

On the Rosarium Philosophorum

**A summary of Joseph L. Henderson's March 18, 1990
slide and lecture presentation before
The San Francisco Friends of ARAS, entitled
"The Rosarium Philosophorum"**

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The Rosarium Philosophorum is an alchemical text ascribed to Petrus Toltetanus of Toledo in the mid-1200s. The only version available to us now was printed in 1550. It is a text, which describes and illustrates the alchemical process of psychic transformation through the metaphor of the sexual union of the King and Queen and their subsequent physical transformations. This process is presented in a series of 20 woodcuts with associated commentaries. In 1946 C.G. Jung published *The Psychology of the Transference* using the first half of the series from the Rosarium Philosophorum to illustrate the typical stages in the development of the transference in psychotherapy. On March 18th, 1990 Joseph L. Henderson gave a slide and lecture presentation before the S.F. Friends of ARAS using the second half of the series to illustrate further developments in the transference and individuation process. He illustrated his presentation with a colorful set of paintings accurately reproducing the original 1550 woodcuts. He began with a review of Jung's commentary on the first ten slides and followed this up with his presentation of the second half of the series. This article is a summary of Dr. Henderson's presentation. I will begin with my own brief introduction to Dr. Jung's discussion on the first ten woodcuts and follow this with my summary of Dr. Henderson's presentation.

C. G. Jung:

The First Ten Illustrations from the Rosarium Philosophorum:

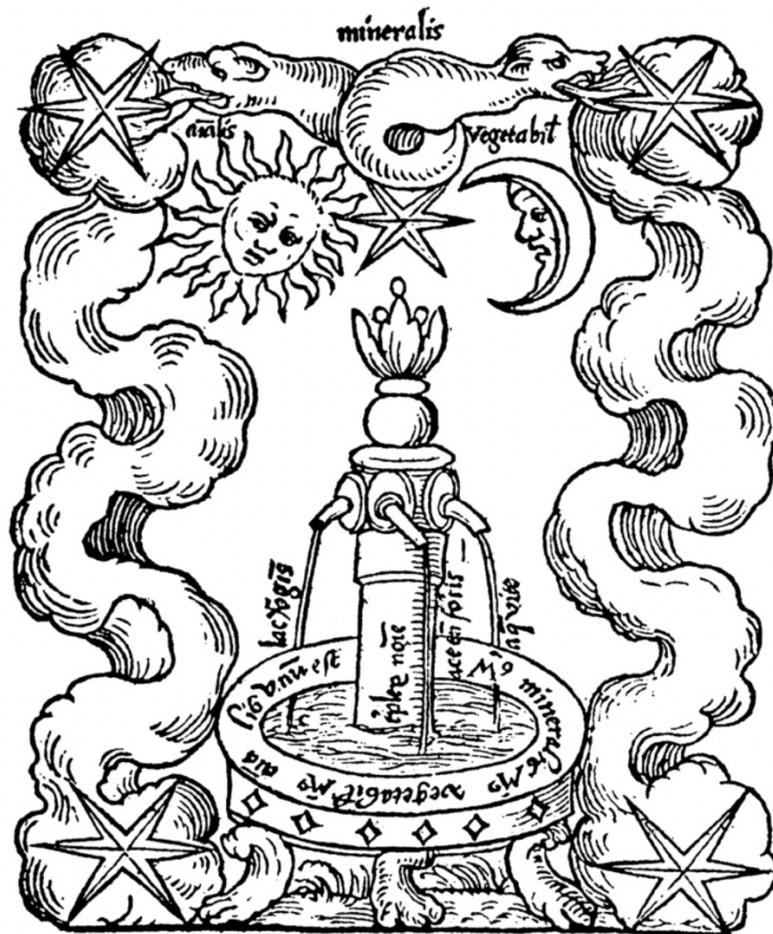


Illustration 1

The first illustration shows a fountain. Above the fountain are the sun and the moon and a two-headed serpent. There are three waterspouts and a reference to the trinity of animal, vegetable and mineral. There are four stars, one in each corner, and a fifth representing the quintessence, in the upper center of the picture. According to Jung the water is the aqua permanens, the divine water, or chaos. This watery chaos is contained in the basin of the fountain, which Jung

describes as the *vas hermeticum*, or the uterus in which the philosopher's child - the transformed world-view - is to be gestated. Also contained in this illustration is the tetrameria or fourfold nature of the work, which suggests that the work begins as chaos, that is, the four elements are disconnected. They then transform into the three manifestations of Mercurius - the inorganic, the organic, and the spiritual. They, in turn, transform into the planetary compliments of Sol and Luna. After Sol and Luna are conjoined, they give rise to the formation of the one and indivisible *lapis philosophorum* - the philosopher's stone. This progression from 4 to 3 to 2 to 1 is known in the alchemical texts as the "Axiom of Maria."

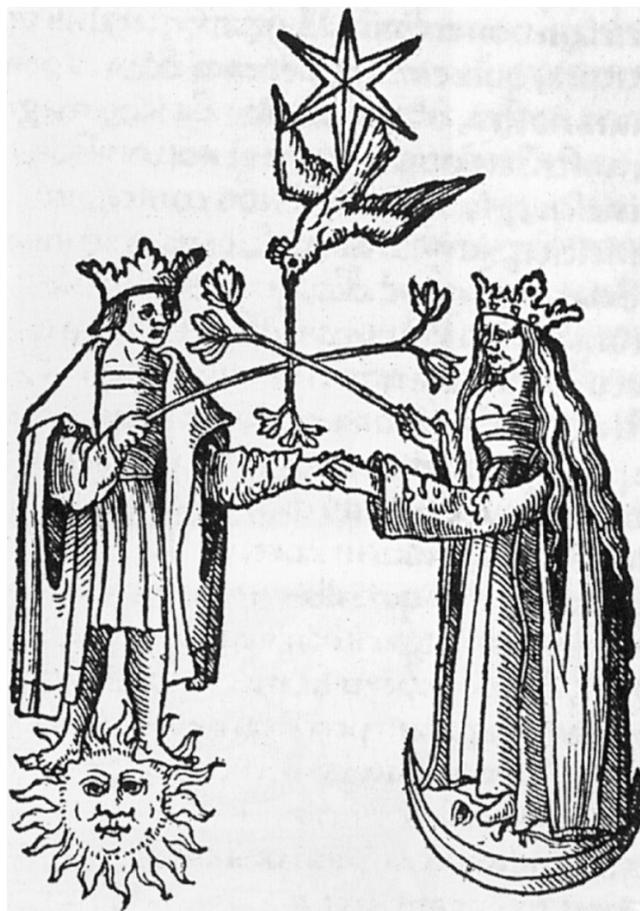


Illustration 2

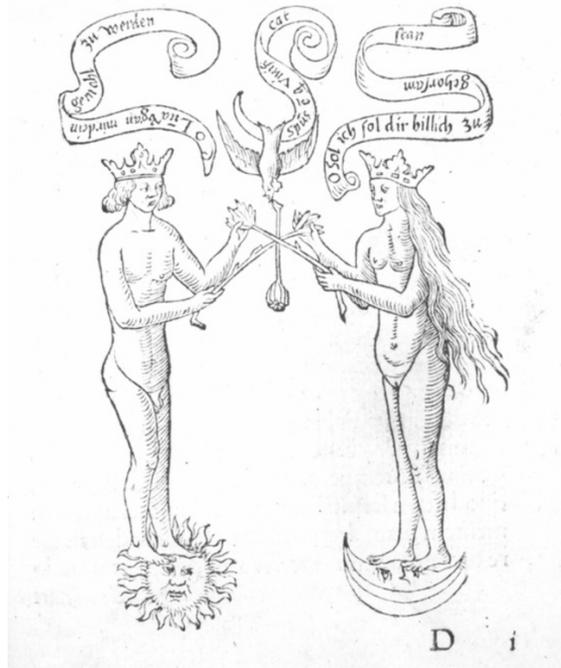


Illustration 3

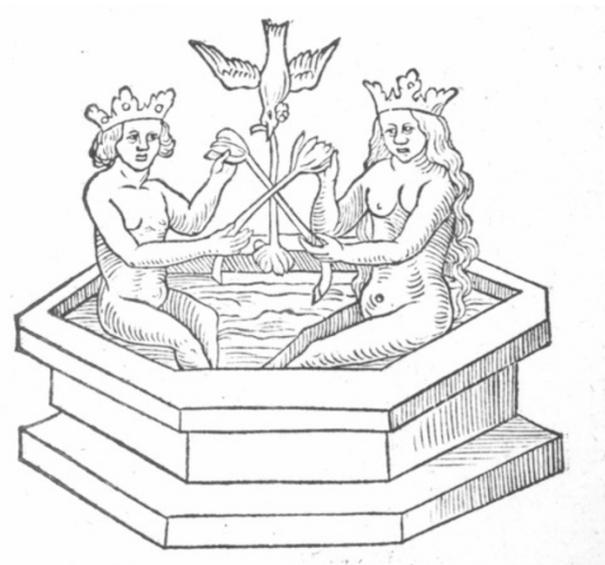


Illustration 4

In the second, third, and fourth woodcuts we see representations of Sol and Luna as king and queen meeting one another through the mediation of "the spirit," as

represented by a dove flying overhead. In the second illustration they stand facing one another in their royal gowns. In the third illustration they remain standing but are seen naked. In the fourth illustration they are seen naked and sitting in a ritual bath. Jung describes this fourth illustration as "a descent into the unconscious." He writes: "The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a "You." Wholeness is a combination of I and you, and these show themselves to be parts of a transcendent unity whose nature can only be grasped symbolically, as in the symbols of the rotundum, the rose, the wheel, or the coniunctio Solis et Lunae." (C.G.Jung, *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, 1954, p.241-245)



Illustration 5

In the fifth illustration Sol and Luna are copulating. The original text, associated with this image, reads: "O Luna, folded in my sweet embrace/ Be you as strong as

I, as fair of face. O Sol, brightest of all lights known to men/ And yet you need me
as the cock the hen." (Jung, p.247) Jung says of this image that "union on the
biological level is a symbol of the unio oppositorum at its highest." (Jung, p.250)

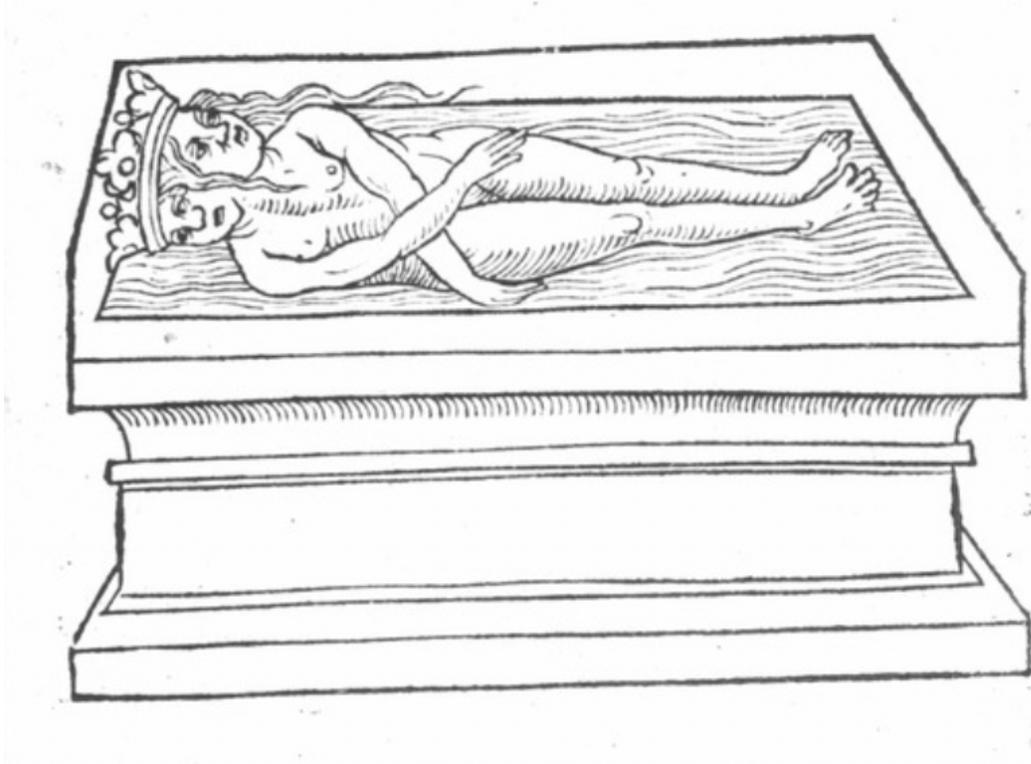


Illustration 6



Illustration 7

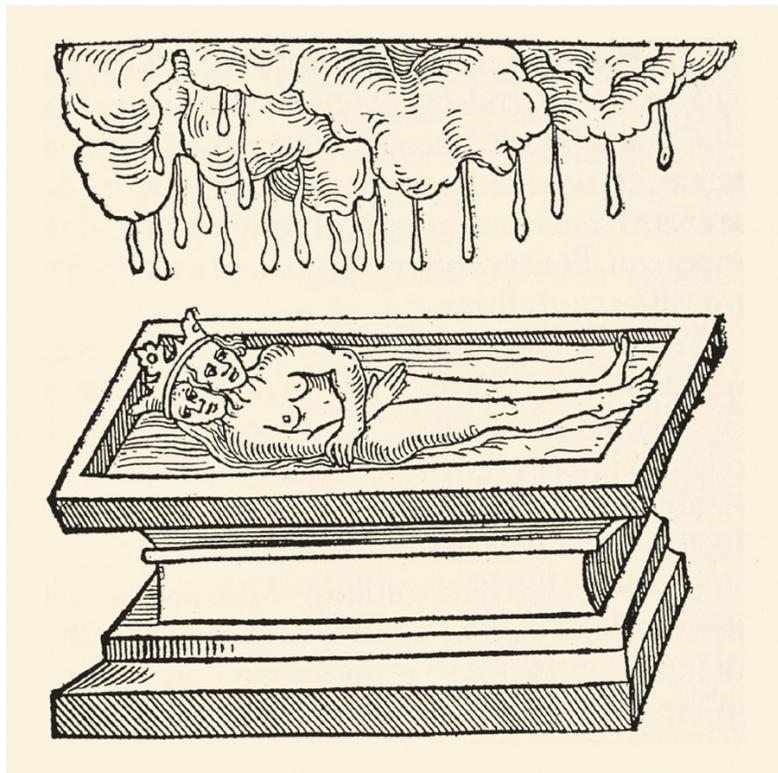


Illustration 8

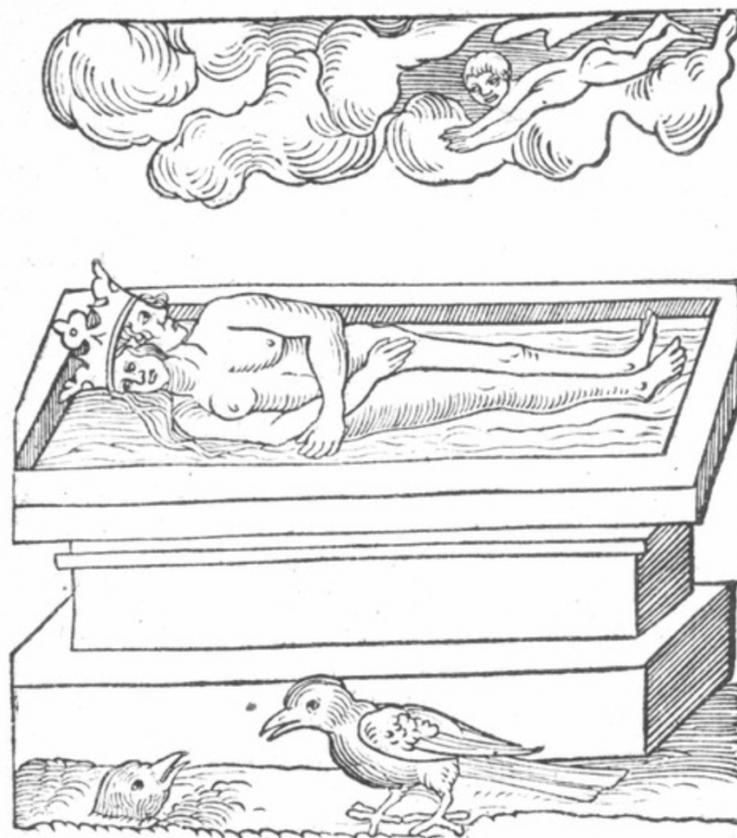


Illustration 9

In the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth illustrations we see that the copulating couple has been transformed into a hermaphrodite lying dead in the sarcophagus. This is the death-like phase in the process of transformation. It is the nigredo, the melancholia, the depression. The Rosarium says: "When you see your matter going black, rejoice: for that is the beginning of the work." (Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy: The Medieval Alchemists and their Royal Art*, 1976, p.102) The sixth illustration depicts the dead hermaphrodite. In the seventh illustration a male soul figure ascends from the corpse of the hermaphrodite. The text says: "Take his brain, grind it up with very strong vinegar, or with boy's urine, until it

turns black." (Fabricius, p.104) In the eighth illustration rain pours down on the corpse. The text says: "Here falls the heavenly dew, to lave???check spelling/ The soiled black body in the grave." (Jung, p.273) This illustration represents a cleansing and resuscitation of the hermaphrodite. It heralds the end of the nigredo phase of the work and the beginning of the albedo. The ninth illustration depicts the return of the soul to the body of the hermaphrodite.



Illustration 10

The tenth illustration shows the bird-winged hermaphrodite standing on a crescent moon. In its out-stretched left hand is a snake. In its out-stretched right hand it holds a chalice with a three-headed snake in it. In the foreground is a

hillside with a bird standing on it and a tree with six pairs of moon-heads and a single moon-head on top. The hermaphrodite is identified as the "Empress" or the "philosopher's daughter." She is alive and has been transformed. Throughout Jung's discussion of this series of illustrations, he draws parallels between this alchemical process of transformation and various transference phenomena in analysis such as the depressive phases of analysis, periods of disorientation, the development of erotic transferences, new syntheses, etc.

Joseph L. Henderson:

The Second Ten Illustrations from the Rosarium Philosophorum:



Illustration 11

The eleventh illustration is very similar to the fifth. Sol and Luna are again copulating in the waters, but in this scene, Luna is on top of Sol and they both have wings. Speaking of the coniunctio or the conjunction of male and female, king and queen, sun and moon, brother and sister, Dr. Henderson noted the parallel between the alchemical image of the copulating couple and the frequent development of an incestuous undercurrent or erotic transference in analysis. He says, "The incestuous undercurrent is an important theme throughout Jung's treatment of the transference. In the initial stages of the transference, he thinks of it as bringing to light symbolism of a union that would be incestuous, if it were acted out in reality, but because it is in the unconscious it succeeds to free these people from their parental bondage." (J.L.H.)

"The psychological doctor's dilemma is: Should he cut it off? [Stop the erotic transference by ending the therapy?] Or should he give in to it? [Act out the erotic transference] If he cuts it off, the process stops. If he gives into it, it also stops. Presumably anything he does, whether to stop it or whether to enact it, is wrong and stops the process. So, what does he do? He lives with it, and stays with his patient until something happens to transform it."(J.L.H.)

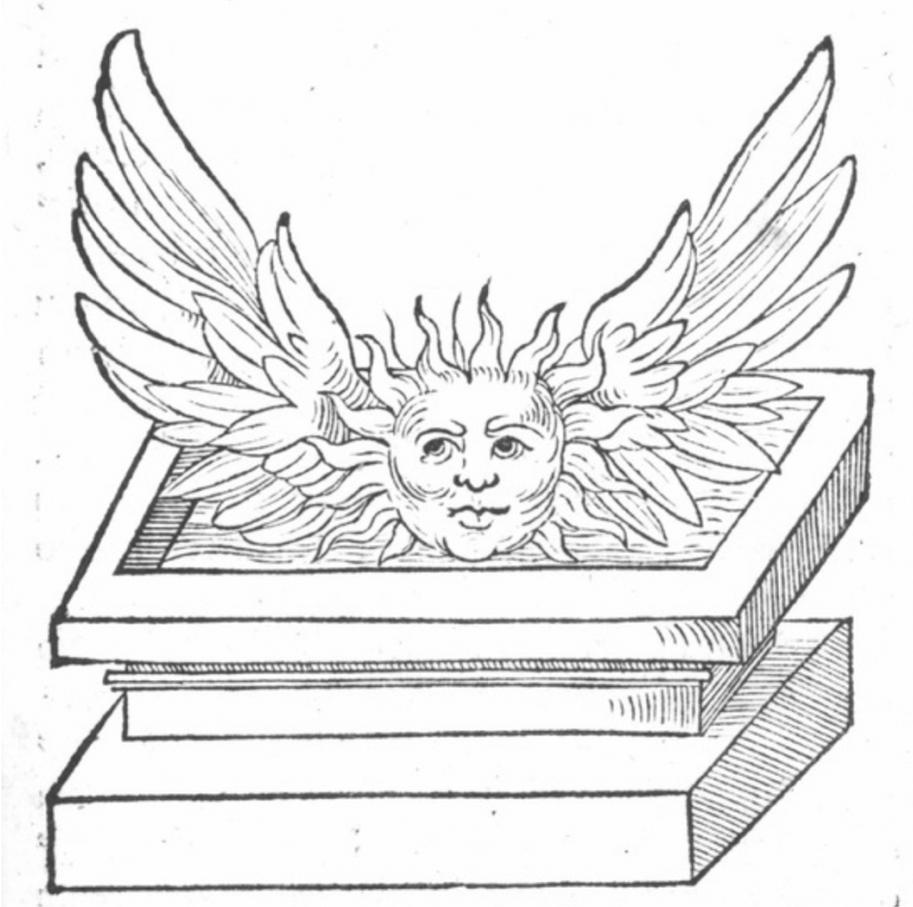


Illustration 12

Dr. Henderson left illustration twelve to discuss at the end of the series.



Illustration 13

Just as illustration eleven is like illustration five, so too is illustration thirteen like illustration six, only the hermaphrodite in illustration thirteen has wings as it lies in the sarcophagus.

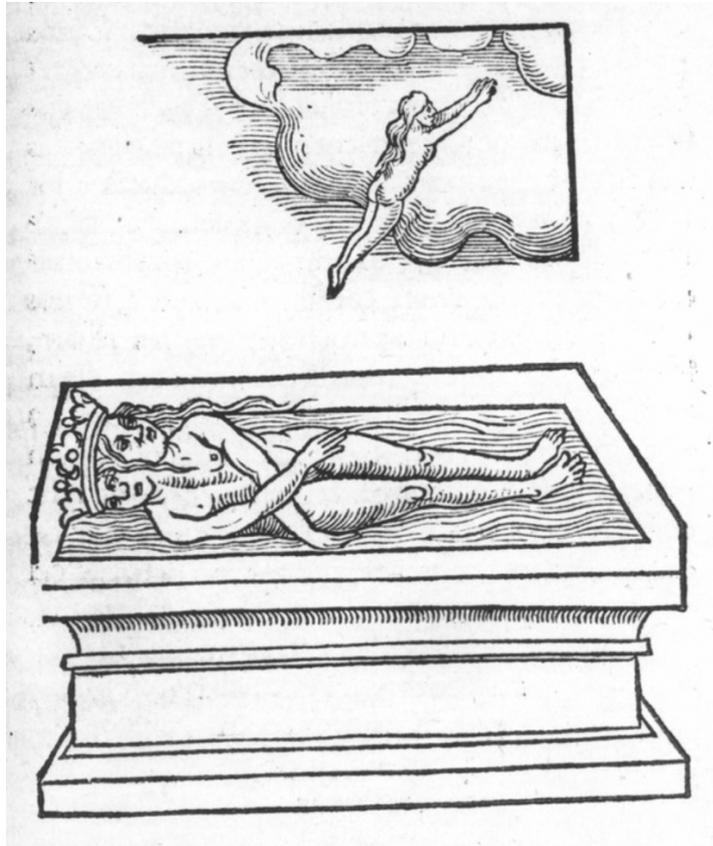


Illustration 14

Illustration fourteen is like number seven, only the soul figure ascending from the hermaphrodite is female in form. Thus, "...the soul here is very much the man's anima figure - the soul as feminine." (J.L.H.) "This ascent of the soul is the stage we often see in people who are in a deep depression and feel that they have really lost the will to live." (J.L.H.) Dr. Henderson explained that depressed patients may entertain suicidal thoughts and feelings, except that, once again, the proper attitude is neither avoidance nor enactment but rather patience and attentiveness to live through the nigredo, or depressive episode, and find or construct a new meaning in "the dawn of a new day." (J.L.H.)

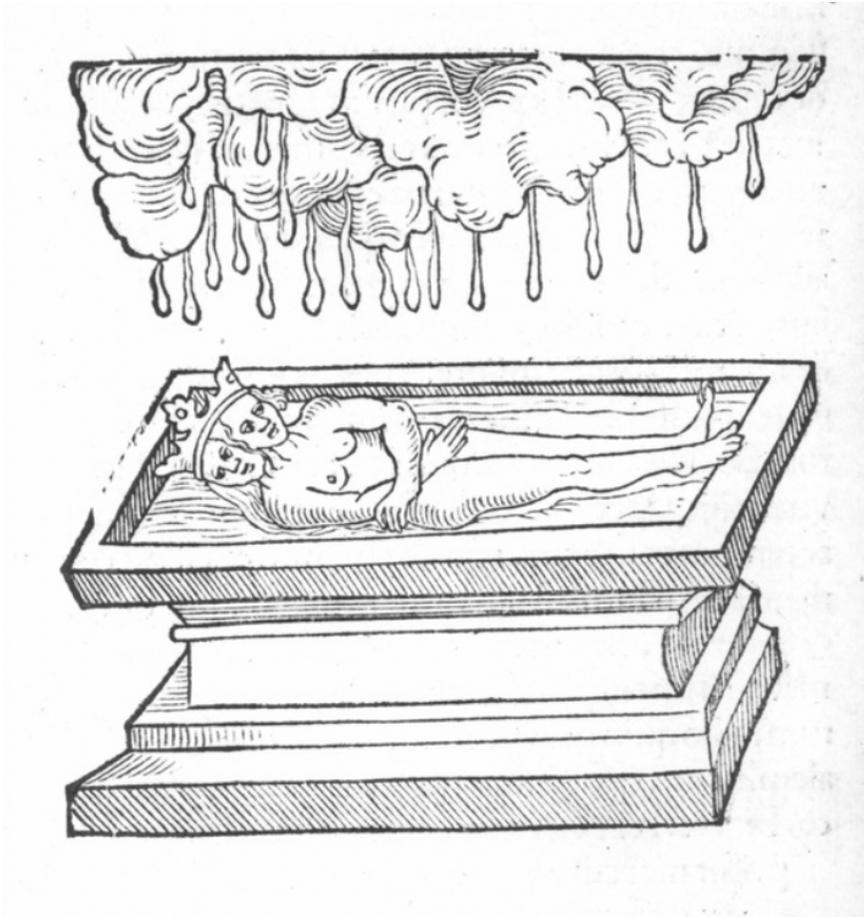


Illustration 15

Illustration fifteen is identical in every way to illustration eight. It is simply the hermaphrodite in the sarcophagus with the heavenly dew washing down on to it. Part of the text to illustration eight states, "Whiten the lato and rend the books lest your hearts be rent asunder." Dr. Henderson explains this for us by saying that, "Intellectual understanding is inappropriate [at this stage in the process]. This is a matter for feeling, not for thinking. So that anyone who tries to think his way through this process, at this time, would be missing the most important thing, which is the feeling that goes with it." (J.L.H.)

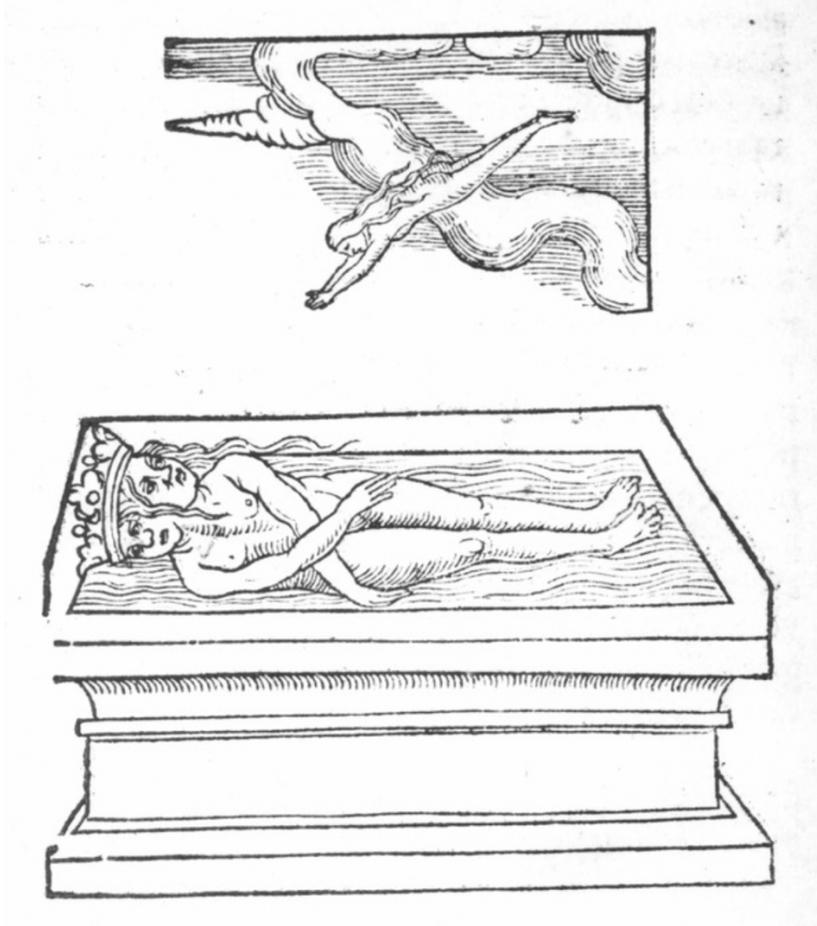


Illustration 16

Illustration sixteen is like illustration nine, only the descending soul figure is female in form.



Illustration 17

Illustration seventeen, which is similar to illustration ten, is of the bat-winged hermaphrodite dressed in royal vestments and standing on a three-headed monster, which is eating itself. In its out-stretched left hand the hermaphrodite holds a snake. In its out-stretched right hand it holds a chalice with a three-headed snake in it. In the background there is a hillside with a bird standing in its nest pecking at its own breast. Its two baby birds open their mouths to the falling drops of blood from its mother's breast. There is also a lion in the background and a tree with six pairs of sun-heads and a single sun-head on top.

Dr. Henderson says that the hermaphrodite's sinister looking bat-wings illustrate the monstrous and horrific nature of the alchemical work. He also notes that there are crests or crowns on the heads of the snakes emerging from the chalices. He says, "Those crowns are the making conscious, spiritually, of the chthonic element. You see," he explained, "snakes are of the earth. Thus, to bring the chthonic element up and redeem it by becoming conscious is essentially the process of alchemy. The whole idea of alchemy is not to aspire to a spiritual life but to recognize that one's earthly life has spirit in it, which can be redeemed, but only if you keep its nature - its true chthonic nature - so that there's no split. Otherwise there's the split between the spirit and nature." (J.L.H.)



Illustration 18

Illustration eighteen shows the green lion sitting on the ground with its head raised, eating the sun. The green lion represents nature and the sun represents



Illustration 20

Illustration twenty is of the resurrected Christ emerging from the sarcophagus.

He is the "filius philosophorum," the son of the philosopher. (J.L.H.)

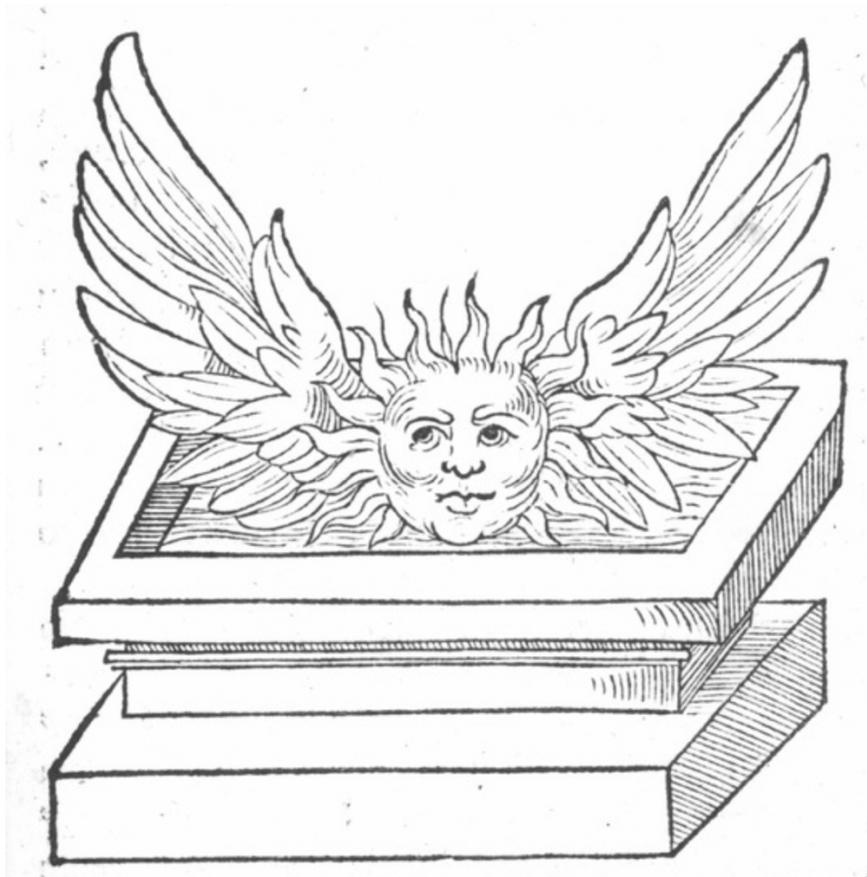


Illustration 12

Dr. Henderson closed his presentation by returning to illustration twelve - the image of a winged sun in the sarcophagus. He noted that this image belongs to that part in the series when a death cycle begins but he then spoke of it as an image of the "goal of individuation." In speaking of this goal of individuation he said, "We don't mean that it [individuation] just goes round and round repeating itself all the time. We don't mean that it reaches an ideal goal up in heaven somewhere. We think of it as something that has life, that comes and goes, that day turns into night and into day again, and the wings [on the sun disc] are the wings of spirit that keep it afloat." (J.L.H.) This winged sun disc is a "symbol of

the Self, that is, a unified duality, composed of the reality of this world - the winged creature - and the abstraction of that which is beyond understanding yet ultimately powerful and necessary for life - namely the sun." (J.L.H.)