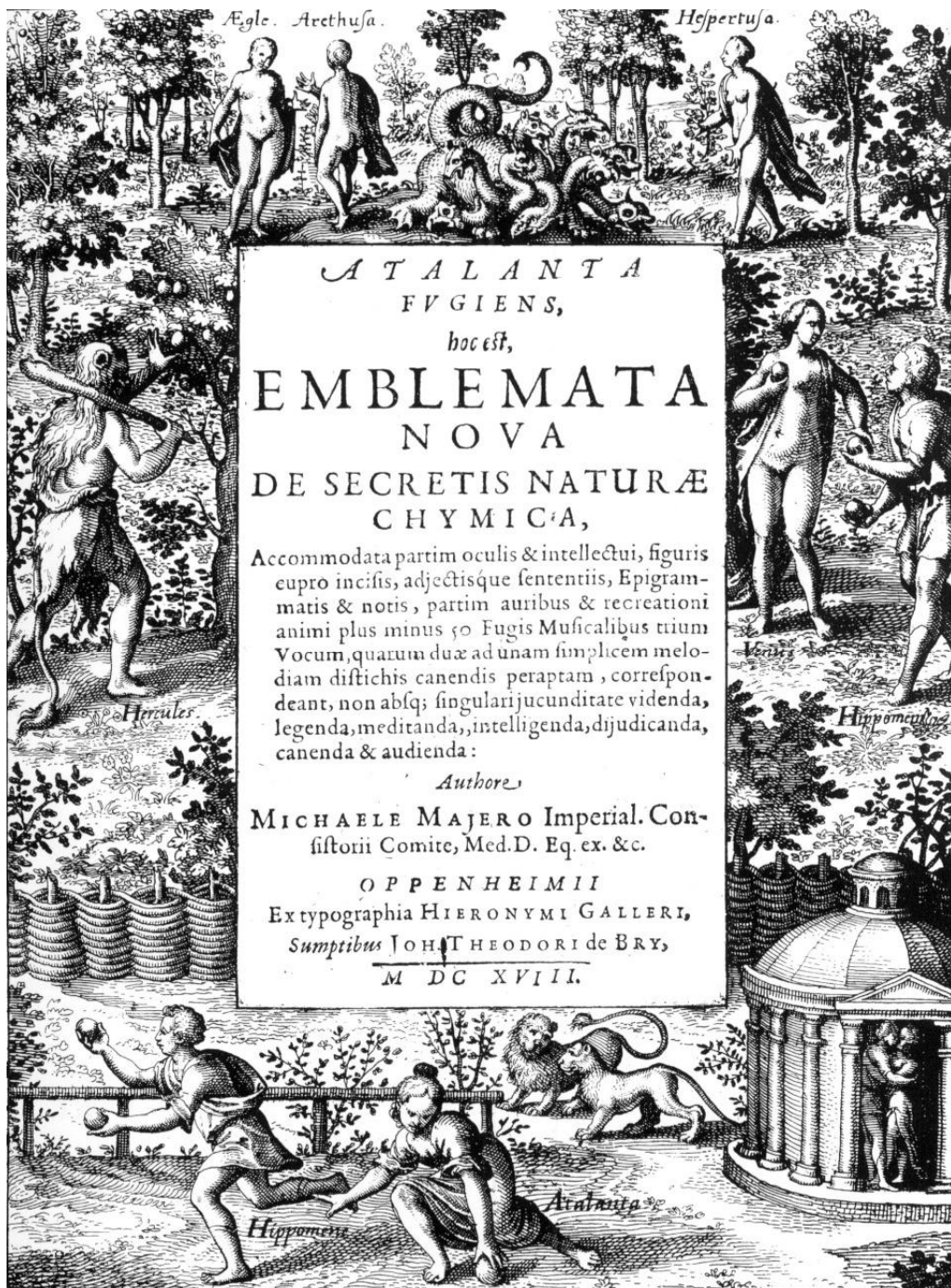
- There is dialectic between the front plan and the rear plan of the images that can topple the function of an image from a revelative function to a didactic one.

The usage of allegories in *Atlanta*'s iconography has a function beyond its metaphorical and didactic character. These images became symbols in themselves, *developed symbols* or *icons*, synthetic representations that concentrate a *summa* of meanings, even if the narrative character is present. What is the function of these images? They say more than the texts. In the case of Maier, I would suggest, not necessarily as a conclusion, but rather as concluding hypothesis, that the images are cinematic symbols that can be converted into symbols and in consequence the symbols can be translated into narrative image. This kind of behavior, which valorized the image more than the text to express an abstract thing, is specific for alchemical texts from the Renaissance.

I would also suggest that the presence of images in alchemical texts is a way of expressing the unity of knowledge. As I remarked in the chapter concerning the stature of image, alchemy could be seen as a reaction to scholasticism because of the discursive character of knowledge that was formed in the rigid steps of argumentation, a totally different reaction from the Cartesian response. “The unity of knowledge,” opposite to “the succession of knowledge,” is the ultimate aim of the esoteric tradition. The image, whether it is a Renaissance masterpiece, an Impressionist landscape or a Surrealist dream, communicates in the highest way a desire for the unity of knowledge, and is better illustrated in Neo-Platonic conceptions about the function of the image than in the history of chemistry.

Atalanta fugiens was coherent with Maier’s personality and the spiritual taste of the Renaissance, which was well illustrated in the political plan at the court of Rudolph II. Music was part of a harmonic whole. In this setting, imagery played an important role, because music can not be followed in an abstract way (only through hearing). The illustrations are the counterpart of the musical scores; they are the “physical” dance. The rest, i.e., writing, is the theoretical discourse, which could well be absent for a learned alchemist. The alchemist could understand the internal union of mater and spirit through images and fugues. In this book, Maier shows again that his fundamental opening is into art (in a Renaissance understanding). He is a poet and a musician who sings in an artistic way about alchemy.

APPENDIX



No.1. Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*'s Frontispiece

Es hat ihn der Wind getragen im Bauche.

*Atalanta
sen von
Fugiens.*

Embryo vento sâ Bore æ qui clauditur al-
vo, Vivus in hanc lucem si semel ortus erit, or tus e rit.

*Hippomenes
sen von
sequens.*

Embryo vento sâ Bore æ qui clauditur al-
vo, Vivus in hanc lucem si semel ortus erit, erit.

*Pomum ob-
jectum sen
von Mo-
rans.*

Embryo ventosa Boreæ qui clauditur alvo,
Vivus in hanc lucem si semel ortus erit.

I. Epigrammatica Latini versio Germanica.

Die Frucht im Bauch des Winds/welche noch verborgen lebet/
So ferne in dieses Lichte dieselbe wirt erhebet/
Kan allerhöhen Helden Raht und That vbergehen weit
Durch Kunst und starke Gewalt und seines Leibes Arbeit;
Schaw/das er nicht vnziemlich vor der Zeit geboren werd/
Sondern in rechter Maß komme lebendig auff die Erd.

EMBLE-

No.2. Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*. Example of musical score with the three voices that corresponds to Mercury, Sulphur and Salt.



No.3. Michael Maier, *Symbola Aureae Mensae* (1617). Avicenna symbol.



No. 4. Michael Maier's coat of arms. In the half right part is Avicenna's symbol that stays for *coincidentia oppositorum*.



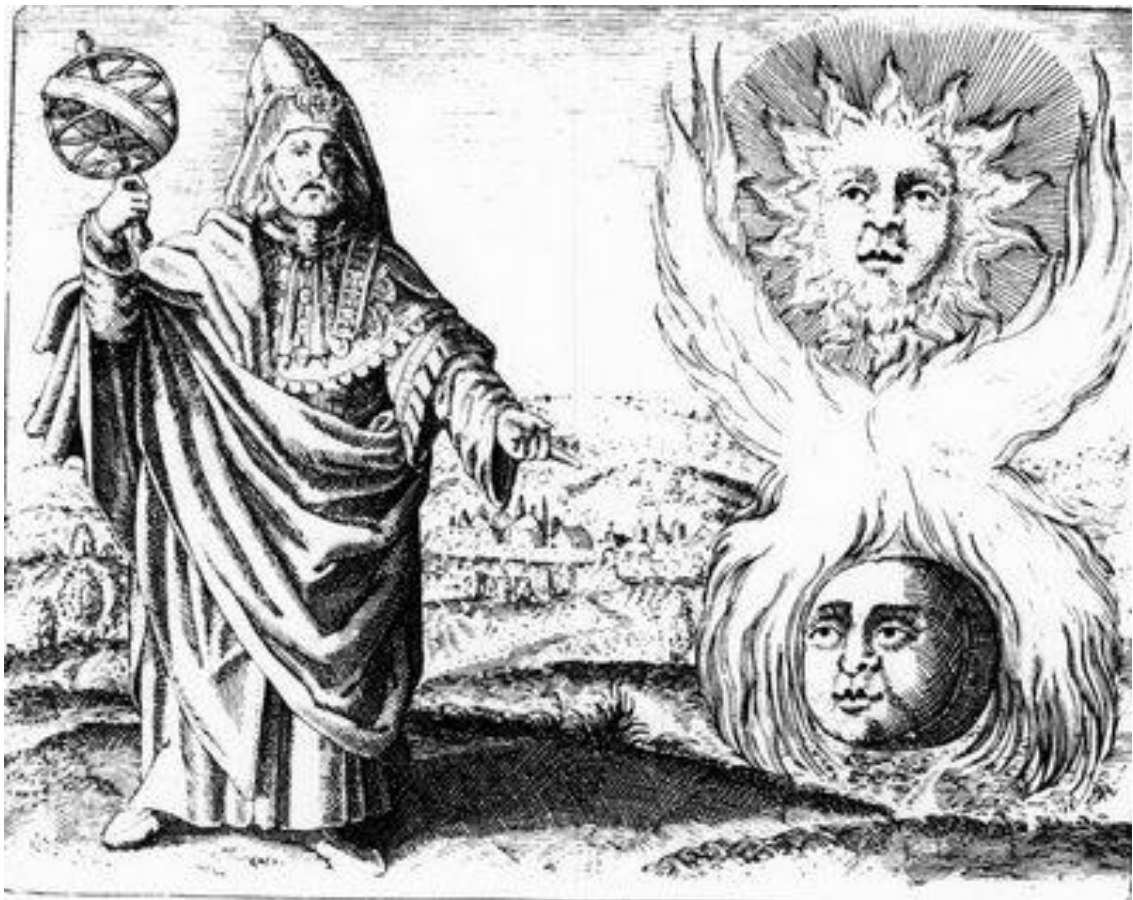
No. 5. Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*; *Emblema V*.



No. 6. Maier' coat of arms, manuscript, Wappenbuch II, fol. 114 (Wien, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv).



No.7. Johann Daniel Mylius. *Opus Medico-Chymicum* (1622). Detail from the frontispiece.



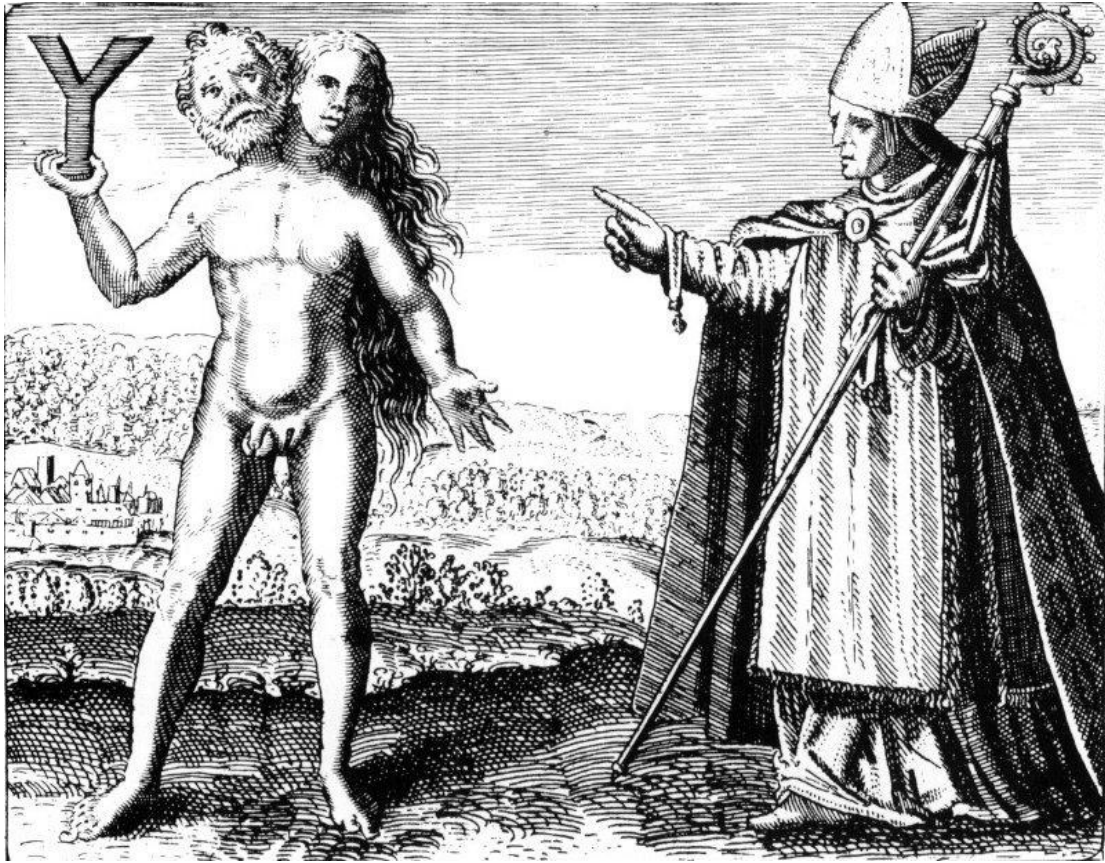
No.8. Michael Maier, *Symbola Aureae Mensae* (1617).Hermes indicates to conjunction of Sol and Moon through the help of fire; the first illustration.



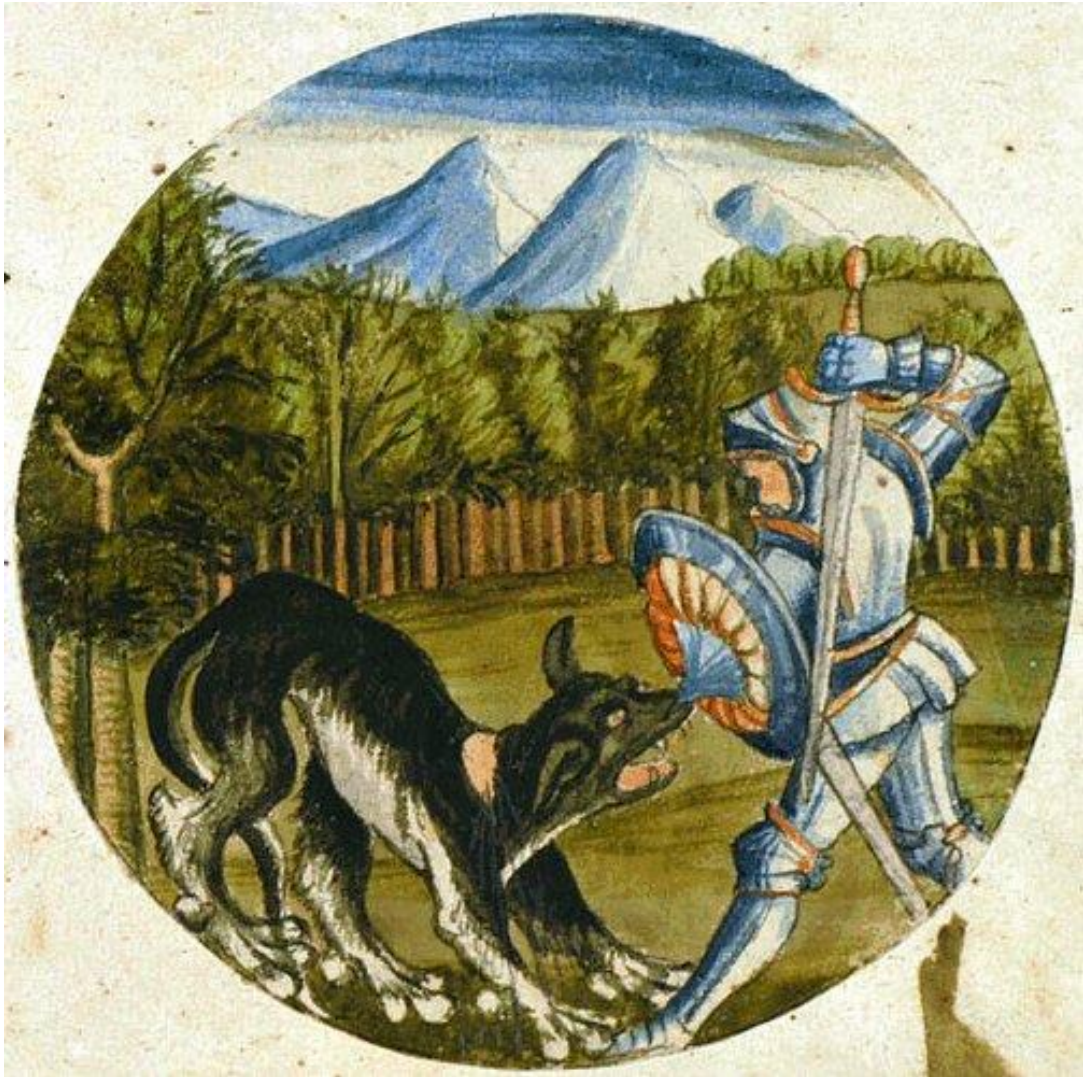
No.9. Lamspring's *Tractatus de lapide philosophorum* (1607), *Septima figura*. MS Salzburg, Universitätsbibliothek Salzburg (MS. M I 92).



No.10. Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*; *Emblema VII.*



No.11. Michael Maier, *Symbola Aureae Mensae* (1617), the Pythagorean letter “Y.” Albertus Magnus shows to hermaphrodite as the realization of *coincidentia*. The Pythagorean letter “Y” is the abstraction of the idea incarnated by hermaphrodite.



No.12. Lamspring's *Tractatus de lapide philosophorum* (1607), *Secunda figura*. The sword is associated with the moment of *Putrefactio*.

Hic celeriter animadvertite
Nigram feram in sylva.

SECUNDA FIGURA.



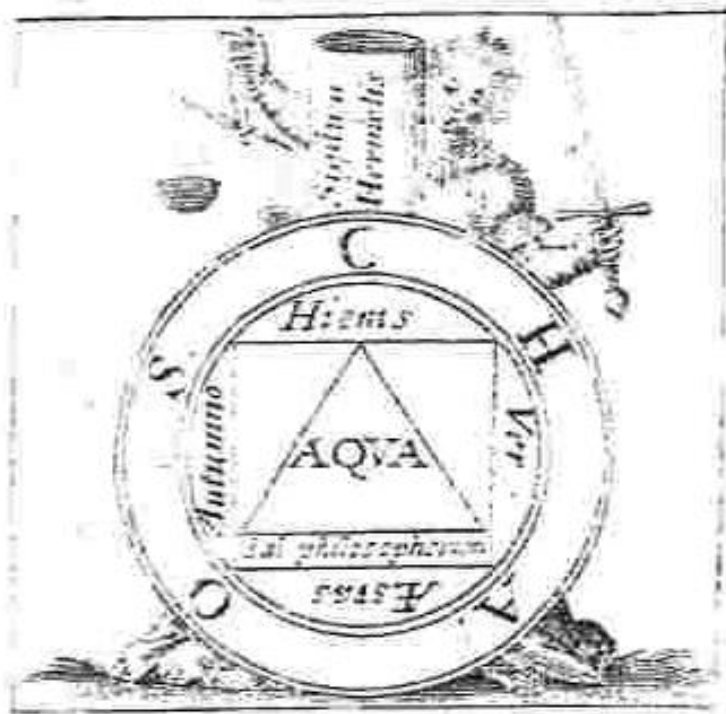
PUTREFACTIO.

IN

PHILA.

No. 13. Lambspring, *De lapide Philosophorum Figuræ et Emblemata*; *Secunda figura* from *Museum Hermeticum* (1678).

VII. CLAVIS.



No.14. Basil Valentine, *De Lapide Sapientem*, the seventh key, from *Museum Hermeticum*. (1678).

Est summum portentum
Ex duobus leonibus unum fieri.

QUARTA FIGVRA.



Spiritus & Anima sunt conjungendi & redigendi
ad corpus suum.

XX 3

Alexan.

No. 15. Lambspring, *De lapide Philosophorum Figuræ et Emblemata*; Quarta figura from *Museum Hermeticum* (1678).



No.16. Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*; *Emblema XVI*.

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- . *De Circulo physico, quadrato: Hoc est, de Auro ejusque virtute medicinali, sub duro cortice instar nuclei latente, an et qualis inde petenda sit tractatus haut inutilis.* Oppenheim: Lucas Jennis, 1616.
- . *Symbola aureae mensae duodecim nationum, hoc est Hermaea seu Mercurii festa ab heroibus duodenis selectis, artis chymicae usu, sapientia et autoritate paribus celebrata, ad Pyrgopolynicen seu adversarium illum tot annis jactabundum, virgini Chemiae injuriam argumentis tam vitiosis quam convitiis argutis inferentem, confundendum et exarmandum, artifices vero optime de ea meritos suo honori et famae restituendum.* Frankfurt a. M: Lucas Jennis, 1617.
- . *Atalanta Fugiens, hoc est, Emblemata Nova de Secretis Naturae Chymica, Accommodata partim oculis et intellectui, figuris cupro incisis, adjunctisque sententiis, Epigrammatis et notis, partim auribus & recreationi animi plus minus 50 Fugis Musicalibus trium Vocum, quarum duae ad unam simplicem melodiam distichis canendis peraptam, correspondeant, non absq; singulari jucunditate videnda, legenda, meditanda, intelligenda, dijudicanda, canenda et audienda.* Oppenheim: Johann Theodori de Bry, 1617.
- . (ed.), *Tripus Aureus, hoc est, Tres Tractatus Chymici Selectissimi, nempe; I. Basilii Valentini, Benedictini Ordinis monachi, Germani, Practica vna cum 12. clauibus & appendice, ex Germanico; II. Thomas Nortoni, Angli Philosophi Crede Mihi seu Ordinale, ante annos 140. ab autore scriptum, nunc ex Anglicano manuscripto in Latinum translatus, phrasi cuiusque authoris vt & sententia retenta; III. Cremeri cuiusdam Abbatis Westmonasteriensis Angli Testamentum, hactenus nondum publicatum, nunc in diuersarum nationum gratiam editi, & figuris cupro affabre incisis ornati opera & studio.* Frankfurt a. M.: Lucas Jennis, 1618.
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