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"Nature Can Overcome Nature"

In the world of forms, Nature's "mode of operation" consists of a continuous rhythm of "dissolutions" and "coagulations", or of disintegrations and formations, so that the dissolution of any formal entity is but the preparation for a new conjunction between a *forma* and its *materia*. Nature acts like Penelope who, to rid herself of unworthy suitors, unwound at night the wedding garment which she had woven during the day.

In this way too the alchemist works. Following the adage *solve et coagula,* he dissolves the imperfect coagulations of the soul, reduces the latter to its *materia,* and crystallizes it anew in a nobler form. But he can accomplish this work only in unison with Nature, by means of a natural vibration of the soul which awakes during the course of the work and links the human and cosmic domains. Then of her own accord, Nature comes to the aid of art, according to the alchemical adage: "The progress of the work pleases nature greatly" (*operis processio multum naturae placet*).

The two phases of Nature—dissolution and coagulation—which seem opposed from a superficial point of view but which in reality are mutually complementary, can in a certain sense be related to the two poles, essence and substance, though these of course are not present within Nature as a pure opposition of Activity and Passivity, but merely as relative reflections of the latter. Within Nature it is alchemical Sulphur which corresponds to the active pole, and alchemical Quicksilver which corresponds to the passive pole. Sulphur is relatively active; it is Sulphur which confers form. Quicksilver resembles passive *materia* and is thus more immediately linked with Nature herself and her feminine character. Since Sulphur represents the essential pole in its natural refraction, it can be said to be active in passive mode, while Quicksilver, in view of the dynamic character of Nature, can be said to be passive in active mode. The relation of the two primordial forces to each other is thus similar to that of man and woman in sexual union. (See diagram on p. 110.)

The best symbol for the couple Sulphur-Mercury is the Chinese device of *yin-yang,* with the black pole in the white vortex and the white pole in the black vortex, as an indication that the passive is present in the active, and the active in the passive, just as man contains the nature of woman, and woman the nature of man.[4]

4. This has not merely a psychological, but also and above all an ontological, basis.

In the soul Sulphur represents the essence or spirit, whereas Quicksilver corresponds to the soul itself in its receptive and passive role.

According to Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî, who always has the highest interpretations in mind, Sulphur corresponds to the "Divine Command", that is to say, to the *fiat lux* by means of which the world became a cosmos out of chaos, while Quicksilver represents Universal Nature, the passive counterpart of the former.[5] Thus, even although within the specific realm of alchemy the two poles appear as more or less conditioned forces, it is highly useful to remember their unconditioned prototypes, as only by so doing can one understand, for example, in what respect Sulphur corresponds to the spiritual will, and Quicksilver to the "plastic" capacity of the soul. In an immediate sense, and in its general psychological interpretation, the spiritual will proceeds from an ideal and endeavors to form the soul in accordance with this. In its original essence, however, which reveals itself only within the framework of a traditional spiritual art, the spiritual will is a vibration coming from the center of the being, a spiritual act which breaks through thought and which on the plane of the soul effects two things: a broadening and a deepening of the "sense of being", and a clarification and a stabilization of the essential contents of consciousness. In accordance with this, the "plastic" capacity of the soul, which responds to the original Act of the Spirit, is not merely the passive imagination that takes on and develops forms, but a capacity which gradually extends beyond the confines of the individual consciousness bound to the body.

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5. Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî, *Futuhât al-Makkîya.*

Sulphur, the original masculine power, and Quicksilver, the original feminine power, both strive towards the wholeness of their one and eternal prototype. The latter is at the same time the reason for their opposition and of their mutual attraction—just as the masculine and feminine natures long for the integrality of the human state, and as a result of this seek both to separate from one another, and to unite with one another. By means of their physical union both try to re-establish the image of their common eternal prototype. This is the marriage of man and woman, sulphur and quicksilver, Spirit and soul.

In the mineral domain, it is gold that is born of the perfect union of the two generative principles. Gold is the true product of metallic generation. Every other metal is either a premature birth or an abortion, an imperfect gold, and, in this way of looking at things, the alchemical work is nothing other than a midwife or helper, which art offers nature, so that the latter can perfectly ripen the fruit whose maturation was being hindered by certain temporal circumstances.[6] This can be understood both in the mineral and in the microcosmic sense. Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî regards gold as the symbol of the original and uncorrupted state (*fitra*) of the soul, the form in which the human soul was created at the beginning. According to the Islamic conception, the soul of every child unconsciously approaches this Adamic state, before being led away from it again by the errors imposed on it by adults.[7] The uncorrupted state possesses an inward equilibrium of forces. This is expressed by the stability of gold.

According to a widely held cosmological view—already mentioned by Aristotle—Nature is characterized by four properties, which are manifested on the sensory level by heat, cold, humidity, and dryness. Heat and dryness are associated with Quicksilver. The first two properties thus have a masculine and predominantly active character, whereas the last two have a feminine and more passive character. What this means can be seen more clearly when one relates heat to expansion, cold to contraction, humidity to dissolution, and dryness to coagulation.

6. The most recent discoveries in the realm of nuclear fission seem to confirm that the qualitatively lowest metals are the most unstable. Uranium closely resembles lead.
7. This doctrine is not to be confused with the opinion of J.-J. Rousseau that man is good in himself. The unconscious recapitulation of the primordial state in the child does not exclude negative tendencies or hereditary defects.

The heat, or power of expansion, proper to Sulphur, causes the growth of a given form from its essential center, and this force of Nature is closely connected with life. The dryness of Sulphur coagulates or "fixes" a *forma* on the level of its *materia,* so that it imitates the immutability of its prototype in a passive and material way. In other words, Sulphur's power of expansion is the dynamic—and therefore relatively passive—aspect of the essential Act, and coagulation is the inverse or lower aspect of the immutability of Essence. Pure Act is motionless and True Essence is active. The coldness, or power of contraction, of Quicksilver opposes the coagulating power of Sulphur, in that it surrounds forms from the outside, as it were, and holds them fast, like a cosmic womb.[8] The moist and dissolving character of Quicksilver, however, resembles feminine receptivity, which, like water, can take on all forms, without thereby being altered.

The four natural properties or "modes of operation", which are related in pairs to Sulphur and Quicksilver, can, in their successive coagulations and dissolutions, enter into a variety of combinations with one another. Generation only takes place when the properties of Sulphur and Quicksilver mutually penetrate each other. When sulphurous dryness joins one-sidedly with mercurial coldness, so that coagulation and contraction come together (without the action thereon of the expansive heat of Sulphur or the dissolving humidity of Quicksilver), a complete *rigor* of soul and body ensues. In terms of life, this is the torpor of old age, and on the ethical level, avarice. More generally and more profoundly, it is the wrapping up of the ego-consciousness in itself, a mortal condition of the soul which has lost its original receptivity and vitality, both spiritually and sensually. The other way round, a one-sided conjunction of heat and humidity (i.e., expansion and dissolution) results in a volatilization of powers. It resembles the condition of consuming passion, vice, and dissipation of spirit. Characteristically, the two types of disequilibrium are usually to be found together. One begets the other. The numbing of the powers of the soul leads to dissipation, and the fire of a passion lived out regardlessly brings inward death. The soul which is avaricious with itself and closes itself to the Spirit, is carried away in the vortex of dissolving impressions. Creative equilibrium is only

8. On the contracting power of Quicksilver, see René Guénon, *The Great Triad* (Cambridge, UK: Quinta Essentia, 1991), chapter 12, "Sulphur, Mercury, Salt".

produced when the expansive power of Sulphur and the contractive power of Quicksilver hold the balance, and when, at the same time, the masculine coagulating power enters into a fruitful union with the feminine dissolving capacity. This is the true marriage of the two poles of being, which are represented *inter alia* by the intersecting triangles of the Seal of Solomon—the sign which also symbolizes the synthesis of the four elements. The applications of this law are quite unlimited; only a few psychological and "vital" consequences have been mentioned here. It might also be added that traditional medicine is founded on the same principles, the four elements then corresponding to the four humors.[9]

The soul, in her entire breadth, as unfolded in the course of the alchemical work, is governed by the two fundamental forces Sulphur and Quicksilver which slumber, in the "chaotic" state of the unawakened soul, like the fire in flint and the water in ice. When they awake, they first of all manifest their opposition in a certain outward tension. From this tension they continue to grow, the one on the other, and, to the extent that they become free, they embrace one another, in that they are related to one another as man and woman. To these two phases of their development are related the first two clauses of the Hermetic formula: "Nature takes delight in Nature; Nature contains Nature, and Nature can overcome Nature". The last clause means that the two powers, when they have so grown that one can embrace the other, reunite on a higher plane, so that their opposition, which previously had bound the soul, now becomes a fruitful complementarism, by means of which the soul achieves dominion over the entire world of psychic forms and currents. Thus, Nature as a liberating force overcomes Nature as tyranny and entanglement.

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When the immutable Divine Act which governs the cosmos, is symbolically represented by a motionless vertical axis, the "course" of Nature, in relation to it, is like a spiral, which winds itself around this axis, so that with each encirclement it realizes a new plane or degree of existence. This is the primordial symbol of the serpent or dragon,

9. To air corresponds the red constituent of blood, to fire yellow bile, to water phlegm, and to earth black bile. All four humors are contained in the blood. See diagram on p. 122.

which winds itself round the axis of the tree of the world.[10] Almost all the symbols of Nature proceed from the spiral or the circle. The rhythm of the successive "unrollings" and "rollings" of Nature, of the alchemical *solve et coagula* is represented by the double spiral:

whose form also lies at the basis of the zoomorphic representations of the *Shakti*. Also related to this is the representation of two serpents or dragons winding themselves in contrary directions round a staff or tree. These correspond to the two complementary phases of nature or the two fundamental forces.[11] This is the ancient heritage of images of nature on which both alchemy and certain traditions of the East (especially tantrism) draw.

It should also be noted here that the use of a serpent or dragon as the image of a cosmic power is to be found in all parts of the world. It is especially characteristic of those traditional arts, such as alchemy, which are concerned with the subtle world. A reptile moves without legs and by means of an uninterrupted rhythm of its body, so that it is the incorporation, so to say, of a subtle oscillation. Furthermore, its essence is both fiery and cold, conscious and elemental. The resemblance in question is so real that most, if not all, traditional cultures have regarded serpents as the occasional carriers of subtle or psychic powers. One need only think of the serpent as the guardian of tombs in Western and Far-Eastern antiquity.

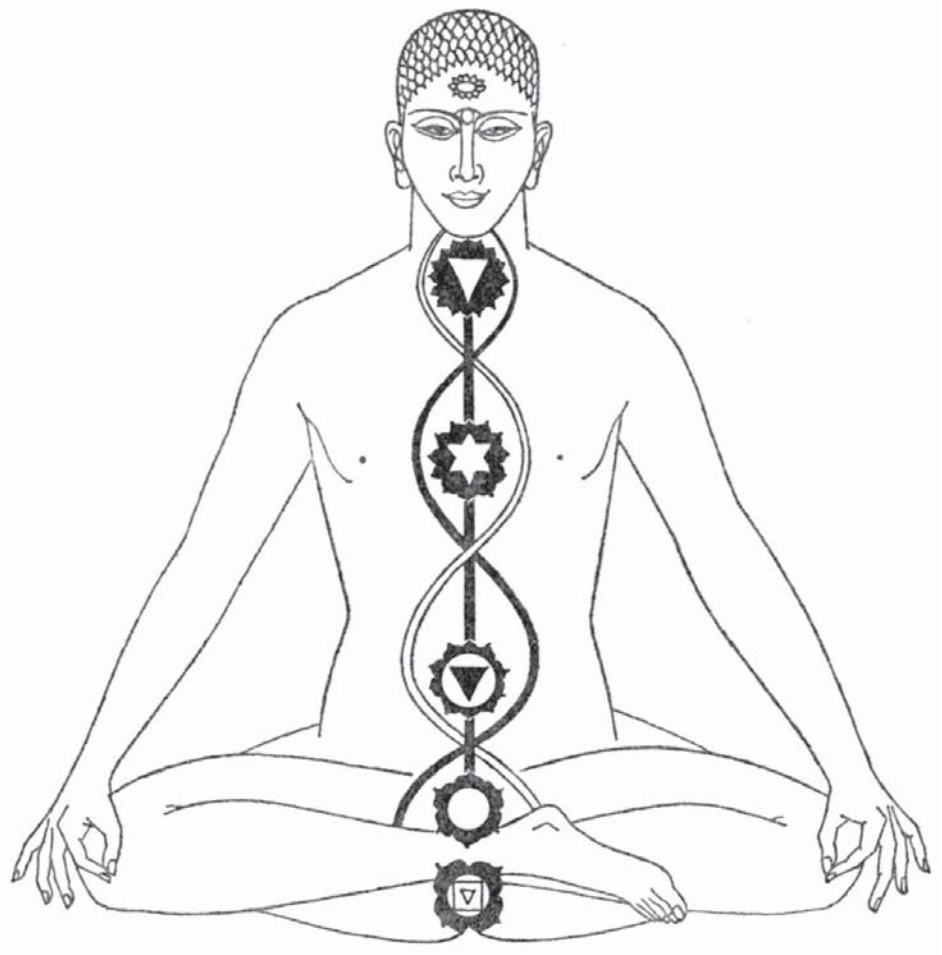
In *laya-yoga,* a spiritual method belonging to the realm of tantrism, whose name signifies union (*yoga*) achieved through solution (*laya*), the awakening of the *Shakti* within the human microcosm is compared with the awakening of a serpent (*kundalinî*), which until then had remained coiled up in the subtle center known as *mûlâdhâra*. According to a certain correspondence between the subtle and corporeal orders, this center is located at the lower end of the vertebral column. *Kundalinî* is awakened by certain exercises in spiritual concentration, by means of which it gradually ascends, in spiral fashion, the spiritual axis of man, bringing into play ever wider and higher states of consciousness, until it finally restores the plenitude of consciousness in the supra-formal Spirit.[12] In this representa-

10. See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis at Universalis, 1995).
11. See René Guénon, op. cit.
12. See Arthur Avalon, *The Serpent Power* (Madras, 1931).

tion, which must not be conceived literally, but as a symbolical—though logical and consequential—description of inward processes, one will again recognize the image of Nature or *Shakti* twining round the world-axis. That the developing power should come "from below" is in keeping with the fact that potency (*potentia*)—like *materia prima*—in its passivity represents the "base" of the cosmos, and not the summit.

In the Hermetic tradition, Universal Nature in her latent condition is likewise represented as a coiled up reptile. This is the dragon Uroboros which, curling into a circle, bites its own tail.

Nature in her dynamic phase, on the other hand, is portrayed by means of the two serpents or dragons, which, in the form of the well-known model of the staff of Hermes or caduceus, wind them-



The seven *chakras* or power-centers in the subtle body of man, with the two power-streams *Ida* and *Pingala*, which wind round the central axis. Tantric representation from *The Serpent Power* by Arthur Avalon. The leaf design on the head represents the highest *chakra*: "the lotus with the thousand petals".

selves round an axis—that of the world or of man—in opposing directions. This duplication of the primordial serpent has also its counterpart in *laya-yoga,* for *Kundalinî* is likewise divided into two subtle forces, *Ida* and *Pingala,* which in opposite directions wind themselves round *Merudanda,* the microcosmic prolongation of the world-axis. At the beginning of the spiritual work, the *Shakti* is present in this divided form, and only after the two forces are activated alternately by means of a form of concentration based on breathing, does *Kundalinî* awake from its sleep and start to ascend. As soon as it has reached the highest threshold of ego-consciousness, the two opposing forces become completely dissolved in it. For alchemy, the two forces represented as serpents or dragons are Sulphur and Quicksilver. Their macrocosmic prototype is the two phases—increasing and decreasing—of the sun's annual course, separated from one another by the winter and summer solstices.[13] The connection between the tantric and alchemical symbolisms is obvious: of the two forces *Pingala* and *Ida,* which wind themselves round the *Merudanda,* the first is described as being hot and dry, characterized by the color red, and, like alchemical Sulphur, compared with the sun. The second force, *Ida,* is regarded as being cold and humid, and in its silvery pallor is associated with the moon.

In his book *On the Hieroglyphic Figures*, Nicolas Flamel writes of the mutual relationship of Sulphur and Quicksilver:

> . . . these are the two serpents which are fixed around the caduceus, or Staff of Mercury, and by means of which Mercury wields his great power and transforms himself as he wills. Whoever kills one, says Haly,[14] also kills the other, for each one of them can only die along with her sister [by means of their death both pass over into a new state]. . . . After both have been placed in the "vessel" of the grave [that is to say, the inward, "hermetically sealed" vessel], they begin to bite one another savagely, and, on account of their great poison and raging fury, do not let go of each other—unless the cold should deter them—until both, as a result of their dripping poison and deadly wounding, are drenched in blood. So long as Nature remains "untamed", the opposition of the two forces is manifested in destructive or "poisonous" mode, so that they finally kill one another and drown in their own poison, which, after their death, will transmute them into living and perpetual water reunited on a higher level, after they have lost, with

13. See Julius Schwabe, *Archetyp und Tierkreis* (Basle, 1961).
14. Probably the Arab name 'Ali.

their downfall and decomposition, their first, natural forms, in order to acquire a single, new, nobler, and better form.[15]

The staff of Hermes, or caduceus,
from a drawing by Hans Holbein the Younger.

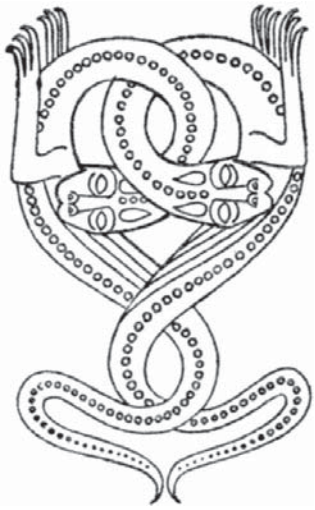
This fable supplements the Hermetic myth of the staff of Hermes. Hermes, or Mercury, struck with his staff a pair of serpents in combat with one another. The blow tamed the serpents, which wound themselves round his staff and conferred on him the theurgic power of "binding" and "loosing". This means the transmutation of chaos into cosmos, of conflict into order, through the power of a spiritual act, which both discriminates and unites.

Pair of dragons from an Arab talisman.

15. The unformed, or amorphous, is the opposite of the formless, or supra-formal. The latter does not lack form, it possesses it essentially, without being limited by it. For this reason the supra-formal—that is, the pure Spirit—can only be realized by means of a perfect form.

In the Jewish tradition, as a counterpart to the staff of Hermes and the Hindu symbol of *Brahma-danda*,[16] we find Moses' rod, which indeed turns itself into a serpent. In Islamic mysticism, Moses' rod, which "on God's command" turned into a serpent, and on being "grasped" by Moses turned back into a rod, is compared with the passional soul (*nafs*), which through the influence of the Divine Spirit can be turned into a wonder-working power. Because it incorporates a spiritual power, Moses' rod, turned into serpent, can vanquish the serpents engendered by the Egyptian sorcerers and made of magic—and therefore psychic power; for the Spirit prevails over the soul and its domain.[17] This interpretation of the story of Moses' rod, mentioned in the Koran, recalls the Hindu distinction between *vidyâ-mâyâ* (Universal Nature in her "enlightening" aspect) and *avidyâ-mâyâ* (Universal Nature as the power of illusion). In this distinction, moreover, is also to be found the deepest sense of the Hermetic proverb: "Nature can overcome Nature." From the alchemical point of view, the changing of Moses' rod into a serpent and its subsequent re-solidification corresponds exactly to the *solve et coagula* of the great work.

Pair of dragons from the Romanesque choir of Basle Cathedral.



Romanesque form of the caduceus on the door of St. Michael's Church in Pavia.

In medieval Christian art, there is a representation of the staff of Hermes which Flamel's fable brings vividly to mind. The image of a pair of serpents or dragons entwined together and biting one

16. See René Guénon, op. cit.
17. See my translation of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, chapter on Moses.

another was already common in early Irish-Anglo-Saxon art. In Romanesque sculpture it occurs so commonly and plays such a striking role in the decoration of sacred buildings,[18] that one might readily conclude that it was a kind of "signature" of certain Christian-Hermetic schools. Moreover, the same motif is connected with the symbol of the knot, whose cosmological meaning lies in the fact that the harder one pulls on the knot, the more firmly its two constituents hold together.

Birds from an alchemical manuscript of 1550 in Basle University Library.

This illustrates *inter alia* the mutual paralysis of the two forces when in a state of "chaos".[19] Sometimes one of the two reptiles representing Sulphur and Quicksilver is winged, whereas the other is without wings. Or, instead of two reptiles, there are a lion and a dragon in combat. The absence of wings always refers to the "firm" nature of Sulphur, whereas the winged animal, be it a dragon, a griffin, or an eagle, represents "volatile" Quicksilver.[20] The lion, which conquers the dragon, corresponds to Sulphur, which "fixes" Quicksilver. A winged lion, or leo-griffin, can represent the union of the two natures, and has the same meaning as the image of the male-female androgyne.

18. In fact, this motif is to be found in almost all Romanesque churches.
19. This explains the role of knots in magic.
20. See Senior Zadith, *Turba Philosophorum. Bibl. des phil. chim.*

Finally, the dragon alone can represent all phases of the work, depending on whether it is provided with feet, fins, or wings, or is without any limbs whatsoever. It can be considered as able to live either in water, air, or on the earth, and, as a salamander, even in fire. The alchemical symbol of the dragon thus closely resembles that of the Far-Eastern world-dragon, which first lives as a fish in water, and then, as a winged creature, soars into the heavens. It also recalls the Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, which successively moves under the earth, on the earth, and in the heavens.

All these correspondences with the animal images of alchemy have been mentioned in order to show how a cosmological wisdom of the most general bearing is reflected in alchemy, in a particular way and within specific limits.

(from *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*)

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