THE EARLIEST CONCEPTS OF THE SOUL AND THEIR BEARING ON ALCHEMY

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NOTHING shocks the human mind so much as the loss of a companion or a relative whose presence had meant so much happiness to the survivor. As its reverse experience the most pleasant surprise comes to an intelligent child on discovering an overnight addition of a brother or a sister in the family. In other words, the phenomena of birth and death leave the deepest impressions of all. To an acute observer the same is true of plant life. In a temperate region everything appears desolate and dead during winter, while, with the advent of spring, life seems to burst forth as though forced by an explosive. Now, to a reflective mind these contrasts, between life and death and active and latent life, are nothing compared to those between organic and inorganic world. To know this difference is to solve the fundamental problem of life. Reasoning logically man could trace his descent to an Adam. But Adam himself had to be conceived as "dust" enlivened. The real riddle of life consisted, therefore, in explaining the conversion of dead into living matter. This we shall see has a direct bearing on understanding alchemy which tries to imitate creation and to make live gold out of dead copper.

Alchemy is an offshoot of herbalism which had accepted animism as its basic doctrine. This attributed a soul even to a herb so that its soul could transmigrate into man. Alchemy had incorporated this doctrine but was also inspired by dualism. According to this everything is dual-natured, as male/female, applicable even to the soul. The male component of the soul is *Animus* in Latin, *Ruh* in Arabic, and *Spirit* in English. The female counterpart is *Anima* in Latin, *Nafas* in Arabic, and *Soul* (specific) in English. *Anima* or *Nafas* gives form or individuality ; *Animus* or *Ruh* imparts duration of life. Thus a crippled old man would have a poor *Nafas,* because he is physically infirm, but since he is already superannuated his *Animus* or *Ruh* must have been strong. Likewise herbalism discovered that Ephedra, as an ordinary herb, can only possess a weak *Nafas,* but, being a perennial plant and, above all, having red berries and even a red pith, it must be exceptionally strong in

its *Ruh*. The value of bearing red fruits will be explained later. Being rich in *Ruh,* Ephedra was extolled as the Soma-plant and its juice, a donor of longevity. Just as repeated blood transfusions can prolong human life, recurring use of Soma could postpone death on its threatening to approach one. On this account Soma has been interpreted as a drug of immortality. The alchemist, however, wanted a real drug of immortality, one which could confer immortality with a single dose. This is how alchemy branched off from herbalism.

The limitations to the properties of Soma had first to be explained. It has *Ruh* or Spirit but relatively no *Nafas* or Soul (specific). Such a soul is not reproductive, it cannot increase in totality ; it is, so to say, only male. To avoid misunderstanding soul, as a whole or as ordinarily understood, is written here with a small "s" as "soul"; whereas the male-soul as Spirit ; and the female-soul, or Soul specific, as Soul with a capital "S". Now, if the donor of a male-soul should be made to co-operate with another which can donate an equally powerful female-soul, a pair of *Ruh* and *Nafas* can fuse into a unity and become, like a hermaphrodite, capable of breeding its kind. The *male-soul could be discovered in many herbs,* but not the female-soul, because of the delicate constitution of such plants. On the contrary, metals are known for their solidity and this virtue is the expression of a strong female-soul or *Nafas*. Thus if a herb like Soma and a metal like Copper can donate their souls together we shall have two weak elements and two strong ones. On calcining them, the poor *Nafas* of the herb and the weak *Ruh* of the metal will disappear, leaving the strong Herbal Spirit to combine with the powerful Metallic Soul. In other words, the Soma-Copper complex gives rise to a strong pair of *Ruh-Nafas* or Spirit-Soul which on union becomes self-reproductive as a true hermaphrodite. If such a calcined herbometallic preparation is consumed, its soul, now self-generative, can continue to increase in its new environment and thus make it permanent for ever. Such a drug turns copper into gold and man becomes immortal. Above all, the gold that results is live gold, like a living virus or ferment. If seeded into another metal, like mercury or an amalgam, this in turn becomes gold. Synthetic gold has been actually called ferment gold on that account and differs from ordinary gold which must be looked upon as fossil gold. The soul of synthetic gold or live gold is a hermaphrodite-soul while that of fossil gold

preponderantly a female-soul. We see now that *gold was created out of copper* and the product was a live metal. The metal was infused with a soul.

It is evident from the above consideration that the alchemical synthesis of gold depended on the Soma-juice as the donor of Spirit or *Ruh.* And the most obvious effect was the transformation of copper into gold. Thus the juice, which was a drug of immortality, could be designated, even better, by its spectacular effect, as the gold-making juice. The Chinese name for it is Kim-Iya, literally Gold-Plant juice. The Arabicised form became Ki-Miya, which, taking the article "al," was changed into al-Kimiya, later Europeanised into alchemy. *Ki-Miya* in Chinese and *al-Kimiya* in Arabic are *primarily substances* and not the names of any science. Thus *these terms mean plant-juice* and as such are comparable with Soma-Ras or Soma-juice. While the latter had to be regularly consumed, Kimiya, after having been calcined with a metal, was to be taken only once. We see, by now, that the entire play of alchemy depended upon the concept of the soul, for this represents the life-donating agent, and alchemical preparations were all charged with powers to impart longevity. Their active principle was lif-essence, i.e. soul.

Let us now go into details, taking a particular concept of the soul and comparing each with a corresponding alchemical preparation. The early man was a hunter. He had to decide if the animal he killed was still alive or already dead. A problem of life was thus forced on him. Beginning with himself he realised that he has a body, but then there was a world of difference between his own and that of a corpse. He had to discover the labile factor to explain the difference. The animals he killed first lost their blood and subsequenty died. The obvious impression was that:

l. Blood = Life-principle.

This life-donating agent, the element present in life and absent on death, was called soul. Blood represented the first concept of the soul. This was further confirmed when injury to a dead body did not result in any flow of blood. In fact by this test a dead body could be differentiated from a living one. Such an early differentiation between body, as the container, and blood, as its real content, between flesh and blood, or between body and soul, has been fully recognised. The Old Testament, for example, refers to Blood as Life and does not permit its use as food, while that of flesh alone is sanctioned. If the blood of a goat were to be consumed one would

unwittingly receive the entire soul of a goat and would make the recipient partly behave like that animal. On the contrary, its flesh would be perfectly neutral and can only add to build the human body. On the above principle if a brave enemy is overpowered and killed, his blood would represent a courage-imparting element and to taste it would be to become braver still. Such a custom of drinking human blood did exist in heathen times. When it was further known that liver and heart are special organs rich in blood, these were eaten by preference. Even those that were not cannibals accepted such drugs.

It was, later on, realised that fresh blood alone is red while spilt blood darkens in time. Thus what actually represented life-force was something red and accordingly:

2. Redness = Life-principle.

Exploiting this idea everything red became a life-donating agent. From red earths to red berries all were life-prolonging drugs. In fact even the bones of the dead were painted with red ochre as though this would serve to revive the dead in due course. An excellent example of a red fruit being exceptionally prized is the pomegranate. Its home is Persia but the fruit, on account of its colour, was introduced early into Egypt and Greece in the West, as also into China in the East. On Greek tombstones it is carved as though it could donate life-essence enough to resuscitate the dead. The role of pomegranate was the same as that of red ochre above, in either case on account of its redness. Soma-juice also got its importance from its plant bearing red berries and having a red pith. That red earths and red fruits were eaten with this view, is an accepted fact. Looking out for substances which approached blood in colour the best happened to be Cinnabar. When further purified, by dry distillation, it sublimes as vermilion which is pure mercuric sulphide. This substance has been extolled as the pride of alchemy. It occupies such a position in the pharmacopoeias of China, India and of Yunani medicine. In Sanskrit it is called *Makara Dhwaja,* the emblem of the god of love, a synonym for the god of rejuvenation and immortality. No explanation exists as to why vermilion acquired its esteemed position wherever alchemy bad spread. Alchemy, as the art of increasing longevity, and believing, redness = blood = soul, could not but accept vermilion as the best life-donating agent. It is evident that, instead of purifying cinnabar into vermilion, the latter was more conveniently made from sulphur and mercury.

As components of vermilion both mercury and sulphur acquired special importance and each was made an independent unit. Moreover, in harmony with dualism, one component became male, which was Sulphur, and the other female, which was Mercury. Vermilion, being sublimable, its two constituents were likewise volatile. This was another property later on attributed to the soul.

When wounded animals came more to be observed it was revealed that blood, soon after it gushes forth from wounds, gives rise to vapours. Only when these have disappeared somewhere in the heaven that spilt blood begins to darken. Thus we can say that if:

2. Redness=Life-principle, it is even more precise to maintain that:

3. Blood-vapours = Life-principle.

Up to Homer's time the Greeks used to believe blood-vapour as the soul and called it Thymos.

Later on hunting gradually became uncertain when man turned to agriculture. With a more settled life there arose more accurate observations on natural deaths, specially among fellow-mcn. It was established that breathing is a positive sign of life and that the last breath meant the signal of life-exit. Hence the conclusion:

4. Breath =Life-principle.

But what is breath, other than Wind or Air, so that:

5. Air= Life-principle?

Comparative etymology tells us that words for soul (as a whole) in most languages mean breath, wind or air. Breath is an even more mysterious element than blood-vapours, as the former leaves the body unseen and unnoticed for man to expire. On the basis that air=life-principle, there arose in China and India a system of prolonging life by exercising breath control or holding the air inhaled as long as possible to fully extract its energy content. Air, therefore, became a donor of life-principle and it was believed that the less it is contaminated, or the purer it is, the greater is the proportionof *Ruh* in it. On this account atmosphere of higher altitudes was preferred and such localities became the haunts of lovers of longevity performing Yoga exercises.

As agriculture advanced contacts with vegetable life correspondingly increased. Man came to appreciate the fragrance of plants like the rose and the mint. When such a flower is completely withered it has lost most of its smell. To the primitive mind such loss meant the loss of soul. It must be reminded that according to animism a plant owned a soul, and in this light, what could the soul of a flower, like rose, be other than its essence? As a relic of such a concept we still have terms like *Ruh-i vulab,* soul-of-rose, its life-principle. Some South African tribes entertain the notion of soul as identical with such an essence.

We are thus made to realise the qualities attributed to a soul as sharply contrasted with those of a body. The latter is solid, visible and easily handled; the former is invisible, volatile and capricious to the utmost, disappearing without indicating its way and time of exit. With such qualities:

6. Volatile-essence = Life-principle.

The alchemist being solely after drugs of longevity invented the process of distillation. He could then isolate the active principle, which meant mainly its *Ruh* or Spirit, free from *Nafas* or Soul specific. Thus all distillates were Spirits. It has been pointed out that every form of life had its own *Nafas* or Soul specific, but all forms of life had the same element of longevity, only quantitatively different from individual to individual. Thus the distillates came under the category of *Ruh* and were concentrated active principles imparting longevity.

The history of pharmacy teaches us that man first used simples or crude drugs as such. Then he made extracts or decoctions to separate the soluble or the assimilable portion from the rest representing its ruffage. Then he concentrated these extracts to reduce the bulk by evaporating the water which he had himself added. Later he tried to crystallise the active principle wherever possible, e.g. ammonium chloride, camphor. His idea of purification was backed by a most vital consideration. The active principle should be *Ruh* without any admixture of *Nafas.* Crystals which reappear unchanged on recrystallisation could stand the test of purity. Surveying all available substances nothing proved so ideal as mercuric sulphide. It is crystalline, thus as pure as it can be, sublimable as any volatile Spirit should be. On being sublimed it regains itsform showingits freedom from any contamination or admixture with a *Nafas.* Moreover, it can be regenerated

from pure elements, from pure Mercury and pure Sulphur. In such a synthesis a germ of creation is implied. To introduce soul (as a whole) into dust meant creation of living creatures. Introduction of light sulphur into heavy mercury cannot but suggest an imitation of such a soul/body creation. With a self-generating soul mercuric sulphide would possess all the potentialities of conferring immortality upon man. It was also difficult to calcine it considering its volatile nature. Accordingly calcined mercuric sulphide sells as a more costly drug than calcined gold itself. Vermilion was, therefore, hailed as a drug of immortality, a donor of life-principle.

SUMMARY

1. Man, as hunter, believed Life =Body + Blood, and made Blood = Life principle. Since fresh blood alone was red, Redness= Life-principle. Red fruits, red earths, all became life-donating agents. Nothing approaches blood here more than vermilion.

2. Spilt blood darkens after blood-vapours have disappeared which, therefore, appear to be the subtle life-principle or Blood-vapours= life-principle. Later on distillates of fragrant vegetable products became life-prolonging agents. Vermilion is also sublimable.

3. With the introduction of farming life became more settled and observations on human deaths more precise. Breathing became the best sign of life and what was breath but air. Hence, Air = Life-principle. To hold the breath for a long time meant extracting energy from the atmosphere. Yogic exercises of breath control were invented in China and India.

4. According to dualism even a soul is made up of two elements as male/female. Only when these two are well balanced the issue is self-generative. The human race became self-reproductive because of Adam/Eve, although each by oneself was not. The Soma-juice was rich in the male element or *Ruh,* but poor in *Nafas* or the female-soul. Metals were rich in *Nafas* bur poor in *Ruh* or Spirit. Soma-Copper complex, however, contained a well-balanced union of *Ruh*/*Nafas* which became a hermaphrodite-soul with powers of self-generation. An ever-increasing soul made its vehicle everlasting, a metal became gold, a man immortal. Soma-Copper complex became a drug of immortality as also synthetic gold. This was a live metal for it could be seeded like a ferment making other metals like itself. Thus to synthesise gold was to infuse a soul into copper as its recipient; it was

imitating creation.

5. The only substance where the elements were two, each separable and again returnable, was vermilion. One component was Sulphur, light like a soul, and the other Mercury, heavy like a body. To introduce Sulphur into Mercury was to infuse a soul into a body. The resultant was vermilion, red like blood, covering the first notion of soul. It was sublimable and again returnable to its original state, thus meeting the standard of a volatile Spirit. It was dual-natured with each element capable of being purified and reunited unlike Soma-Copper complex. Vermilion represented the ideal reality of theoretical alchemy.