

The Necessary Relativity of Secrecy

By Nina Hatfield

In the modern mind, secrecy is often equated with evasion and associated with negativity. Upon considering secrecy as one of the foundational components of alchemy and other hermetic arts, it is easy to conjure a list of negatively inflected reasons, from self-protection, which assumes an outside danger, to abuse or hoarding of power and charlatanism. That our imaginations tend to stop here reflects a bias against the unknown, an assumption that all should be known and that mystery is a problem to be corrected. In spite of the plausibility of these manifestations of secrecy, stretching the imagination beyond this bias reveals a constructive engagement with mystery.

Inquiring more deeply into secrecy offers access to another way of perceiving. From the post-Enlightenment viewpoint that all should be known through illumination, that all should be known by revealing, it is strangely disorienting to find the same goal of attainment of knowledge, even the same imagery of light, wrapped in assertions of the necessity of mystery, of darkness. The jarring sensation this creates reveals a largely unquestioned association between knowledge and the openness of the light of day. The alchemical philosophers' use of secrecy also calls into question assumptions about the singularity of truth and challenges a paradigm of the linear accumulation of knowledge, as well as its inevitable discoverability.

The frustration common in response to alchemy's persistent secrecy seems to reveal an unspoken assumption that if only someone would tell it to us straight, we would understand, that the secrecy itself is the barrier to our comprehension. However, alchemical texts make explicit statements that if certain knowledge were to be revealed to the uninitiated, it would only be misunderstood. The knowledge itself could be either

endangered by or lost to those misunderstandings, or perilously harnessed by those unprepared for its implications. Here we are introduced to a critical concept which secrecy serves to honor: that understanding is a reciprocal relationship between the knower and the known, that not everyone is capable of understanding everything, nor in any sequence.

The idea that the proper attainment of knowledge is inextricably linked with the specificity of the individual is reflected in Marie-Louise von Franz's translation of "The Prophetess Isis to her Son," likely originally a Hellenic Greek text (43). In this account, Isis describes to her son how she learned the full mysteries from an angel. The critical point for this discussion is that the contact between Isis and this source of knowledge is through her own *desirability*, paired with her presence of mind and desire to learn (45, 46). After placing herself in the environment associated with the knowledge she sought, and spending time there, waiting for the right time, "it happened that one of the angels who dwelt in the first firmament saw [Isis] from above and came towards [her] desiring to unite with [her] sexually" (44). Rather than receiving this first angel as a divine physical influx, Isis' response was to resist the union, preferring to "ask him about the preparation of gold and silver" (44). Not wishing to answer her "since it was [. . .] the superlatively great mystery [. . .], he] said he would return next day and with him would be a greater angel, Amnaël, who would be able to answer" her (45). The following day when this greater angel also was "gripped by the same desire of [her] and was in a great hurry," she again resisted and "overcame his desire till [. . .] he gave her the truth of the mysteries without keeping anything back, but in the full truth" (46).

An interpretation of this account is that we are being shown, by Isis' example, how the recipient of knowledge not only needs to actively seek the mysteries by being in

the place and time to receive inspiration, but also has to attract the divine carriers of knowledge. Moreover, to comprehend what comes, one needs the presence of mind to stop and inquire into the process rather than passively submitting to being overtaken by the influx. Isis is both receptive and active. We see a specific relationship that is enticed and extracted, not an impersonal bestowal of wisdom.

Along with this divine transmission of understanding comes one of the key hallmarks of alchemical practice, an elaborate vow of secrecy. Isis explains to her son, “he made me with this oath promise never to tell the mystery [. . .] except to my son, my child, and my closest friend, so that you are me and I am you” (46). The mystery can be shared, but only with someone who *is Isis*. The mystery is, by its nature, only available to someone who will understand it as Isis did. Further, the mystery itself instructs that “one must stay with existing nature and the matter one has in hand in order to prepare things [...] wheat creates wheat, and a man begets a man, and thus also gold will harvest gold, like produces like” (47). Here again is the equation of the doer with what is done, or created. A philosopher will create out of the state of his or her own being. To produce gold the philosopher has to become gold.

Hildegard von Bingen expresses a similar idea when she writes in an account of her visions which began in early childhood, “Wisdom teaches in the light of love, and bids me tell how I was brought into this my gift of vision . . . ‘Hear these words, human creature, and tell them not according to yourself but according to me, and taught by me, speak of yourself like this’” (qtd. in Dronke 144, 145). Here von Bingen is being taught to transform herself by a loving wisdom who instructs that she learn how to speak in a loving way as the wisdom does, first verbatim, then through practice gaining the ability to

speak directly from herself with love. It could be said that this wisdom is showing her how to transform from human to gold.

To truly acknowledge that a person needs to conduct the work, the alchemical opus, first-hand is to radically shift the idea of teaching and of knowledge itself. Rather than thinking that one can convey a known quantity to another, alchemical instruction becomes more an act of activation, encouragement, guidance, and camaraderie, helping to create the space and the framework for each individual to embark on their own work. Secrecy is a tool to create just such a space, while alchemy's veiled symbolic guidance is varied and open enough to interpretation to allow the meaning and import to be provided by each alchemist. C. G. Jung's conception of the collective unconscious as an unknowable source of wisdom similarly takes the place of human teachers and can be equated with the source of Isis' angels and von Bingen's Wisdom.

In the alchemical work itself, secrecy and the mystery it protects create the rarified air, the focus necessary to closely attend to the subtleties of ideas, and the sensitivity to experiences that may be lost to perception if not singled out in this way as special. The profound but quiet insights, the conversations with angels, the fleeting glimpses of the outlines of doorways into new ways of seeing require the hushed attention that can be evoked by secrecy in order to be noticed. Secrecy can be seen as arising out of the process, and the privacy afforded by secrecy can be seen as prerequisite to the process. This is one of the many closed loops essential to alchemy and symbolized by the ouroboros.

Secrecy also honors the quieting reality that what is one person's profound insight can appear meaningless or inconsequential to another. Secrecy serves to protect such wisdom's importance, to preserve its impact. The specificity of the individual alchemical

opus is illustrated in Jung's insight in his essay "The Undiscovered Self," that despite all of his efforts to formulate his understandings in theories, "whether it is a question of understanding a fellow human being or of self-knowledge, [he] must in both cases leave all theoretical assumptions behind" (*CW 10*, para. 495). To connect with what is actually, specifically, happening requires secreting it away from the intrusion of preconceived expectations. The only way the authentic can unfold is hermetically sealed in its own private context, particularly at certain stages. To realize something is not the same as being told about it.

Given the importance of secrecy and privacy to the alchemical effort, it is a wonder that alchemists sought each other out and went to such great lengths to communicate in writing and images, obscured by symbolism, "anagrams, acrostics and other enigmatic figures" though they were (Drucker 121). This is where the commonalities of hermetic cultures appear in what otherwise, one would imagine, would quickly have become unrecognizably disparate efforts from one individual to another. Secrecy and obscurity allow a level of sharing to occur without intruding on the process. When even the ultimate goal is specified by some as *symbolic* gold, patterns of experience can be shared and process can be discussed without impinging on the content of each individual's process. Seen this way, alchemical patterns describing stages of transformation can be understood as archetypes of transformation, which manifest consistently as recognizable stages of many specific types of transformation.

Just as myths and symbols of all types are inherently open to interpretation, the symbolism of alchemy resonates and offers up insights into patterns in many contexts. Because of its secretive nature, though, alchemical symbolism lends itself especially to exploration of the ineffable. Here lies its power as a mystery school. Alchemy's focus on

manifesting transformation indicates that it is situated at the border between what is widely known or fully manifest and what has not yet come into being. By obscuring itself from the start, alchemy creates a flexibility that can birth the new and ever changing.

The tentative footing of the new and not yet fully manifest also helps to explain the alchemical philosophers' preoccupation with protecting the work itself. Albertus Magnus' first precept for the work, as he describes in *Libellus de Alchimia*, is "that the worker in this art must be silent and secretive and reveal his secret to no one, knowing full well that if many know, the secret in no way will be kept, and that when it is divulged, it will be repeated with error. Thus it will be lost, and the work will remain imperfect" (qtd. in Linden, 103). Rather than having a rationalistic sense of the world as a puzzle to be systematically deciphered, the alchemical philosophers appear to see themselves as participant conjurers and their work as bringing something into being that is neither inevitable nor guaranteed. This attitude seems at first glance to more accurately describe theoretical and philosophical applications than those of matter, but that is an arbitrary split that many alchemists do not make.

Discoveries of imagination can manifest in form. As a simplified example, conceptions of cultural organization centered on respect for the individual, manifesting as a representative government in the United States of America, have had vast repercussions physically. We can see the reflection of these ideas in obvious correlations such as the construction of ballot boxes and in the no less interrelated paving of land for automobiles. A culture of individuals convinced of individualistic ideals values the ability to make varied choices in destination and pattern at any time and therefore largely reflects a preference for driving alone over riding in public transit along the same routes and in

collaboration with others. Such far-reaching ramifications of philosophical conceptions also explain the gravity and sense of import with which alchemists hold their work.

Another nuance in the secrecy of the alchemists' art is that of timing, also firmly fixed in the realm of matter. Just as manifestation does not have to be instantaneous to exist, alchemical literature reflects an acute awareness of the sequential aspect of transformation. Transformation implies and alchemical symbolism endlessly explores that a single thing is not perpetually the same, that it is undergoing change and, from one stage to the next, different responses and expectations apply. In this context, initiation into alchemy must be allowed to undergo the stages and phases proper to their work. To reveal too much to them—to intrude with information, experiences, or other ingredients—at the wrong time would at best interrupt their sequential efforts and at worst derail their process entirely or send them off in a wrong direction. Jung seemed to be subscribing to this thinking when, during his time in India, he “studiously avoided all so-called ‘holy men.’ [He] did so because [he] had to make [his] own truth, not accept from others what [he] could not attain on [his] own. [He] would have felt it as a theft had [he] attempted to learn from the holy men and to accept their truth for [himself]” (*Memories*, 275).

Jung's natural affinity for the alchemical perspective is also apparent in that last distinction between *their* truth and his truth. This is not a mechanistic, scientific, repeatable definition of truth. This is a nuanced, subjective sense of truth that manages to respect others' truths. Notice that Jung does not say he avoided the truth of the holy men because it was wrong, but rather that it would have been a *theft*, implying something valuable and something that belongs to someone else.

Marie-Louise von Franz also defends the variability of truth in a remarkable exchange with an audience member recorded in a collection of her Alchemy lectures, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology*. When a theologian proposes that proper action can be predetermined according to Church dogma, von Franz replies, speaking as a Jungian psychologist but using the theological language of her questioner,

Yes, because you *do* know what God wants in each case, but we do not. We always try to ask Him first from within. [. . .] To us the experience of God is greater and more unknown and therefore we consult Him again each time. We have not the idea that He has uttered His last word. That is the great contrast between psychology and theology. We think of God as a reality who can speak in our psyche. (138, 139)

Even while asserting the complexity of a perspective as foundational and important as this is to Jungian thought, von Franz is mindful of the additional validity of this questioner's reality. For another their beliefs *are* true.

This attitude of respect for the autonomy of another's experience also glows through when von Franz points out the psychological etiquette necessary in the use of the word *projection*. She describes that "the use of the word depends on the state [the speaker] is in" (123). The meaning and applicability of the term, and of the idea itself, depends on the state of an individual's experience. She clarifies, "When I doubt, I can use it, but if there is no doubt in me I cannot, and I should never use the word to poison another person's reality" (123). She is not only saying it is unethical to undermine another's state of relatedness, she is also asserting that unless relatedness is in doubt in first-person experience, it is manifestly not a projection. Such nuance reflects a transformative, responsive, and respectful sense of varied reality rather than a paradigm of fixed meaning and absolutes.

Marion Woodman describes these variations in perspectives as a difference between “Sophia,” the feminine wisdom of god, and the masculine “Wisdom of God,” which

[. . .] resides in theology, dogma and moral philosophy. Because it is a knowable Wisdom it is accessible to reason, and being accessible it is codifiable. It can be and often is reduced to catechism. It is an institutionalized collective Wisdom. The Wisdom of Sophia, on the other hand, is the Wisdom of the unknowable. It is the nonrational, nonrepeatable and nonconsistent. It belongs to the here-and-now, the immediate moment. [. . .] It is the moment in which life is conceived not in some repeatable fashion, for it is unique and particular to the moment. (74)

This seems to make a distinction between the ways in which wisdom is perceived more than between the content of either type of wisdom. Woodman associates the secret, unknown, actively manifesting with feminine birthing processes while linking established, agreed upon paradigms with fixity and masculinity. Such pairing of gendered symbolism appears throughout alchemical imagery, indicating that the relationship between feminine and masculine qualities, or lunar and solar attitudes, are an active dynamic in transformation and that both are necessary.

If there is one thing we can confirm first-hand in the way of the alchemists, it is the truth contained in the recently partially decoded *Copiale Cipher*, roughly translated into English as, “Curiosity is the inheritance of mankind. Frequently we want to know something only because it needs to be kept secret” (4). From the modern viewpoint this has been interpreted as meaning that secrecy is a ruse used only to make us want to know something (Schachtman 218). Upon closer consideration of the statement, with an appreciation for the possibility that some things indeed do need to be kept secret, we can imagine that this insight is reflecting on the perceptible pull that the true secret exerts. This reveals the paradox that alchemy’s ‘keep out’ sign is simultaneously its calling card.

To be presented with something unknown but presumably knowable because it is framed as a secret is to stoke the fire of one's own curiosity, one's own desire, and to feel beckoned to attempt the work. A secret begs a question and a question begs an answer. At the threshold of alchemy's liminal territory, wondering where to begin, Isis' cryptic disclosure of Amnëal's mystery assures, "one must stay with existing nature and the matter one has in hand in order to prepare things" (von Franz 47). Amnëal provides the amniotic fluid of insight that nurtures the prima materia of the philosopher's stone—that which exists, who we are as we begin—as the alchemist's work is conceived.

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