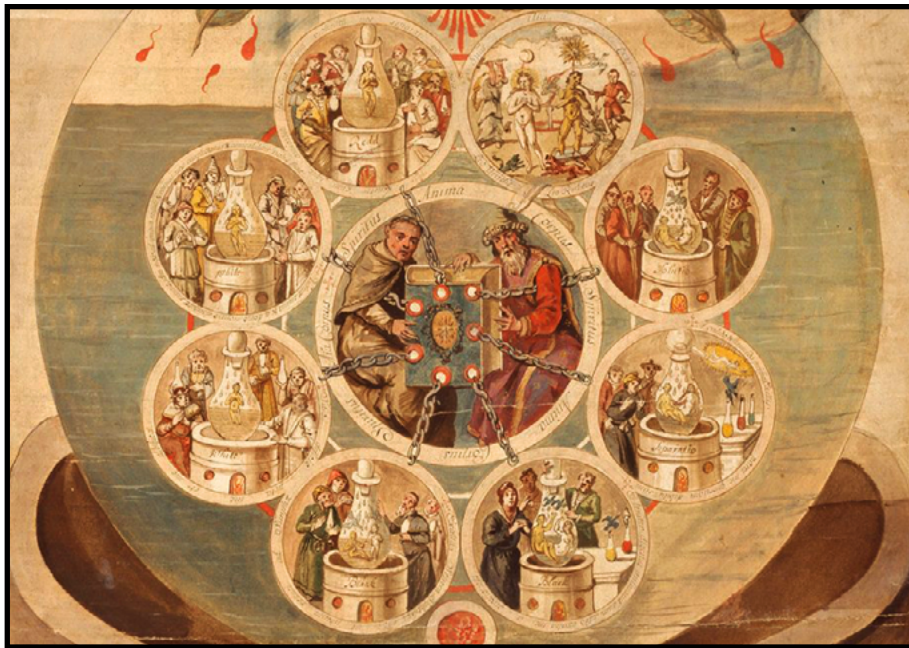


# TRUE IMAGINATION IN ALCHEMY

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*A detail from the Ripley Scroll, sometimes called  
“Alchemists Revealing Secrets from the Book of Seven Seals,” ca. 1700.*

There is a riddle from the Middle Ages that describes the true nature of the First Matter—a mysterious, etheric substance that is the source of all transformation:

The key to life and death is everywhere to be found, but if you do not find it in your own house, you will find it nowhere. Yet, it is before everyone’s eyes; no one lives without it; everyone has used it. The poor usually possess more of it than the rich; children play with it in the streets. The meek and uneducated esteem it highly, but the privileged and learned often throw it away. It is the only thing from which the Philosopher’s Stone can be prepared, and without it, no noble metal can ever be created.

The riddle tells us that this secret power is commonly used and is in plain sight. But it is most obvious where we live (in our own minds?). Children play with it,

and humble poor people use it more than snobbish rich people. The uneducated lower class prizes it, but the educated higher class believes it is an idle waste of time. Yet this hidden ability—that so many condemn and take for granted—is the only path to real wisdom and the only way to perfect anything.

One of the authors in the twelfth-century text *Turba Philosophorum* (*Assembly of Philosophers*) describes it as “a thing which is found everywhere, which is a stone and no stone, contemptible yet precious, hidden, concealed, and yet known to everyone. It is a thing stronger and more sublime than all other things.”

“It is familiar to all men, young and old,” explains the author of *Gloria Mundi* (*Glory of All Worlds* - 1620). “It is found in the country, in the village, in the town, in all things created by God; yet it is despised by everyone. No one prizes it, though, next

to the human soul, it is the most beautiful and the most precious thing upon earth and has the power to pull down kings and princes.”

How you answer the riddle has a lot to do with your concept of reality. Where do you draw the line at what is real? Your fantasies? Your dreams? Your thoughts? Your soul? Matter—is that real? According to Hermetic philosophy, everything is real. Everything we perceive is part of the same One Thing, and the spectrum of our awareness is determined by the light of the One Mind. That primal light is reflected in each person’s consciousness in the light of imagination, which is the answer to our riddle.

My ten-year-old nephew once described imagination as “walking around inside your mind.” For alchemists, it was a private world of infinite possibilities where much of the Great Work took place. To differentiate it from idle fantasy and daydreaming, they called it the True Imagination. It is a special kind of mental imagery or visualization that is directly connected to the ground of reality. In our culture, we are taught to reject the True Imagination and sever our ties to the hidden reality while we are still children. Families, schools, churches—authorities of all types—deny our inborn connection to the Divine Mind and replace it with their own dogma.

“There is a secret stone,” explains one fourteenth-century alchemist, “hidden in a deep well, worthless and rejected.” “Our most precious stone,” laments another, “cast forth upon the dunghill, being most dear, is made the vilest of the vile.”

According to Paracelsus, “the True Imagination leads life back to its spiritual reality, and it then takes on the name of meditation.” What he meant was that the

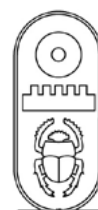
True Imagination envisions the divine source of anything, which can then be explored and understood through meditation.

The meditative methods used by alchemists consisted of prolonged and silent invocation of divine powers. Sometimes a person’s “inner angel” or “higher self” was invoked. In their meditations, they were looking for the “angelic ray” that unites the world of forms with the divine ideals that are the source of everything.

The author of the 1550 text *Rosarium philosophorum* (*The Rosary of the Philosophers*) describes this special kind of alchemical meditation: “Take care that your door is well and firmly closed, so that he who is within cannot escape, and, the Divine willing, you will reach the goal. Nature carries out her operations gradually; and indeed, I would have you do the same: let your imagination be guided wholly by nature, through whom the bodies regenerate themselves in the bowels of the earth. And imagine this with true and not with fantastic imagination.”



*A woodcut from The Rosary of the Philosophers, 1550.*





An image from Carl Jung's *The Red Book*, first published in English in 2009.  
 The text in the image reads: "Father of the Prophet, beloved Philemon."

The True Imagination envisions the subtle processes of nature and connects them with their divine archetypes. It attempts to capture the "Seed of the World" as the Divine Mind dreams it. Therefore, when Hermetic writers speak of "seeing with the eyes of spirit," they are describing a process that penetrates the deeper genesis of things beyond their outward appearances.

Alchemists believed imagination is a piece of heaven concealed within us, a divine connection to the cosmic One Mind. If you look up the definition of "imagination" in Martin Rulandus's *Lexicon of Alchemy* (1612), you will find it defined as "the Star in Man, a celestial or supercelestial body."

"The alchemists' concept of *Imaginatio*," explains Carl Jung (1875-1961), "is the most important key to understanding the Opus. We have to conceive of these imaginal processes not as the immaterial phantoms that we readily take fantasy

pictures to be, but as something corporeal, a subtle body. The act of imagining was like a physical activity that could be fitted into the cycle of material changes that brought these about and was brought about by them in turn. The alchemist related himself not only to the unconscious but directly to the very substance that he hoped to transform through the power of imagination. The act of imagining is therefore a concentrated extract of life forces, a hybrid of the physical and psychic."

From his lifelong study of alchemy, Jung developed the new discipline of transpersonal psychology and a therapeutic method he called "active imagination" that uses the imagination as "an organ of understanding." The technique allows unconscious issues and deeper feelings to act themselves out in visualizations that often involve conversations with imaginal figures, such as one of Jung's "guides," Philemon (shown above).

Active imagination can also be practiced by automatic writing or artistic endeavors like painting, sculpting, music, and dance. The method opens a channel of communication between conscious and unconscious parts of a person's psyche and also between the personal level and the collective unconscious.

Active imagination demonstrates the reality of pre-existing images in the human psyche corresponding to external events and objects. Surprisingly, this concept is a basic principle in the philosophy of science. Galileo, Francis Bacon, Giordano Bruno, Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, and Gottlieb Leibniz all spoke of primordial images that are pre-existent in the human soul and can be perceived through the "innate instinct" of imagination.

Quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli (1900-1958) explained how these images

are the source of scientific insight: "When one analyzes the pre-conscious steps to true concepts, one always finds ideas which consist of symbolic images. These inner pictures are produced by an 'instinct to imagining' and are shared by different individuals independently. Out of these archaic images grow rational concepts."

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) used the True Imagination to see himself riding on a light beam through the cosmos, and he returned from his journey with the theory of relativity. Like the alchemists, he paid homage to the power of this divine gift: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire universe, and all there ever will be to know and understand."



*A detail from an illustration in Splendor Solis, 1582.*

