

A Threefold Alchemical Journey Through the Book of Lambspring

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The Book of Lambspring is well known as one of the gems from the *Musaeum Hermeticum* published in 1625 by Lucas Jennis in Frankfurt, especially for its series of fifteen emblematic plates. It seems that this little book was first published, under the title *De Lapide Philosophico Triga Chemicum* (Prague 1599) compiled by the Frenchman Nicolas Barnaud prominent in the alchemical circles around Rudolf II. However, this tract and its emblematic drawings circulated in manuscript during the last two decades of the 16th century, as is attested by a number of copies dated to this period which still survive in libraries and special collections today. [Of these we might mention Ms 16752 in the National Museum in Nurnberg, and the manuscript copy in the University of Leiden.]

The Book of Lambspring is a short work with an introductory section in verse and an emblem showing a threefold furnace. Following the tradition of emblem books of the period its series of fifteen emblems each bears a motto or title with a verse on the facing page. The Book of Lambspring is a work of spiritual alchemy, has few references to physical alchemical processes, and it seems unlikely that it could ever have provided any clues that might help someone engaged upon physical experimentation. Instead, it is a clear, powerful and extremely useful statement of the inner work of the spiritual alchemist. Its verses point to the soul and spirit involved in the alchemical transformation and its fifteen emblems are evocative symbols of these inner processes.

Unlike some other series of alchemical emblems (say the Mylius Philosophia Reformata, or even the Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine), the Book of Lambspring avoids complex layers of symbols, or paradoxical 'surrealistic' images, and presents its message instead through direct simplicity of imagery. It is perhaps this delightful simplicity, joined with the archetypal power of its symbolism that keeps this work approachable by present day consciousness, and ensures the continued use of these emblems as illustrations in popular works on 'occult' and 'mystical' symbolism. Although individual emblems from the Book of Lambspring still seem to touch our souls through the clean lines of their archetypal symbolism, there does not seem to have been any serious attempt made to reveal the structure of its sequence as a whole and of how to work through the process of inner development sketched by 'Lambspring'.

One way of looking at these emblems, which I believe we will find useful as a basis for our inner work, is to see the sequence as forming three groups of five emblems 1-5, 6-10, 11-15.

A clue to this is given in the title page illustration which shows a threefold furnace,



and this is hinted at further by the fact that Emblems 1-5, and 6-10 have short epigrams placed under each emblem, while the sequence 11-15 does not have this feature.

Once we look at the emblems in this way distinct patterns can be seen. The first layer of five emblems deal with the different facets of polarities in our inner world.



Emblem 1 shows us two fish swimming in opposite directions in our inner sea ("The sea is the body, the two fish are Soul and Spirit" states the epigram). These two polarities coexist though work in different ways.



The second emblem shows a different aspect to polarities in the fight between the inner dragon and an armed knight (a St George figure) in the Forest of the Soul. In this emblem there is a sense that the polarities must struggle to overcome each other.



Next in Emblem 3 we have the beautiful picture of the meeting in a clearing in the forest of a magnificent Stag and a graceful Unicorn. The Stag as a symbol is often associated with the Sun and the Unicorn is usually linked with the Moon. These polarities are to be coupled together through the alchemist's work.



Next, in Emblem 4, the polarities are seen in their manifestation as masculine and feminine, pictured here in the meeting of Lion and Lioness. We note how they raise their opposite paws (Lion - right, Lioness - left) mirroring the posture of the Stag and Unicorn in the previous emblem.



The fifth emblem, which completes this part of the sequence shows the wild Wolf and the tamed Dog fighting for supremacy. These polarities are further linked in the verse with the directions West (Dog) and East (Wolf).

Thus we can see that the first five emblems show us different ways in which the polarities appear in our inner world. The dynamically opposed though balanced way of the two fishes, the battling of the Dragon and Knight elements, or Wolf and Dog, and the meeting and relationship indicated in the Stag-Unicorn and Lion-Lioness emblems.

The next five emblems seem to indicate different ways in which we must inwardly work to unite these polarities in our beings.



Emblem 6 is a clear statement of the Ouroboros, the serpent dragon that siezes its own tail and unites these polarities in forming its circle in the Soul.



Emblem 7 shows us two birds - one sits on the nest and cannot move, tied to its earthly task, while its partner attempts to soar into the heavens. As the associated verse states "The one that is below holds the one that is above" echoing the opening lines of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes.



The next emblem, number 8, the central emblem of the whole sequence, pictures two birds, a red and a white, fighting each other - one above, the other below. The verse indicates that these become transformed into white doves and becomes a Phoenix. Thus at this stage, the polarities fight, absorb each other and are reborn in a new form.



The ninth emblem shows us the King of the Forest seated on his throne with his feet set upon the Dragon he has overcome. This marks the inner stage which completes the integration of the polarities revealed in Emblem 2. Now, no struggle with the Dragon is necessary, for the King has emerged in the Soul as ruler of the dark realm of the Forest. His throne also bears fish upon its arms, echoing the symbolism of Emblem 1. Significantly, seven steps mount up to his throne.



This second sequence ends in Emblem 10 with the image of an alchemical adept roasting a Salamander in the fire. Here the inner fire works upon the Salamander or spiritual remnant of the Dragon, purifying and elevating it, and investing it with a new spiritual energy, till it becomes the glowing living interior source of the Philosophers' Stone, or inner foundation for the solidity of the Soul. This contrasts with the picture of the inner sea of the initial emblem 1, with its implication of the lack of solidity in the flowing soul forces.

We can therefore recognise in this second grouping of emblems some indication of ways in which the polarities must be woven together and brought into a relationship through the inner work of the soul alchemist. The first group shows the ways in which these polarities appear in the soul, the second points to ways of working with them towards an integration.

We note some cross correspondences between these two groups :-

[1] Water - [10] Fire element.

[2] Dragon/Knight - [9] Dragon/King relationship.

[4] Lion/Lioness - [7] Two birds 'married' together.

[5] Wolf/Dog of East and West - [6] Ouroboros uniting two directions.

The last grouping of emblems introduce a new set of characters - an old King, young Prince, and winged spiritual guide - and show in sequence the stages an alchemist must go through to complete the work begun in the earliest stages of his inner work. This sequence is rather strange and we will here consider it as a whole.



In Emblem 11, the old King gives his son into the charge of an ancient spiritual guide, who leads him up a high mountain in order to give him a glimpse of the heavenly throne. The young Prince delights in this vision but realises the great sorrow of his father who was not not able to undertake this journey, and decides to return to the old King.



In Emblem 12, we see the guide with his charge high upon the mountain standing on the threshold of the spiritual world, the archetypes of the Sun, Moon and Stars around them.



The old King was as dead without his son and when the young Prince returns with his guide, his father is so pleased to see him that he swallows his son. This is pictured in the thirteenth emblem.



Emblem 14 shows the old King lying sweating in his bed, while a gentle dew descends from above softening the father's body so that his son may be reborn from him. The final emblem shows the rebirth of the son from his father, and the verse states "The Son ever remains in the Father, and the Father in the Son", which echoes Christian sentiments.

One interpretation is of the old King or father as the earthly part of the alchemist's soul, or that aspect turned to the body and outer senses - the young Prince or son as that part of the soul that is free to rise to the spirit - and the Guide as the spiritual part of the alchemist. Strangely, this sequence seems to indicate a path of spiritual development which is almost an inversion or mirroring of the christian path. In the tradition of the christian mystical path, there is a sense of the incarnation of spirit in matter, as a sacrifice of the spirit descending from the Heavenly Father to become involved and incarnated in matter as the Christ, to suffer in the body, and to become resurrected and return to the spirit. In the alchemical path outlined here, the father is the earthly King, rather than Heavenly Father, the son is given an opportunity of rising into the spirit to leave the material realm behind, and kneel at the heavenly Throne, but elects to return to the material world and become reabsorbed by his earthly father, who is the suffering one. (We don't have here a picture of the spirit suffering in matter, but of the matter suffering without the spiritual).



The father undergoes a strange process of transformation through the dew that descends, and the sweat that rises out of his body. Eventually the son is emanated again and yet they remain inseparable, and as the text has it "they perish no more and laugh at death". This is not so much a resurrection from death as a transcendence of death. Thus this is a process of excarnation and suffering then incarnation, rather than a picture of incarnation then resurrection through suffering. In some ways this alchemical work is paralleled with the christian idea of the incarnation and resurrection, but here we seem to have a mirror image of the process.

The Book of Lambspring is an important work that points us especially to the inner aspect of the alchemical process. The indications I have presented here are only hints at one possible way of entering into the Lambspring process. However, as with all such hermetic systems of inner exercises, we cannot entirely grasp it through our thinking and if we wish to work this process we must take an inner journey into the strange landscape of Lambspring's work. By studying the text and meditatively penetrating each emblem in sequence we will be able to experience the symbols working within our souls. The

indications I have presented here, hopefully might be a useful map for exploring this process.