



2008-03-14

# Transcendental Exchange: Alchemical Discourse in Romantic Philosophy and Literature

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TRANSCENDENTAL EXCHANGE: ALCHEMICAL DISCOURSE IN  
ROMANTIC PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

April 2008

## ABSTRACT

### TRANSCENDENTAL CONVERSATIONS: ALCHEMICAL DISCOURSE IN ROMANTIC PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

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Alchemical imagery and ideology is present in many Romantic works of literature, but it has largely been overlooked by literary historians in their contextualization of the time period. The same can be said for mysticism in general, of which alchemy is a subset. This project accounts for alchemy in the works of transcendental philosophers and writers as it contributes to some of the most important conversations of the Romantic time period, particularly the reaction against empirical philosophy and the articulation of creative processes. The transcendental conversation is a transnational one, encompassing Germany, Britain, and America, with its use of alchemy also following this transnational progression.

The German idealists developed an epistemology that took from alchemical precepts that in turn informed their spiritual models of genius and the creative process.

German idealism largely influenced Romantic conceptions of art and creativity, which then contributed to the Romantic ideal of a poet-prophet. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Nathaniel Hawthorne further developed their own models of the creative process by incorporating alchemy as an image of the transformation from vision into art. I examine Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" for their alchemical imagery that articulates such a genius ideal. I also found, however, that these two Romantic works express an awareness of artistic limitations and frustration in the face of this ideal, which illustrates the ambiguity these two writers are known for. But alchemy, as a discourse of contradictions and their negotiation, is a site that accommodates the tension between a posited ideal and the reality of actual experience. As such, alchemy, as an underlying ideology to the poet-prophet, allows for flexibility in an artist's identity. Furthermore, as a deeply personal philosophy of transformation, alchemy's image as a work of art suggests the artist's personal investment in the creative process, which is necessary to art's viability in an increasingly materialistic world.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my sincere appreciation to my thesis committee chair, Frank Christianson, for his assistance in the progression of this thesis. I appreciate his patience in reading multiple drafts and in guiding me toward more substantial insights than I was capable of recognizing on my own. I also thank Nick Mason, not only for his perceptive comments on my drafts but for his willingness to serve as a mentor during the course of my program at BYU, and Dennis Perry for his helpful feedback and encouragement.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION: THE TRANSCENDENTAL CONVERSATION

This project began with a recognition of the pervasive alchemy in Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories, which then raised the question for me, how did an obscure quasi-science find its way into the stories of a Puritan-haunted American? As I came to be better acquainted with alchemy and its underwriting philosophy of Hermeticism, I recognized its imagery and ideology in many other Romantic texts of literature and philosophy, among them Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, G. W. F. Hegel and F. W. J. Schelling, as well as later poets such as Robert Browning, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Such widespread occurrences of similar tropes and ideas suggest that alchemy, at least in its most generically mystical form, has saturated Western thought. To some this may seem like an obvious and unexciting statement, but to others alchemy will forever be tied to irrationalism, superstition, and magic, so that any kinship between post-Enlightenment canonical writers and alchemy is hard to believe.

Writing about alchemy's relationship to scientific history, Patricia Fara states that the recognition of Isaac Newton as an alchemist would have been considered "almost blasphemous" until only fifty years ago because of the marginalized place alchemy has occupied since the Scientific Revolution of the 1600s (500). Scientific attitudes toward alchemy are also indicative of attitudes within philosophy and literature. Indeed, alchemy is a word that often comes with negative associations of mad scientists, gullibility in believing the impossible, and even witchcraft, sorcery, and other dark supernatural phenomena, so that critics often find it difficult to take it seriously in major

literary works. The category of mysticism in general, in fact, has been met with resistance, as Leigh Eric Schmidt claims in “The Making of Modern ‘Mysticism,’” and I believe that Schmidt’s claims for mysticism apply to alchemy as well. He shows how most religious historians tend to overlook the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in their analysis of mysticism. This “gaping eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hole,” he points out, “skims across many of the most important developments within the category’s modern formation” (275). The reason for this historical hole, he asserts, is that mysticism has largely been dismissed as an illusion of essentialism, so that religious historians don’t take it seriously enough to provide it a place in history. Schmidt makes the claim, though, that regardless of the criticisms we may now legitimately level at mysticism, it served a purpose for those who wrote in its name and who thereby contributed to its formation as a category of religious and philosophical experience. As such, it deserves consideration as something that was valid to the past as present to itself. Alchemy, as one of these “important developments” within mysticism’s formation has also, I believe, been largely overlooked as a valid window into the Romantic time period. As such, I suggest it is, as a subset of mysticism, “a modern artifact” (Schmidt 276) worthy of our attention.

Although, alchemy is now actually receiving more notice in the historical accounts of science, philosophy and literature (hence, Fara’s observations that Newton’s identity as an alchemist is now acceptable), alchemical interpretations of literary texts are still few. Of the articles and books on literary alchemy that do exist, too many of them do nothing more than spell out in tedious detail what each alchemical reference and symbol means, but little analysis has been done that places the specific use of alchemy (as opposed to a generally esoteric tradition) in larger cultural, historical or philosophical



contexts. Notwithstanding this general oversight, however, a few texts are noteworthy for their contributions. The first major work of literary criticism that recognizes the impact of Hermeticism on Romanticism is M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971). Abrams explains that the Romantic worldview was heavily influenced by two forms of "traditional wisdom," Hebrew Kabbala and Christian Hermeticism (155), thereby giving credit for Romanticism's mystic leanings to the esoteric traditions that had been a prevalent part of European thought for centuries. Kabbala and Hermeticism are part of the same mystical tradition, and they deal with supernatural means of arriving at knowledge, such as visions and revelations. Abrams points out that even though "lunatic fringes" existed in them, much that had evolved from them "had been a reputable, indeed an almost universally accepted part of the intellectual universe" (170). Even though Abrams mentions alchemy only briefly in relation to Hermeticism, the philosophical milieu of the Romantic period as described by him is fraught with terminology that also informs the alchemical imagery of regeneration: words and phrases such as union, regeneration, marriage, reconciliation of opposites, renovated world, make young again, the whole, the One, and circuitous also dominate the alchemical vocabulary. In fact, the terms Hermeticism and alchemy are themselves synonymous terms when used in the context of this imagery.

Predictably, Abrams's Romanticism is chiefly European, and he illustrates his arguments through the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and German philosophers such as Hegel. Although he gives cursory attention to the Americans, he illustrates Hermeticism as a mainly European phenomenon, stating that the American Transcendentalists merely "seized upon and expanded the assertions by Coleridge,

Wordsworth, Carlyle, and their German contemporaries” (412). Arthur Versluis, however, offers more independent avenues of American Hermeticism in his book *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (2001). He provides extensive evidence that Hermeticism, including alchemy, has always had a place in both worldview and practice in America, claiming it was initially transmitted across the Atlantic during America’s colonization. As Randall Clack further observes, the use of alchemical tropes in particular by American writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller is common, especially as those tropes represent the theme of regeneration. The fact that American writers use alchemical imagery is not surprising, as Clack describes it, because the history of the New World is fraught with alchemical mythology. He lists some of the early explorers who came to America looking for unlimited wealth and youth, Cortez’s City of Gold, Ponce de Leon’s Fountain of Youth, and Coronado’s Seven Cities of Gold among them (5). He also observes that Hector de Crevecoeur’s image of a melting pot is an “alchemical/metallurgical image” that encompasses the promise many saw in America as a land of transformation (6).

Contextualization of alchemy tends to fall along national lines, with distinctions of its use being made according to the traditions and assumptions of each geographic area. While such claims are plausible, I have also noticed a correlation between alchemy and transcendental philosophy, and this relationship appears to emerge within a more transnational conversation. Transcendentalism as we speak of it now is usually attributed to the early nineteenth-century American circle of writers and thinkers that included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott, but these Americans were actually part of a larger exchange regarding knowledge, consciousness, and aesthetics that took Immanuel

Kant's transcendental philosophy as their foundation. Emerson himself acknowledges how Kant's philosophy has "deeply colored the conversation and poetry of the present day" (86), and he provides a transnational context for this conversation:

It is well known to most of my [1842] audience that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg ... The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called at the present day *Transcendental*.  
(86)

In addition to the Americans, then, the German idealists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well as Coleridge, who made attempts to be a philosopher after the pattern of the Germans, also wrote under the transcendental rubric. In this project, therefore, I use the term "transcendental" to signify this philosophical system that in turn "deeply colored," as Emerson suggests, particular aesthetic practices (the "poetry of the present day"). The Germans, British, and Americans alike contributed to this transcendental conversation.

In this chapter, I show alchemical principles that play an important role in the works of the German idealists. German idealism was an influential philosophy of the Romantic time period, especially as it further developed and disseminated Kant's theories throughout Europe and America. Kant's texts are not themselves alchemical, although many of his mystical precepts may be termed Hermetic. His German successors, however, formulated their own transcendental systems within an alchemical ideology.

Here I emphasize their most significant alchemical and Hermetic ideas as those ideas contributed to the alchemical elements of the larger transcendental conversation. The formation of an alchemical transcendentalism by the Germans, then, sets the stage for the same kinds of appropriations among the literary writers who also engaged in transcendental discourse. I discuss two of these writers, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Nathaniel Hawthorne, in the following two chapters. By placing Romantic artists within German parameters, I hope to illustrate the dissemination of transcendental ideas beyond its own field of philosophy. This diffusion of transcendentalism, I believe, was an important source for the precepts of alchemy and their appropriation for aesthetic practices during the Romantic time period.

### Alchemy

Because alchemy has become a somewhat obscure literary allusion, its symbolism is often lost on a contemporary reader. Before I can embark on a discussion of its place within transcendental philosophy, therefore, it is necessary for me to explain its basic precepts.

Alchemy, in a nutshell, is a philosophy of transformation, particularly the transforming of lead into gold. At its foundation is the belief that all tangible matter is made from a prime substance (*prima materia*) that is the equivalent of spirit. The theory of transformation relies on the belief of the *prima materia* because it is through this common substance that all the various materials of nature may claim kinship, and it is through this kinship that materials may cross over from one thing to another. Thus, in theory, the so-called contingent qualities of a substance, such as what makes a mineral lead instead of gold, may be changed out according to the purpose of the alchemist, but

the essential quality of the substance (the *prima materia* or “quintessence”) will always remain the same. It is through this essential substance that all matter is seen as possessing a soul. Humans, as part of this system of *prima materia*, have an intelligence that is derived from God, but they resemble God more closely than other forms of nature. The alchemist, consequently, relates himself in a synecdochical correspondence as the microcosm of a larger universe. Thus, man is God in miniature, a replica of the divine. While *prima materia* is also used to mean the substances in their base or prime condition, the context is always within this correspondence to the Divine, so that the base substance contains “the seed of gold” or the divine attributes that makes the potential of that transformation possible.

This principle of correspondence originates from Hermeticism, which serves as alchemy’s philosophical and theological foundation. The terms “alchemy” and “Hermeticism” are so closely related that many scholars use them interchangeably; however, Hermeticism is a more general philosophy from which different sects branch out, such as the Freemasons, Rosicrucians, and Illuminati. Alchemy, then, is one member within a larger family of Hermetic denominations, but it distinguishes itself with the use of metallurgical or chemical imagery, as opposed to, say, the Freemasons who employ images relating to building cathedrals and stonework. Generally, the term “hermetic” refers to the mystery tradition of Western culture in a nonspecific way as that tradition posits knowledge through divine intuition or communication (Drury 115-116). Specifically, Hermeticism is a genre of writings that call on, write to, or claim authorship from Hermes Trismegistus, the “thrice great,” who is a mythical figure derived from Egyptian mythology. These texts, called the *Hermetica*, portray Hermes as a teacher and

seer of esoteric knowledge, who then imparts his wisdom to Tat and Asclepius through dialogues that are similar to Plato's.

The *Hermetica* texts were written between 100 to 300 CE (Copenhaver xlv), placing them close to the Neoplatonic writings of Plotinus.<sup>1</sup> As such, they describe a theological system based on the "One" god who is the first cause of the universe and from whom a chain of cause and effect emanates. According to Hermes, God and his creations are always in motion: "God is not idle, else everything would be idle, for each and every thing is full of god. Nowhere in the cosmos nor in any other thing is there idleness" (38). This becoming is made possible by a soul that exists outwardly in the universe and "brings it to life" (38). Significantly, the becoming of God and humans is done primarily in the mind. Hermeticism is, therefore, a mystical philosophy of consciousness. Such mysticism that relies on the emerging consciousness of god and man becomes an especially important principle to the allegorical practices of alchemy and later to transcendental philosophy.

In order to understand alchemy more fully, we may divide it into the two categories of exoteric and esoteric functions. On the surface, the exoteric function is more straightforward than the mystical complexities of the esoteric, and it is what most people think of when referencing alchemy because it has to do with the physical act of metal transformation. Its central tableau is the scientist who works in a laboratory with ovens, crucibles, substances and the *prima materia* in order to discover the gold-making or elixir-making process. This elixir is the philosopher's stone, otherwise known as the *lapis*, Elixir of Life (*elixir vitae*), philosophical gold, and a myriad of other terms that

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<sup>1</sup> See Brian P. Copenhaver's introduction to the *Hermetica*, in which he provides a thorough contextualization of the Hermetic texts.

were used to describe and hide at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Application of the philosopher's stone to any given substance would instantly transform that substance into gold. This elixir also made claims to immortality. In addition, the quest for the philosopher's stone was manifest to a lesser degree in the medical pursuit of a universal panacea so that the early study of medicine was highly fraught with alchemical philosophy.

The second category of alchemy, esotericism, is a move toward the symbolic, and it is actually more to the point of what alchemists felt their pursuit was about. The esoteric function has to do with the philosophical and spiritual nature of alchemy, where the laboratory work came to represent the inner workings of the soul. As alchemists worked on the metals and substances in their lab, they saw a symbolic connection between the purifying stages of the metallic refining process and the struggles humans face in life. They saw the fire and heat of their ovens as symbolic of suffering and hardship, they saw the solutions applied to the metals as washings that purified, and they saw the promise of gold as symbolic of the potential for humankind's exaltation. In this sense, then, chemical transformations of substances were a visible link to the inner workings of the soul. The ultimate goal for an esoteric alchemist was a transmutation of self—more so than metals—from base to purified nature, creating inner union through the metaphorical processes of death (i.e. spiritual loss or failure) and rebirth (i.e. spiritual achievement or progress) by fire (i.e. suffering). Because they believed that the spiritual is inherent in all matter, everything is essentially spiritual; therefore, material

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<sup>2</sup> The philosopher's stone was a completely theoretical substance; according to C. G. Jung, no one has ever produced the philosopher's stone (239). For a complete description of alchemy and its precepts, see his *Psychology and Alchemy* 227-241; Linden's introduction to *Darke Hieroglyphicks* 1-36; and Taylor.

experiments were means to ultimately spiritual ends. It is significant to understand that all exoteric experiments were done with this ultimate goal in mind.

The processes of alchemy are often described as discrete stages that an adept needs to pass through in order to come to the final stage of the philosopher's stone. These stages incorporate both the exoteric and the esoteric functions of alchemy and, as I have mentioned, are described based on the visual appearance and effects of the laboratory substance and then applied metaphorically to the adept himself. At different time periods and among different alchemists the number of required stages varied in number from twelve to seven to four, but finally came to rest, according to Jung, at three around the fifteenth or sixteenth century in order to reflect the number in the trinity (229-30).<sup>3</sup>

These three alchemical stages are described by three corresponding colors: 1) black, signifying darkness or chaos that is already present in the *prima materia*, that is brought on by the separation of elements, or that results from the death of a product that was created from a previous union of opposites; 2) white, representing a washing (*baptisma*) or resurrection, which carries with it the idea of rebirth —often spoken of in terms of the moon, silver, daybreak or Queen; and 3) red, symbolizing the reaction of the material to the heat as it is raised to its highest intensity, through which a final fusion is effected. This last stage contains the symbolism of the sun, sunrise, and King, who unites with the Queen to form a union of opposites. The offspring from this union will eventually die to begin the process anew (Jung 227-232).

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<sup>3</sup> The appropriation of the trinity in the alchemical stages is indicative of the relationship between alchemy and Christianity in Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As a symbol of purification and regeneration, Christ stands as the ultimate philosopher's stone.



Transcendentalists particularly use the first and last stages in their imagery. The first is associated with separation and then sublimation, which in chemical terms refers to the process of changing a liquid to a gas. Stanton J. Linden provides an alchemical definition of sublimation as “the distilling process, in name derived from the ‘elevation’ or ‘exaltation’ of the materials circulating in the still.” Taking his definition from Sir George Ripley, Linden notes that the first purpose of sublimation is to “make the body spiritual.” Linden also quotes John Read’s explanation of sublimation: “when repeated many times it was supposed to furnish the ‘quintessence’ of the material concerned” (18). A favorite image of sublimation is an ascending winged creature from a dark emblem of its base self, signifying the spiritual transformation of matter. Sublimation is seen as a liminal stage because it brings the adept to a threshold where further transformation is possible.

The last stage is associated with a reconciliation or conjunction. As Linden defines it, “Conjunction is the union of the two opposing, sexually differentiated *principles*, Sulphur and Mercury [...], variously referred to as male and female, king and queen, the red man and the white wife, brother and sister, and many other forms” (17). This stage forges a working relationship with paradox, and among its favorite images are sexual embraces and marriage. It is important to note that “the [alchemical] process is a repetition of the stages gone before” (Taylor 143), so that the stages are seen to work in cycles, with the adept moving backward and forward in smaller units as he moves overall toward the end goal. This back and forth movement represents the death and rebirth an alchemist undergoes, with the death acting as an equally important function as the rebirth. This movement also results in abundant circular or mandala emblems within alchemy,

which signifies the stages and their continual repetitions and reconciliations as well as the wholeness brought on by the successful completion of the philosopher's stone.

As mentioned previously, alchemy's origins are traditionally linked to the *Hermetica*, ancient texts that served as the basis for most mystical sects. However, in *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy* (1978), Mircea Eliade traces alchemical thought processes back to the rituals and myths of primitive man. He explains how the earliest smiths viewed the earth as a Mother from whom they tenuously aborted sacred embryos from the womb when gathering the ore they used in their work. Because the ores came from a living Earth-Mother, they contained the same living substance; as such, the ores were gendered to reflect the literal facts of the birth process. The later combination of the ores in the fires of the smith was seen as a magical "marriage of metals" from which a new birth could arise (37). This marriage was accompanied with various symbolic sexual rituals that are meant to symbolize the divine creative process. Thus, as I have already noted, alchemy is fraught with marriage and sexual symbolism; inherent in the symbol of a marriage is the primitive concept of a union of opposites within nature in which the division between the opposing gendered elements is overcome to form a new wholeness.

Furthermore, a central theme of alchemy as explained by Eliade is that man takes the place of time in his quest to perfect materials. Primitive man believed that the ores and metals in the earth would eventually become gold if left to themselves, but if humans could speed up the process, regeneration could occur at a much faster rate. Alchemists, then, served as a proxy for time. Inherent in this role of the alchemists is the assumption that progress will happen by default—that nature will inevitably refine the materials if

left to its natural processes—and that man's role is merely to be a part of this autonomous progress. Indeed, Eliade reminds us that the hope of post-Enlightenment science is steeped with the alchemical goal of “infinite progress” through the transformation and improvement of nature (172). Such an assumption is significant in understanding how alchemical philosophy and imagery fits within the Romantic time period, for the philosophy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shares the same assumption of inevitable progress with alchemy.

### Transcendentalism

Although alchemy began as a precursor to science and medicine, the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sloughed off anything that could be deemed superstitious, and alchemy became one such casualty. Interestingly, alchemy survives in literature and philosophy, which can be attributed to two of its characteristics: its metaphorical practices and its doctrine that combines the material with the spiritual. As an established spiritual discourse especially, alchemy emerges in transcendental reactions against the materialism that had dominated philosophy since Newton.

In an introduction to Isaac Newton's writings on the philosophy of nature, John Herman Randall notes that the “point of departure” for the transcendentalists “remained Newton's Nature,” despite the fact that they spent more time trying “to get away from or pass beyond” it than embracing it as unqualified truth (xiv). The transcendentalists were particularly threatened by the implications of mechanistic theories of nature because such theories tend to ignore or reject spiritual considerations. As a result, the transcendentalists reassert concepts of divine essences and microcosmic correspondences to a world soul and to a spiritualized nature. The concept of spirit helped them explain

the teleology of nature and man: nature may be a series of parts that work together as a mechanism, but that mechanism also has a purposiveness that cannot be explained by empiricism alone. Thus, as many people were becoming disillusioned with science's supposed monopoly on knowledge, the transcendentalists insisted that truth comes in many forms and that spiritual origination of knowledge is just as important and productive as truth derived from a scientific method. Alchemy, as a spiritual philosophy that also incorporates elements of empiricism, serves as a conciliator to this paradigmatic binary between spirit and matter.

As I have mentioned, the beginning point for transcendental philosophy and literature is Immanuel Kant. Kant's writings represent "The Copernican Turn" for Enlightenment thought in that he established the subjective consciousness as an absolute mediator to cognition and, as such, the structuring instrument of individual reality. This model of consciousness is different from the hitherto prevailing belief that the mind is a passive receptacle of information and knowledge. On the contrary, self-consciousness, according to Kant, acts as a barrier to the supersensible and noumenal realm, that is, to the realm of essences and of things-in-themselves, so that truth can only be derived from bodily sensations and the intuitions they posit. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains his concept of subjectivity: "From all this it undeniably follows that the pure concepts of understanding can *never* admit of *transcendental* but *always* only of *empirical* employment, and that the principles of pure understanding can apply only to objects of the senses under the universal conditions of a possible experience" (264).

In presenting the empirical as an antithesis to the transcendental Kant does not, however, completely negate transcendental intuition. He merely points out the limits of

our mental capabilities. The term transcendental refers to the possibility of cognizing the supersensible realm and, therefore, to our intellectual capacity to go beyond the limits of sensory understanding. Accordingly, a transcendental concept is an ideal that posits representations of things, rather than the things themselves; it is capable only of anticipation rather than actualization (264). But the ideal is still a cognition that has meaning, even if that meaning resides in a realm outside of sensory existence. Hence, inherent in Kant's transcendental idealism is his concept of a priori knowledge, which is associated with intuition and inner perception. An a priori concept is knowledge that necessarily exists before sensory experience and acts as supersensible experience. It may be realized through the senses, but it does not rely on the senses for its existence. Because it originally exists outside sensory experience, when an individual recognizes it as truth, he or she recognizes that it must have always been truth. In that way, it resides within the realm of absolutes, which is also the realm of morality and purposive teleology.<sup>4</sup>

This model of a subjective consciousness was immediately compelling and far-reaching. After Kant, the mediation of the self-consciousness on knowledge and cognition could not be ignored any more than Newton's empirical laws of mechanism could be. For those who inherited Kant's philosophy, specifically the German idealists and the literary writers they influenced, it became their new starting point. Thus, all credible texts from Kant forward took his model of subjectivity as an assumption, as Coleridge illustrates in *Biographia Literaria*: "That the self-consciousness is the fixed

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<sup>4</sup> Kant provides an important distinction between the terms "transcendental" and "transcendent." Transcendental is associated with a priori knowledge and resides within experience. Transcendent is "mere thought" that exists outside of experience; as such, it cannot be a means to knowledge (Pluhar xxxvii).

point, to which for us all is mortised and annexed, needs no further proof” (300). As a result, much of transcendental philosophy and literature deals with psychological issues, especially as the activity of the self-consciousness defines moral character through its transcendental movement toward a priori knowledge. Alchemy, with its conception of becoming that leads to moral knowledge and action, is an apt image of this transcendental consciousness.

At this point, one might conjecture that Jung’s work on consciousness and alchemy will be the model from which I will base my conclusions. While Jung’s work is compelling for psychology and the interpretation of dreams, I am not convinced that Jung’s biological collective unconscious accounts for the dissemination of alchemical tropes within Romantic philosophy and literature. Instead, I see this process as occurring more within the social framework of textual influence. Alchemy had saturated the folkloric practices of the world of letters during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, especially in Germany as Glenn Alexander Magee points out.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the writers within the world of letters were subject to religious, familial, literary, and other cultural environments. Hence, I rely heavily on Jung only for his thorough explanations of alchemy’s history and precepts. But for the narrative of alchemy’s dissemination throughout Romantic philosophy and literature, I rely on a social model. I will begin this narrative with the German idealists whose transcendental/alchemical philosophy served as a springboard for much of Romanticism’s literary production.

### German Idealism

The German philosophers who succeeded Kant appropriated the term

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<sup>5</sup> See *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, Chapters 1 and 2 for Magee’s contextualization of alchemy and Hermeticism within German culture.

“transcendental” to describe their system of philosophy, which is basically a system of epistemology (philosophy was discussed in terms of systems in order to compete with the prevailing scientific methods of discovery). By virtue of the term “transcendental,” these German idealists dealt primarily with intuition, which was seen to be a spiritual phenomenon. Thus, their systems serve, in effect, as apologetics for spiritual knowledge. As a source for this spiritual discourse, many of them took from earlier mystical writers such as Jacob Bohme, Giordano Bruno and F. C. Oetinger, who in turn took from Hermeticism and alchemy for their own philosophical outlook. As such, the transcendental system of philosophy that reigned in the late eighteenth century may be seen as part of a long-standing mystical tradition.

Although the idealists worked within the spiritual realm of intuition and essences, they stayed within the boundaries of material reality, so that their systems sought to establish a relationship between spirit and matter. But because matter had been championed to the point that it threatened the spiritual, they emphasized the spiritual in order to reassert its equal prominence in the process of discovering knowledge. Their systems do not negate material reality altogether, then, as some criticism of transcendentalism would imply, but rather they suggest the material is the means to the spiritual, and vice versa, with the human consciousness acting as a mediator between the material and spiritual. At their most basic level, these transcendental systems incorporate a fundamental principle of alchemy: negotiation between opposing elements of nature necessarily leads to a fusion between them.

One function of the spiritual side of consciousness, according to the idealists, is its ability to conceptualize perfection, and, as a result, their philosophy is infused with

optimism regarding the potential of human morality on both an individual and societal level. Even though they acknowledge human limitations, they tend to emphasize the possibilities over the impossibilities of human nature. Hermetic alchemy, with its tropes of becoming, self-refinement through reconciliation, and inevitable progression, is used as rhetorical devices within this idealist discourse. At the root of human capacity for perfection is a correspondence to the One, which represents the ideal of unity, harmony, and synthesis of the inner individual as well as of society as a whole. These terms represent the common assumptions among the transcendentalists as a group, especially as they signify a compelling hope for universal harmony amidst the social and political upheavals of the Romantic time period. Because imperfect men and women cannot effect universal peace on their own, the Hermetic One, at least, offered the conceptualization of ultimate unity and the justification to work toward that unity.

The Hermetic One, then, is a means for the idealists to explain the functions of the intuition that serves as the means for human perfection. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, for example, claims in 1794, “the vocation of man” is to “perfect himself without end” (9), and he justifies this vocation through his concept of Ego, which includes a “pure I” that gives all humans an absolute self-identity through reason. This “pure I” is the central location from which all empirical knowledge is subsumed and then transformed into a priori knowledge, and it has absolute credibility because it is part of an eternal, and therefore ethical, identity, i.e. it is the source of the Good. Other transcendentalists posit variations of this same theory with different emphases and terminology but with similar implications: in addition to Fichte’s Ego is Schelling’s world soul and Hegel’s absolute Spirit (and later Emerson’s Over-Soul). The Good of these systems can be explained in



Hermetic terms: it is an intuitive presence that exists through a human microcosmic correspondence to an absolute macrocosm, and it, therefore, makes self-perfection possible through its emanating qualities of unity, wholeness, ethics, and wisdom.

Hegel's system of absolute Spirit is particularly Hermetic. Indeed, Magee claims that Hegel is not merely influenced by Hermetic texts but that his writings are Hermetic texts. His philosophy is also specifically alchemical. In the preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he portrays the events of history as a perpetual dialectic, in which opposites are posited, reciprocally negated, and eventually reconciled within an advancing universal Spirit in its quest for self-knowledge. His system (what he terms "Science") contains an obvious affinity to alchemy in its spiritual quest of reconciling opposites. But even more, Hegel is concerned with reducing concepts down to their essence (the "simplicity")—just as alchemists attempted to reduce a substance down to the *prima materia* in order to understand its essence—and then with gathering each essence together to form a whole Notion. Thus, Hegel's system undertakes no less than to get at the absolute core of knowledge.

From this core, Hegel's system progresses through what is, in effect, the alchemical stages, where a new Notion eventually arises out of the death of its old form. The process begins with a subject and object, the thesis and antithesis, that work through oppositions in a process of negation—not negation that merely knocks down or erases, however, but one that results in a positive whole where the negative and its opposite are both essential to a new unit of knowledge. Hegel attests to "the tremendous power of the negative" (19) for its ability to separate concepts, for, he says, "what is thus *separated* and non-actual is an essential moment" (18). The language and principles here are

alchemical as they relate to the first stage of *separatio*, and particularly in Hegel's further point that negation, as a form of death, gives rise to new insight: "Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things most dreadful ... But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself" (19). As the *lapis* is a product of an initial separation and dissolution, knowledge in Hegel's system is only authentically born from the death negation represents.

Hegel's attempt to get at the *prima materia* of knowledge is indicative of the work of the idealists in general because such a basic substance acts as a credible answer to mechanism and, consequently, as affirmation of spiritual experience. Hegel's friend and colleague F.W.J. Schelling thus makes the same move in his philosophy of nature. In the introduction to *Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature*,<sup>6</sup> which is an explicit reaction against Newtonian mechanism, Schelling sees philosophy's main purpose as looking beyond the mechanism to explain why the laws of nature exist in the first place. He claims, "It is not our task to portray such a system [of the mechanism of nature], once it exists, but rather to find how such a system could exist at all" (181). Schelling is not satisfied with merely pointing out cause and effect or the properties of matter; he wants to know what is behind it all—what the cause of the cause is.

To illustrate this first cause, Schelling points out that the various parts of a mechanism relate to the whole only through some common "higher principle," which he defines as spirit. For him, spirit "reciprocally relates the part and the whole, form and

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<sup>6</sup> First published in 1797 but significantly revised in 1803 to include more Hermetic concepts. I use a translation from the 1803 edition.

matter, each to the other.” “Thus,” he tells us, “you must concede that organization is possible only in relation to a *spirit*” (191), the most basic substance of life. Furthermore, Schelling associates the incorporeal representations of consciousness with spiritual phenomena, and because philosophy for him is very much about the functions and role of consciousness, he claims, “Philosophy is nothing other than a *natural science of our spirit*” (189). His idea of true philosophy asks questions that lead to a harmonious connection between empirical appearances and spiritual representations in the mind of humans, for his philosophical science is the systematic mapping of the *process* of consciousness: “We contemplate the system of our representations not in its *being*, but in its *becoming* (189), thereby assuming, like Hegel, that self-consciousness inevitably moves toward reconciliation and unity within a system of contradictions. Such a view provides consciousness with an alchemical structure.

Schelling takes his philosophy of consciousness farther into alchemical territory in his depiction of the consciousness’s self-objectification as a means to understanding and growth, for he is ultimately concerned with how our minds absorb representations of matter and then transform those representations into a spiritual or metaphysical understanding of ourselves—in other words, how we distinguish ourselves from nature in a way that leads to self-reflection. In order for consciousness to progress, he believes man must become an object to himself for study and analysis: “As soon as man sets himself in opposition to the external world...he takes the first step towards philosophy. For with this separation reflection first begins [...] by becoming his own *object*, he separates himself from himself” (168-69). Such a separation of self-consciousness, like Hegel’s separation of notions, is parallel to alchemy’s first step of *separatio* where the

elements of a substance are divided. More significantly, as the alchemists projected the work in their laboratory onto themselves, so that their personal refinement became their “true” work, Schelling’s call for an objectification of self is also an alchemical work. Man becomes the substance in the alembic, and his higher consciousness the hoped for philosopher’s stone.

Such an alchemical reading of Schelling would be consistent with his personal allegiances, according to Magee, who shows how Schelling’s writings contain overt Hermeticism and alchemy, something that is not surprising given the esoteric environment of late eighteenth-century Germany. Magee describes the youth of Schelling and Hegel in Wurttemberg as occurring very much within a Hermetic milieu, with both reading mystical works by Bohme, Oetinger, Robert Fludd, and Paracelsus (70). Oetinger is the most dominant influence for Schelling, according to Magee, because his father owned Oetinger’s books. He also had two uncles with close personal ties to Oetinger (80). In fact, Magee relates how Schelling borrowed the tendency of Oetinger to coin words from the Latin *essentia* to come up with the term *Essentification*. Such a tendency on Oetinger’s part derives from his descriptions of “the unfolding of the potentialities of a thing as made possible by its spirit,” which he often compared to the alchemical process (80). Schelling’s imitation of Oetinger suggests that his alchemy is not accidental—not a vague saturation of common themes and tropes with no knowledge of where they came from—but a willful appropriation. I suggest the same can be said for the other transcendentalists who take part in an alchemical discourse.

#### The Transcendental Genius

The idealists’ philosophy of spirit and its role in self-consciousness and

knowledge served not as a mere influence on Romantic writers in England and America, but as a foundation for their aesthetic models. Authors, as artists, saw themselves and their work as particularly relevant to the time period's celebration of the spiritual, for, as Kant proclaimed, art links humans to an a priori morality. The work of an artist, then, according to transcendental philosophy, is to promote moral knowledge.

The concept of genius is the most significant aesthetic theory to arise from the morality of transcendental philosophy. While Kant and his German successors were not the first to articulate a theory of genius, their transcendental version, with its direct line to the supersensible and noumenal realm, resonated with the Romantic assertion that experience beyond the empirical is real and legitimate. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant defines genius as a "talent" or "natural endowment," an "innate mental predisposition" that comes directly from nature (174). Kant further explains genius in terms of Spirit, which, "in an aesthetic sense," is "the animating principle in the mind" (181-82). In fact, he points out that the word *genius* comes from Latin and means "the guardian and guiding spirit that each person is given as his own at birth" (175). Spirit in the Kantian sense is a supersensible concept, which means it both originates and is experienced outside of the bodily senses. Genius, then, is an intuition that posits a transcendental purposiveness.

This spiritual, purposive intuition thereby depicts the artist as a mystic. Kant explains that the artist himself "does not know how he came by the ideas for [his product of genius]" because genius works as nature does, with its own inexplicable rules and principles (175). Thus, an artist cannot see or understand the source of his originality, for, as Kant explains, "no *Homer* or *Wieland* can show how his ideas, rich in fancy and

yet also in thought, arise and meet in his mind; the reason is that he himself does not know, and hence also cannot teach it to anyone else” (177). In this sense, genius is an ineffable gift.

Schelling’s 1800 treatise on art, “Deduction of a Universal Organ of Philosophy, or Main Propositions of the Philosophy of Art According to Principles of Transcendental Idealism,” also describes the artist in mystical terms. He explains that art proves the existence of spirit—that art is a material form of spirit—because it manifests a power the artist is subject to while in the act of creativity. This power defines “the fateful man” as subject to “an incomprehensible destiny,” which then “sets him apart from all other men.” Such a destiny “compels” the artist “to express or represent things he does not himself fully see through and whose meaning is infinite” (207). Like Kant, Schelling believes art can never fully be learned or taught, or “attained by practice or in any other way, but can only be inborn by the free gift of nature” (208). Accordingly, “the basic character of the work of art is thus an *unconscious infinity*” (209).

This unconsciousness in the production of a work of art is the mystical element to the theories of genius that use Spirit as their explanatory principle, but unconsciousness is only half the equation. Schelling’s model of genius maintains that a work of art is a conscious reworking of the raw material that comes from the unconscious inspiration. Both the unconscious and the conscious, incorporating objectivity and subjectivity respectively, must work together for a product of genius to be produced. For Schelling, this combination of the two is a contradiction, for he associates the objective with determinism and the subjective with free will, yet, he asserts, the final product of art reconciles this contradiction through the fact that beauty does exist in art and that both its

inspiration and creation is often inexplicable. Art, then, is derived not solely from unconsciousness or consciousness but by the combination of both. Schelling explains, “either without the other has no value and only the two in conjunction can bring forth the highest” (208). Schelling’s theory of art as a site of conjunction is an alchemical model of creativity, and his and Kant’s establishment of spirit as the ineffable instrument for inspiration serves as a significant backdrop for further alchemical formulations of genius and the creative process.

#### Alchemy and Transcendental Literature

As the list of authors in the opening paragraph suggests, much can be done to map and analyze alchemy as an artifact of Romantic literature, for many Romantic writers employ alchemy in their writing to varying degrees. In “Endymion,” for example, Keats describes the euphoria of a transcendent love as a “fellowship with essence” (line 780) in which Endymion and Cynthia are “fully alchemiz’d” (781). Endymion himself is an emblem of eternal youth and immortality, while his dreams of Cynthia may be read as an allegory of the pursuit for idealized beauty that originates from poetic visions. Another example is Poe, for whom Clack provides an extensive survey of alchemical imagery and allegory in his fiction and poetry.<sup>7</sup> According to Clack, alchemy held the potential for Poe to find his “way back to a vision of nature” (64), which in turn “would provide a solution to the cultural decay Poe saw around him” as a result of Newtonian demythologization. As Clack’s interpretations suggest, Poe associated alchemy with the power of individual regeneration, but more particularly with the role of “art and the artist as mediators in the process” (65).

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<sup>7</sup> See *The Marriage of Heaven and Earth*, Chapter 4.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* contains an explicit relationship between alchemy and creation, with the product of an alchemical creation residing within the gothic sublime. Frankenstein's creature is frightening and dangerous, but the terror Frankenstein experiences from his creation also moves him toward a higher level of self-knowledge. Interestingly, alchemy in this novel represents the possibility of human knowledge to overstep traditional scientific boundaries, while at the same time it is presented as a threatening science of the dark past, associated with forbidden mysteries that tread on God's domain. As a trope of creation within this context, Shelley examines an underside to alchemy's promises, where the works of genius may escape the control of the creator. Such implications of God-like power resound with the moral obligations Romantic writers felt in their role as poet-prophets.

While Shelley's, Poe's, and Keats's use of alchemy is related to issues that also inform Coleridge's and Hawthorne's writing, I believe the latter two authors have a more specific relationship to transcendental philosophy and its aesthetic model of creativity. They both formulated their models of creative process and products in terms of alchemical transformation in order to meet transcendental moral demands. In the following two chapters, then, I discuss their alchemical formulations of the creative process within the concerns of this transcendental conversation.

Coleridge and Hawthorne see both a literary work and the method that created it as emblems of an alchemical transformation. Two significant implications arise from this formulation. First, while these artists recognized and regretted their own limitations in their role as an alchemist-poet, it would be a mistake for us to overlook the high idealism they labored under, for it was their (materialist) limitations that made affirmation of the



spiritual and transcendental necessary. Significantly, alchemy was a safe discourse for them to negotiate the tension between the spiritual ideal and material inhibitions because its ideology makes room for contradictions. An ability to negotiate contradictions is, I suggest, an important aspect of the genius model from which Coleridge and Hawthorne shaped their own identities as writers.

Second, these writers show an awareness of an indifferent and even hostile audience to the transformational work art is meant to perform, especially as that work is threatened by an increasingly materialistic world. Coleridge's poet-narrator of "Kubla Khan" and Hawthorne's Owen Warland exist in tension with an unsympathetic audience to both art and the process in which it is created. For Hawthorne, art is threatened by a utilitarian ethic of society but also, as Coleridge portrays as well, additional threats come from the demands of daily life and the mortal limitations of the artist himself. Rather than abandon art as useless or hopeless, though, these artists turn their art inward. If society ignores art's transformative powers, the artist will and must partake of it, especially as an artist's experience with transcendental origins provides access to valuable knowledge. On one level, then, using alchemy as a model of creativity reveals a deeply personal agenda on the part of transcendental artists, for alchemy is indeed a deeply personal philosophy.

I have chosen Coleridge and Hawthorne, in part, because of their different nationalities in order to show the transnational points of contact between transcendental authors as they incorporate alchemical imagery in their texts. Coleridge's inclusion here will not be surprising because his writings and philosophy have often been portrayed as mystical. Critics have largely overlooked his use of alchemy, however, which I offer as a

means to not only understand his conceptualization of the creative process, but to recognize the avenues of complexity alchemy made place for in his system of thought. My choice of Hawthorne as a representative of transcendentalism may seem unlikely since the prevailing critical opinion is that he was skeptical of its philosophy. His pervasive use of alchemy in his fiction, though, suggests to me otherwise. In particular, his use of esoteric alchemy in “Artist of the Beautiful” aligns him with the transcendental philosophers, who take from alchemy to find a spiritual discourse best suited to their need to counter the implications of a purely mechanistic nature. His well-established investment in the spiritual is thus enacted through his ubiquitous alchemical tropes.

## CHAPTER 2

## ALCHEMICAL TRANSFORMATION AND COLERIDGE'S CREATIVE GENIUS

In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor asserts that successful writers are born with a gift. She says, "There is no excuse for anyone to write fiction for public consumption unless he has been called to do so by the presence of a gift" (81). She furthers this claim with the advice that anyone who is not born with this gift should forget about becoming a writer: "The ability to create life with words is essentially a gift. If you have it in the first place, you can develop it; if you don't have it, you might as well forget it" (88). Such a view on writing is the legacy of the ideal poet-prophet, called to write beautiful and brilliant words that will lead humankind toward their inevitable perfection. The idea of a poet-prophet has been long-reaching and compelling, for many people still see imaginative writing, when it is done well, as a natural-born talent rather than a skill that can be learned and developed. The transcendental literary writers of the Romantic time period especially helped to popularize such ideals through their theories of genius.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one such writer who expounds on imaginative genius in the context of transcendental philosophy, and his theories are specifically informed by the German transcendental philosophers. As one of the primary texts of Romantic principles on imagination and writing, his *Biographia Literaria* presents the poet as one who has been endowed with divine capabilities because he possesses a higher consciousness that allows him to take in a more comprehensive view of material and metaphysical reality. This higher consciousness results in a better grasp of symbols and their role within poetry. For Coleridge, poetry's power resides in its transformative potential, which is accomplished through the reconciliation of contradictions within the

poem and within the composition process itself. Not surprisingly, he images this transformation with alchemy, thereby imbuing his genius with the spiritual idealism such a philosophy portrays.

Coleridge knew of alchemy not only generally as part of the German philosophical tradition, but he read alchemical texts himself. In Ralph J. Coffman's *Coleridge's Library: A Bibliography of Books Owned or Read by Samuel Taylor Coleridge* is listed such well-known alchemists as Paracelsus, Kenelm Digby, and Robert Fludd, as well as mystics who based their worldview on alchemical principles such as Jacob Bohme and Emmanuel Swedenborg. Indeed, Coleridge proclaims his "feeling of gratitude" (231) to Bohme in Chapter IX of *Biographia Literaria*: "Why need I be afraid? Say rather how dare I be ashamed of the Teutonic theosophist, Jacob Behmen?" (229). In addition, Molly Lefebure describes Coleridge's fascination with chemistry, which he considered to be the "practical end" of alchemy and part of a "divine scheme" (87). Accordingly, she points out that he held alchemy in high esteem, calling it those "darling studies" and associating it with religion and philosophy (88).

Lefebure also explains how Coleridge had planned in the late 1790s to write an epic poem in the same tradition as Goethe's *Faust* (a poem recognized for its pervasive alchemy), in which Michael Scott, an "alchemical-philosopher" (88) acted as the protagonist. Scott had lived during medieval times and was an alleged sorcerer. As the hero in Coleridge's poem, he would have followed the same path as Faust, setting aside the religious and spiritual characteristics of alchemy to learn the magical arts that would bring him fame and power. In the end, Scott would have defeated the Devil he had conjured and rejected his magical alchemy in favor of a religious one that emphasizes

“God’s grace” (89). While Coleridge never wrote the poem, the notes he kept about such ideas illustrates his intent to explore the various sides of alchemy in his writing.

Despite Coleridge’s conscious use of alchemy as a literary device, however, he was actually reluctant to accept some of the more radical alchemical elements found in the mystical writers he perused, as is illustrated by what he called Bohme’s “ignorance of rational psychology” (*Biographia* 229). Indeed, Coleridge embraced the concepts of alchemy but not some of its eccentric imagery and language that would have seemed outlandish to a post-Enlightenment sensibility (perhaps images of an incestual union or urine and feces as base elements would be pertinent examples). Therefore, Coleridge’s alchemy is more subtle than what existed in earlier alchemy because it lacks many fantastical images, thereby reflecting the influence reason had on the evolving modern mind. Coleridge did not seem, though, to moderate alchemy’s basic precepts of paradox, reconciliation, and transformation since he incorporates them into his own poetic structures.

An important poetic structure for Coleridge that incorporates alchemy is his model of the creative process expounded in *Biographia Literaria*. “Kubla Khan” has been read widely as an illustration of this imaginative process, and, as such, scholars have explained the poem in terms of reconciliation between opposing elements, such as the “sunny pleasure-dome” and the “caves of ice.” My reading of the poem coincides with this more traditional interpretation, but I add the further insight of alchemy as the underwriting philosophy behind the model itself. Understanding alchemy’s role in Coleridge’s model of genius is important for another reason, though. More recent criticism of the poem leans away from the straightforward theory/application model of

Coleridge's aesthetic vision. Instead, many critics regard the poem as an indication of Coleridge's frustration with that model, claiming that *Kubla* is a failed and futile poet. This kind of criticism is largely a result of a close reading of the prefatory note attached to the poem as well as of the puzzling last stanza depicting poetic deferment and rejection. Indeed, the argument that "Kubla Khan" posits the limitations to poetic genius is a compelling one. But the argument that the poem celebrates genius is compelling as well. Is it possible that the poem does both? I find a valid response to this question in the alchemical discourse Coleridge calls upon to explain his creative process. As a site of contradictions and their negotiations, alchemy gives place to both an ideal and its limitations, especially in its earlier stages of liminal exchange.

## I

Coleridge's formulation of the poet-prophet is a transcendental one, and it particularly parallels claims F. W. J. Schelling makes about creative genius. Like Schelling, who portrays an artist as standing "apart from all other men" (207), Coleridge portrays genius as residing at a higher level of consciousness than the common man. Indeed, his definition of genius aligns closely to Schelling's formulations of mystical inspiration, by calling it the "highest and intuitive knowledge" and, quoting Wordsworth, "the vision and the faculty divine" (285). In Chapter XII of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge likens consciousness to a mountain range and the view of the horizon this mountain range presents to humans. He describes the common consciousness as limited in both its view and its understanding of the presented boundaries, with fear of the unknown stopping them from going any further than what they are comfortable with. He says,

The first range of hills, that encircle the scanty vale of human life, is the horizon for the majority of its inhabitants. On its ridges the common sun is born and departs. From them the stars rise, and touching them they vanish. By the many, even this range, the natural limit and bulwark of the vale, is but imperfectly known. Its higher ascents are too often hidden by mists and clouds from uncultivated swamps, which few have courage or curiosity to penetrate. To the multitude below these vapours appear, now as the dark haunts of terrific agents, on which none may intrude with impunity. (284)

Many people with this “common” perspective see this vista as “the splendid palaces of happiness and power” because they cannot or will not comprehend anything beyond. But there are those who are not satisfied with the common perspective, and they are the few who have a natural capacity for a higher consciousness. “In all ages,” Coleridge claims, “there have been a few, who measuring and sounding the rivers of the vale at the feet of their furthest inaccessible falls have learnt, that the sources must be far higher and far inward; a few, who even in the level streams have detected elements, which neither the vale itself or the surrounding mountains contained or could supply” (284). This image illustrates the Romantic concept of poet-prophet, one who is capable, even called, to test the depths of origins and knowledge.

Against this backdrop of a mystical genius, Coleridge further expounds his theory in terms of primary and secondary functions, with an important distinction being that the secondary “coexist[s] with the conscious will” (313)—in other words, with a subjective will—while the primary coexists with an unconscious, objective will. The primary imagination, Coleridge explains, is “the living power and prime agent of all human

perception, [...] a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (313). The “Eolian Harp” illustrates the kind of intuition a poet receives from the primary imagination. In this poem Coleridge describes “the one life within us and abroad” (line 26) as the vehicle for his own imaginative musings as a poet. The third stanza describes him “on the midway slope / Of yonder hill” (34-35) where he stretches for an afternoon rest. Through “half-closed eyelids” he envisions “sunbeams danc[ing]” and “idle flitting phantasies” that come to his mind through little or no effort on his part, for, he says, “full many a thought uncalled and undetained ... Traverse my indolent and passive brain” (36-41). He is a poet who merely needs to find quiet and tranquility so that an “intellectual breeze” may pass through his mind, providing the imaginative scenes that he may turn into poetry. Such is the image of the classic Romantic poet: he passively receives raw imaginings from a supersensible source, which he then crafts into art.

But the key word here is “craft,” for the process of creation is more complex for Coleridge, just as it is for Schelling, than just simple, objectively-derived visions. The unconsciousness needs a consciousness, and Coleridge provides that in the form of the secondary imagination. The secondary imagination is very much like the primary imagination in that it exists as a replica or “echo” of the primary, “identical” with it in the type of duties it must fulfill, but it differs “in degree, and in the mode of its operation” (313). The secondary imagination is the resource a poet calls upon in his conscious crafting of a poem. Thus, after receiving the vision or organic inspiration from the primary imagination, the poet then uses the secondary imagination to form this raw material into a linguistic state that may be shared as a work of art, for, as Coleridge



explains, the secondary imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create” (313).

Coleridge’s model of creative genius is similar to Schelling’s in that he also sees creativity as an act of reconciliation. Just as Schelling claims that “the whole productive drive comes to rest with the completion of the product; all contradictions are resolved, all riddles unraveled” (205), Coleridge sees the natural capacity of the artist in “diffus[ing] a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses each into each, by the synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination” (319). This power, Coleridge goes on to explain, is revealed through the ability of a poet to reconcile “opposite or discordant qualities,” of which he names several, among them “sameness with difference,” “general with concrete,” “the individual, with the representative,” the novel or fresh with the “old and familiar, and “self-possession” with “feeling profound or vehement.” It creates a feeling of unity as it “blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial” (319). The power of the poet, then, is to create a feeling of wellness with the world, to negotiate discordant or competing elements in favor of a vision of the world as ultimately whole and at peace, if not immediately so.

This power of poetry to reconcile is Coleridge’s first step toward an alchemical model of the imagination, and parallel to this ideal of reconciliation is the ideal of poetry as an embodiment of transformation. While on one level Coleridge’s system of the imagination may be seen as merely a translation process from the primary vision to the secondary linguistic symbols and images, he specifically describes the processes of the poetic imagination as transformational, and, crucially, alchemy serves as the central

image for this transformational process. In Chapter XIV, immediately following his explanation of the reconciling power of the poet through the imagination, Coleridge provides an illustration of how this reconciliation actually works in the composition of poetry by borrowing the alchemical imagery of a poem written by Sir John Davies. The poem's name is "Of the Soule of Man and the Immortalitie Thereof," and it was written in 1599, during the height of alchemy's popularity in Western culture. The poem was originally meant to be about the soul, but Coleridge prompts his readers to apply it to poetic imagination. It reads:

Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns  
Bodies to spirit by sublimation strange,  
As fire converts to fire the things it burns,  
As we our food into our nature change.

From their gross matter she abstracts their forms,  
And draws a kind of quintessence from things;  
Which to her proper nature she transforms  
To bear them light, on her celestial wings.

Thus does she, when from individual states  
She doth abstract the universal kinds;  
Which then re-clothed in divers names and fates  
Steal access through our senses to our minds. (319)

Apart from the clear alchemical vocabulary of this poem, such as “sublimation,” “quintessence,” “transforms,” and “celestial wings,” its ideas also clearly exhibit alchemical ideology. All three stanzas describe the same process: the transformation of material, sensory experiences or matter (“bodies,” “gross matter,” and “individual states”) into spiritual visions from which the most essential and “universal” knowledge (i.e. “quintessence”) may be abstracted. In an alchemical laboratory, sublimation is the process of distilling a substance until its vapor rises, and it represents the transformation from a material to a spiritual state, which is often symbolized by a winged creature flying heavenward (in the poem, “her celestial wings”). This poem illustrates for Coleridge creative sublimation: the poetic imagination goes from bodily sensations to spiritual visions, from which the most pure and essential knowledge may be abstracted, “re-clothed” in a material, sensory form such as a poem, and then recognized intellectually as a priori knowledge. Such a process is alchemical especially as it allows for the contradictory elements of spirit and matter to work through each other.

Another alchemical element to the poem is its circular stages: it begins and ends with the material. But the final position rests at an elevated state in which transcendental knowledge has been achieved. Within the framework of Hermetic influences, M. H. Abrams describes “a distinctive figure of Romantic thought and imagination—the ascending circle, or spiral” (184). The image of a spiral includes both the original point of consciousness and its ascent to a higher state, thereby “fus[ing] the idea of the circular return with the idea of linear progress” (184). As with most alchemical images, the spiral unites contradictory ideas, which also coincides with the power of reconciliation Coleridge gives to poets. The poet who achieves such a fusion, according to Coleridge’s

model, then, is an alchemist who combines spiritual inspiration and material realities and then reduces them down to their most basic but necessary form of beauty. This quintessence of beauty, a poem, is for Coleridge the sensory window to transcendental truth—a type of philosopher's stone.

The significance of alchemy as Coleridge's model of the imagination lies in the power it gives the poet: poetic work resides in the realm of the divine where the poet has the power to literally change his readers' view of the world and, by so doing, take part in the progression of humankind. In that sense, the poet-prophet serves as a mediator between God and the common man. The poet who bears such responsibility has been endowed with a higher consciousness than the common man and, as such, acts as an initiated adept who is among the select few worthy of the higher knowledge. In this sense, Coleridge's poet-prophet may be seen as a Hermes figure. Just as Hermes Trismegistus becomes a revered teacher to Tat and Asclepius because of his higher knowledge, the persona of the Romantic poet is an esoteric sage. The poet is set off from regular society because he is born with an innate ability to not only recognize but to use the symbols of transformation.

## II

Because "Kubla Khan" is seen as an allegory of Coleridge's creative process that involves the primary and secondary imagination, his reliance on alchemy for an image of this process encourages a reconsideration of "Kubla Khan" that takes alchemy into account. Few critics discuss Coleridge's model of the creative process or "Kubla Khan" in alchemical terms, even though the elements of that process, such as poetry's power to reconcile opposites as well as its transformative effects, clearly reside within alchemy's

domain. Irene Chayes, M.W. Rowe, and Kathleen Wheeler all recognize the poem as an affirmation of Coleridge's conciliatory ideals, particularly as those ideals are represented through the different functions of the imagination, but Fred L. Milne takes this reading a step closer to mine by briefly referencing alchemy as a possible context to "the basic structural pattern of the Xanadu mind-landscape" (20). S.K. Heninger, Jr. provides the most thorough alchemical reading by employing C. G. Jung's theory of individuation, of which alchemy is the central image for the conscious and unconscious functions. More commonly, though, critics see Coleridge's visionary poet in the context of a more generic mysticism. Douglas Hedley, for example, uses "Kubla Khan" to illustrate Coleridge's place within the mystical tradition, suggesting that his theology is a Christianized version of transcendentalism, of which having a vision of God is central (115-116).

In light of Coleridge's alchemical model of the imagination, though, it would make sense if "Kubla Khan," as a poetic representation of that model, contains alchemical elements as well. While it is not as exoterically alchemical as Davies' poem, in that it does not contain laboratory tropes or specialized alchemical vocabulary, its imagery does set forth the hermetic philosophy of correspondences in which a microcosm reflects the properties and characteristics of a macrocosm, or, as the *Hermetica* text "The Emerald Table" explains, "That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing" (Linden 28). Because the secondary imagination's work of art reflects the primary's divine visions, hermetic correspondence is an apt image of their functions. "Kubla Khan" enacts this correspondence through its imagery of organic and artificial operations.

Furthermore, the sexual imagery of “Kubla Khan” is meant to represent the organic creative processes of the primary imagination, and, I suggest, this sexual imagery is an alchemical device that works alongside the trope of microcosmic/macrocosmic correspondence. Alchemy is fraught with marriage and sexual symbolism because inherent in the symbol of a marriage and its consummation is the concept of a union of opposites. Eliade’s explanation of primitive man’s alchemical rituals and myths that include an Earth-Mother illustrate the reasoning behind alchemy’s sexual imagery. This “marriage of metals” and their accompanying sexual rituals are meant to symbolize, even mirror, the divine creative process (37). As the early smiths saw their work as a replica of the natural creation of earth, later alchemists also use imagery of the Earth-Mother and her fertile womb to portray the correspondence of their own synthetic work to natural processes.

This early alchemical mindset in which metallurgical work corresponds to a divine creation complements Coleridge’s model of creativity as imaged in “Kubla Khan.” The first vision of the poem, which recounts Kubla’s construction of a pleasure-dome adjacent to a tumultuous chasm, employs sexual imagery within nature, with a woman’s reproductive anatomy serving as an image of the landscape. There is a “green hill” in which a “deep romantic chasm” lays “athwart a cedarn cover” (lines 12-13). The color green is an obvious symbol for fertility and life, while the chasm and cedarn cover describe the place of entry into the womb. The womb itself is reflected in the “caverns measureless to man” (4). In essence, then, the chasm and the caverns represent nature, where the creative act occurs macrocosmically. The earth is personified by a woman wailing for her lover and continues with her breathing “in fast thick pants” and “with

ceaseless turmoil seething” (17-18). A fountain then “momently was forced,” from which “huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail” (19-21). The fountain, then, serves as a personification of the orgasmic moment—the pinnacle of the chaos of this organic process. The man and the woman are both represented in this scene, the ultimate union of opposites. As such, the procreative act of nature symbolizes the creative act of the primary imagination, described in *Biographia Literaria* as “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (313).

In contrast to the primitive chaos of the caverns, the pleasure-dome is enclosed in man-made order. It has the feel of an open, colorful, and pleasant place, almost like a Garden of Eden, where the senses are at work. An important difference of the pleasure-dome to the caverns lies in its geographical location: it is above ground where the sun bathes it with light, thereby symbolizing the consciousness in its visible free will. In contrast, the sunless sea and caves of ice exist in darkness and mystery, where the unconscious does its ineffable work. Most significantly, the pleasure-dome is fashioned by man: it is a mortal creation, whereas the caverns and their procreativity result from a divine creation. Thus, the pleasure-dome is a representation of art in its final, material form. What’s more, as an image of art, it is like the ores that the early smiths took from the earth and on which they performed their synthetic work, which was in turn meant to replicate nature’s work. Hence, the pleasure-dome and the caverns are reciprocally mirrored to each other on the waves of the river: the waves carry the shadow of the dome to the caves simultaneously as they carry the sounds from the cave. Hence, the microcosmic pleasure-dome serves as a reflection of the macrocosmic caverns in the same way that the secondary imagination, which is responsible for the “man-made”

functions of the imagination, echoes the primary. Incidentally, water is set up as an image of a visionary mirror in the preface to “Kubla Khan”: “And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms / Come trembling back, unite, and now once more / The pool becomes a mirror” (102).

An important element of the macrocosm/microcosm concept in alchemy is its attempt to explain the origins of knowledge. As Nicholas Halmi explains, man as microcosm “is capable of forming a mental image of the world,” and, consequently, can “incorporate the macrocosm into itself, in the form of knowledge” (45). Similarly, according to Coleridge’s model of imaginative genius, the significance of a primary source of inspiration is that the poet has a direct line to absolute truth, which he can then fashion in a poem as a priori knowledge. Such a system is what the alchemical poem by Davies is meant to describe. Thus, while the “pleasure-dome” of “Kubla Khan” mirrors the sexual act that incarnates the creative act, it also refers to a mystical pleasure of knowledge. In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth equates knowledge with pleasure: “We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone ... knowledge is pleasure” (361). These statements are made in connection with the role of the poet, which is chiefly to put the mind “in a state of enjoyment” (362), but they also refer to the pleasure that comes from working through more difficult concepts toward a final triumph of understanding. Such a process may be done as a poet through the composition of a poem but also more significantly as a poet-philosopher who works through the “real and substantial action and suffering” of life (361). Thus, knowledge as pleasure is the genuinely mystical reward of a true work of



genius. If the pleasure-dome is a mirrored image of the caverns, it is so by way of what the transformation from organic to man-made creativity eventually leads to—the pleasure of a priori knowledge that originates in the organic transcendental realm.

This relationship between the dome and the caverns may appear at first to be linear; however, the river with its “mazy motion” suggests a more cyclical model. Warren Stevenson describes the river in “Kubla Khan” as returning to the fountain after its path through the sunless sea, thereby depicting the ancient symbol of the serpent with the tail in its mouth (609). The tail-eating serpent, or uroboros, is a common alchemical image, and it represents, according to Jolande Jacobi, “the hermetic alchemistic transmutation process and symbol of eternity, time, etc.” (149). Coleridge uses this symbol elsewhere to illustrate the discerning power of poetic genius. In an 1815 letter to Joseph Cottle he writes:

The common end of all *narrative*, nay, of *all*, Poems is to convert a series into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings a *circular* motion—the snake with it’s Tail in its Mouth [...] what to our short sight appears strait is but a part of the great Cycle—just as the calm Sea to us *appears* level, tho’ it be indeed only a part of a *globe*. Now what the Globe is in Geography, *miniaturing* in order to *manifest* the Truth, such is a Poem to the Image of God. (Beer 99)

When read alchemically, then, the cyclical river in “Kubla Khan” illustrates first the circular nature of correspondences. The poet begins with the macrocosm of “that which is above” and also ends there, accomplishing the wholeness represented by a circle. The

cyclical river also illustrates the transformational stages of the poetic genius: the process of the imagination leads to a product of art earned through the cyclical exchange between the primary and secondary functions. Both this process and the product embody an affinity to truth.

### III

Coleridge's alchemical model of creative transformation is quite idealistic, accentuating what was at least *conceptually* feasible for poets. But as Seamus Perry has noted, there exists in Coleridge "a tenacious realism persisting alongside the growing sway of his idealism" (4-5). If the first and second visions of the poem represent the idealism of Coleridge's genius model, the poem's prefatory note and ending stanza reveal a realism that mitigates that idealism. The meaning of the preface attached to "Kubla Khan" has been a source for much debate among critics,<sup>8</sup> with more recent readings viewing it as subverting the ideals found in the poem itself. At face value, the narrative of the preface upholds Coleridge's genius ideal. It portrays an Author as a passive receptacle of a vision "in which the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of

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<sup>8</sup> Beginning with Elisabeth Schneider's *Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Khan*, the preface has come under scrutiny as a fiction. Schneider believes the note is an attempt to hide Coleridge's "notorious" inability to finish many of the works he proposed to do, with the subtitle "fragment" serving as self-justification (785). Other critics, such as Rosemary Ashton and J. Robert Barth, also question, to varying degrees, Coleridge's claim that the poem is a result of a drug-induced dream. On the other hand, Alan Richardson wonders how such a distrustful approach to Coleridge is warranted. He doesn't see any reason why we should not read the preface at face value; in fact, he claims that the introductory note is probably one of Coleridge's most honest pieces of writing (15). For my own argument, I believe the most productive question is not whether the preface describes the actual creation of the poem, i.e. whether the story of the dream and its subsequent interruption is fictional or not, but whether its narrative sustains the ideals Coleridge has set forth for the creative process.

effort” (102). Upon regaining consciousness, he “eagerly” wrote down the poem supposedly in the form we have it now. The Author, as a persona for Coleridge, here experiences a clear moment of primary imagination similar to what he describes in “The Eolian Harp,” where he is given, as a gift, the raw material, which he then arranges in a poem through the function of his secondary imagination.

Significantly, Coleridge attempts to control how we read the poem by calling it a fragment, which was a popular genre of his time. Anne Janowitz notes that Byron, Keats, and Wordsworth all published poems as fragments in addition to Coleridge, and she also points out that “Kubla Khan” was published with two other fragments by Coleridge, “Christabel” and “The Pains of Sleep.” The fact that these poets, who were highly competent writers, not only allowed unfinished poems to be published but then emphasized their incompleteness indicates for Janowitz that the fragment as a poetic form is noteworthy. I suggest the popularity of the fragment genre may be explained, at least in part, by the parallel popularity of the theories of genius that these Romantic poets espoused. If the poet is, in fact, receptive to visions through the unconscious or primary imagination, a fragment such as “Kubla Khan” is an apt manifestation of those visions in a form as close to the original as possible: it presents the unfinished and otherworldly state of an authentic vision or “dream” before the secondary imagination takes over with conscious revision. “Kubla Khan,” then, as a fragment, is a means for Coleridge to display his intuitive gifts.

For Janowitz, however, a fragment signifies “a poetic unity somehow prematurely stopped” (26-27) so that it represents not pure genius but a tension between what was strived for and what was actually possible. The difficulty of translating a vision into

language is an important barrier for Romantic poets, she contends, and the fragment seeks to both justify and bemoan “the incommensurateness of vision and language” (31).<sup>9</sup> Janowitz’s argument is representative of what is now widely recognized by literary historians: in addition to the ideals of unity and reconciliation, Romanticism “was built as well from anxiety, frustration, and irresolution” (26). When “Kubla Khan” and its preface are read in these terms, Coleridge’s alchemical ideals of transformation come into question.

I believe the preface and the last stanza of the poem do possess a melancholic tone that undermines, to a certain extent, the high idealism of its subject matter. In addition, I do see how the poem as a fragment, by virtue of its unfinished state, could posit the impossibility of obtaining high ideals. Indeed, the preface and the last stanza of the poem reflect Coleridge’s awareness of his limitations as a poet as they portray interruption, deferment, and rejection. In a letter to John Thelwall, written around the same time as “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge expresses frustration with his inability to grasp the infinite:

I can *at times* feel strongly the beauties you describe, in themselves, & for themselves—but more frequently *all things* appear little—all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child’s play—the universe itself—what but an immense heap of *little things*?—I can contemplate nothing but parts, & parts are all *little*—!—My mind feels as if it ached to behold &

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<sup>9</sup> It is relevant here to note that the recognition of language’s insufficiency to capture visions in their original form is built into the genius model. Kant’s definition of genius includes the impossibility to share it with others; he says, “no [determinate] *concept* can be adequate” because “no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it” (182). Coleridge also admits that rendering visions into language is “arduous work,” valuable but “difficult” and “rare” (*Biographia* 403).

know something *great*—something *one & indivisible* and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty! (Perry 132)

The “little things” Coleridge refers to reside within the material world and are distractions from the more valuable “great” things of a mystical, divine realm. One implication of the fragment as a visionary genre, then, is that a vision comes and goes infrequently according to the material circumstances of the receiver. As the narrative in the preface to “Kubla Khan” portrays, the Author’s vision is lost as a result of the “person on business from Porlock” so that his vision is easily interrupted by worldly concerns; once the vision is gone, the material it furnishes is not easily accessible. Coleridge laments the easily-lost vision through the fragment poem he includes in the preface: “Then all the charm / Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair / Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread, / And each mis-shape[s] the other.” Coleridge here recognizes that because a poet lives in the real world, he is subject to its interruptions, transactions, and petty concerns, so that the “charm” of the “phantom-world so fair” is random, unsustainable, and easily forgotten.

Coleridge’s deferment of completing “what had been originally given to him” in vision also questions his genius ideal. He tells us he has “frequently purposed to finish for himself” the poem, but his quote from Theocritus (“I’ll sing a sweeter song tomorrow”) coupled with his own words (“the to-morrow is yet to come”) portray him as a mere man, lacking in the inspiration needed to finish the poem, rather than as a poet-prophet. This delay is repeated in the last stanza of “Kubla Khan” through the wish “*Could* I revive within me / Her symphony and song, ... I *would* build that dome in the

air” (lines 42-45, my emphasis). The poet’s voice here does not show what he can do and has done, but rather what he would do if he could. Inherent in the label “fragment” is the threat of imaginative sterility that accompanies a loss of vision.

What’s more, in the last stanza of the poem the “common” listeners reject the poet and his poetry. Because a visionary experience is a privilege bestowed on a gifted few, and because it is then difficult to put into language, the visions may be incomprehensible to the “common” people who don’t possess the spiritual sensibilities that poets do. The poet, then, is threatened with irrelevance: his visions may be useless—or at least, perceived as useless, which amounts to the same thing—because they do not reside within lived experience. Thus, “Kubla Khan” ends with a similar sentiment as that in Chapter XII of *Biographia Literaria*, “Poor man! he is not made for this world” (285). Interestingly, the scene at the end of the poem is not a depiction of what does happen but, as the poet himself says, what should happen after his poetry becomes public. After seeing the “sunny dome” and “caves of ice,” which represent his poetry, the poet ironically advises, “all *should* cry, “Beware! Beware!”; they *should* “Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close [their] eyes with holy dread” (47-49, my emphasis). Because it is the poet speaking here and not actually the people who represent his audience, we glimpse the self-consciousness he feels for the task his poetry is meant to accomplish. He knows it will create upheaval and dismay. The poet-prophet is thus threatened by his listeners because he in turn threatens them. The tone of the word “should” is ironic, but perhaps it is even bitter for the obstinacy of the common consciousness’s close-mindedness.

The interruption, deferment, and rejection that make up the experience of the poet in the preface and last stanza contrast significantly to the depiction of the poet in the first stanza as a visionary sage who reveals a priori knowledge through poetry. One explanation for this contrast could be that the poem is, indeed, a fragment, leaving unfinished the final reconciliation of these contradictions. I find this explanation somewhat plausible but not entirely in light of the crafted elements of the poem.<sup>10</sup> Another explanation, an increasingly common one, is that “Kubla Khan” is a poem about failure, specifically the failure of a false poet.<sup>11</sup> But when the poem and the preface are taken as a whole, the tone is not as despondent as failure would suggest. The second half of the fragment poem quoted in the preface suggests Coleridge’s faith that someday the vision will resume: “The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon / The visions will return! And lo! he stays, / And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms / Come trembling back, unite, and now once more / The pool becomes a mirror” (102). If the poet of the preface were entirely false, he would not be worthy of the vision when it returns. In addition, Coleridge likely had the “rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns” of “Kubla

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Mellor provides a helpful description of the poem’s completed elements: “On thematic and stylistic grounds, the poem is complete. The poem describes creative process: the created product (the dome) is evoked, the sources of creativity celebrated, the consequences of the creative act examined. Metrically, the poem moves full circle from the regular prosody of the opening lines through the irregular prosody of the lines describing the source and ending of life itself, back to the metrically regular lines describing the source and ending of life itself, back to the metrically regular lines of the closing description of the poet’s impact on his audience” (158).

<sup>11</sup> David S. Hogsette, for example, believes critics are misguided when they read the poem as an allegory of “imaginative redemption.” He claims the poem instead offers a vision of poetic failure by “ultimately demonstrating that the ideal (pro)creative and redemptive imagination lies beyond the grasp of the mortal poet, remaining an external and unobtainable other” (par.2). See also Regina Hewitt, “The False Poets in ‘Kubla Khan.’”

Khan” in mind when he wrote his letter to Thelwall, since the poem and letter were written around the same time. These landscapes are the source of Coleridge’s faith in “something *one & indivisible*” because they “give me the sense of sublimity or majesty.” Coleridge provides a clear hint here that his vision of Xanadu offers him hope in the face of failure, not the failure itself.

Furthermore, “Kubla Khan” is juxtaposed as “a contrast” to “The Pains of Sleep,” another fragment of the same volume (102). “The Pains of Sleep” describes visions “Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me” (121), which conjured a “desire with loathing strangely mixed / On wild or hateful objects fixed” (122). Besides the distinct difference in word choice and theme between the two poems, Coleridge himself makes it clear that the two fragments are of a “very different character” (103), suggesting that “Kubla Khan” is meant to portray a more positive visionary experience. Thus, when the idealistic elements of “Kubla Khan” are considered alongside the long-standing critical interpretation of a correspondence between the first vision of the poem and the description of poetic genius in *Biographia Literaria*, we can be assured that the poem is not entirely about failure. However, we are still left wondering how the alchemical ideal of poetic transformation and reconciliation can withstand the obvious depictions of poetic limitations in the poem.

Mellor’s concept of romantic irony at first seems to reconcile the genius ideal with its limitations as they both exist in “Kubla Khan.” The romantic ironist, she says, begins from skepticism, where he “must acknowledge the inevitable limitations of his own finite consciousness and of all man-made structures or myths” (5). But even in the midst of his skepticism, the romantic ironist will also “affirm and celebrate the process of



life by creating new images and ideas” (5). This affirmation of creation results from the romantic investment in becoming, in a continual process and action. As part of this becoming, Mellor contends “many central romantic works exhibit a structure that is deliberately open-ended and inconclusive” (6), so that an inherent characteristic of romantic irony is “unstructured openness” (6). The reason for this open-ended structure is to allow for symbols to be posited, challenged, and then rejected, from which new symbols arise for the same process. Romantic irony is, then, a process of artistic becoming, rather than one moment of absolute articulation.

Mellor further distinguishes the romantic ironist from “modern deconstructors” through the ironist’s affirmation and celebration of life, noting that “modern deconstructionists choose to perform only one half of the romantic-ironic operation, that of skeptical analysis and determination of the limits of human language and consciousness” (5). In contrast, the romantic ironist possesses as much “enthusiasm” as skepticism, so that both sides of the ironic coin are grasped and negotiated. Mellor’s depiction of romantic irony is reminiscent of alchemical paradox as alchemy brings together opposing elements in a dialectical relationship. In alchemy, the base earth is as necessary as the divine heavens, and it is through the conjunction of both that purification can happen. “Kubla Khan,” with its alchemical ideals competing against threats of failure, would fit nicely within Mellor’s concept of romantic irony, for the antithetical elements would find place in alchemy’s dialectical ideology.

However, Coleridge exemplifies for Mellor a “negative” response to romantic irony (137). In “Kubla Khan,” the “antithetical forces” of “a unifying imagination” on one side and “mortality, self-doubt, social respectability, and rational understanding” on

the other are, she contends, deliberately left unreconciled (155). The reason for this irresolution is that Coleridge could not reconcile an “underlying chaos” with “the absolute validity of an ordered Christian universe,” even though he “desperately” wanted to do so (137). As a result, his writings are imbued with “guilt-ridden ambivalence” (137).

But Mellor’s bracketing of Coleridge as an exception to the more positive aspects of romantic irony may well be an oversimplification of Coleridge’s relationship with complexity. Seamus Perry describes Coleridge’s use of oppositions as a type of “muddle,” by which Perry does not mean a confused or intellectually-confounded state, but one in which complexity is acknowledged and embraced. He quotes from William Empson to explain “muddle” further: “In a celebrated note to a poem [...] Empson described life as a matter of maintaining oneself between positions, equally attractive or necessary but irresolvable; and elsewhere: ‘Extremely often, in dealing with the world, one arrives at two ideas or ways of dealing with things which both work and are needed, but which entirely contradict one another’” (9). Accordingly, Perry endows Coleridge with the same kind of muddled intellect: seeing the validity in opposing truths, Coleridge tries to make room in his mind for both. Perry quotes a passage from a letter in which Coleridge makes the point for himself: “In all subjects of deep and lasting Interest you will detect a struggle between two opposites, two polar Forces, both of which are alike necessary to our human Well-being, & necessary each to the continued existence of the other” (12). Truth for Coleridge, then, according to Perry’s claims, resides in a liminal space, where negotiation between affirmation and negation is a constant process.

By virtue of its in-between position, a liminal space offers the best potential for transformation because it allows a broad view of multiple perspectives. Alchemy, in that sense, is a liminal discourse as it exists in Romantic idealism. Its end goals would take a poet to the realm of absolutes if it could, but the preliminary steps toward that goal are a relative cycle of thesis and antithesis converging and repelling as they seek to overcome their oppositions. By virtue of the post-Enlightenment scientific mindset that disposed of the more fantastical elements of alchemy, the romantics were quite realistic in acknowledging their weaknesses and limitations as fallen human beings, and as such, they consciously resided in the (pre)liminary stages of the quest for perfection. Although the idealists' appeal for perfection is emphatic, an awareness of perfection's impossibilities resides within its conceptualization. Thus, Fichte proclaims that man's "true vocation ... lies in *endless approximation toward*" perfection, at the same time as he acknowledges, "It is part of the concept of man that his ultimate goal be unobtainable and that his path thereto be infinitely long. Thus it is not man's vocation to reach this goal" (9). In Coleridge, the presence of the alchemical ideal of genius alongside the frank recognition of its limitations is much like the attitude of alchemy in general: the alchemists knew the high odds against the actual discovery of the philosopher's stone, but the stages leading up to that ideal offered their own rewards.

The (pre)liminary stages of alchemy include, by necessity, a mixture of perspectives, since contradictions must first be present for an ultimate reconciliation to take place. As a discourse of reconciliation, then, alchemy gives place to disunity, fragmentation, and failure *and* to unity, wholeness, and success; it gives place for both the grand ideals of redemptive creativity and for the underlying melancholy that comes

from the realization of the impossibility of that redemption in its perfect state. In short, it provides a space to “muddle” through complexity. As Jung points out, “an awareness of the two sides of man’s personality is essential” if one is to partake of the transformative powers of alchemy. Grounding his poetic ideals in the *process* of alchemy (as embodied through “a fragment”), rather than in a final, finished product, allows Coleridge to openly portray its impossibilities alongside its possibilities. The presence of interruptions, deferments, and rejections within a poem about creative genius is entirely consistent with the alchemical ideology it enacts.

CHAPTER 3  
HAWTHORNE'S TRANSCENDENTAL ALCHEMIST

In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson presented “An American Scholar” in which he makes a call for Americans to be confident and self-trusting in the face of European culture that had so far dominated arts and letters. This self-trust is based on a Neoplatonic doctrine of the “Divine Soul” (59) that “animates all men” (56), which provides a transcendental model for the American Scholar to be guided by intuition: “if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him” (59). Like other transcendentalists, such as Schelling and Coleridge, Emerson sees the mind of a scholar as an alembic in which material experience changes into truth as it passes through. A scholar receives “into him the world around” in the same way Coleridge’s poet receives an “intellectual breeze” of the primary imagination from which he crafts a poem by virtue of the secondary imagination. This “theory of books” Emerson calls “transmuting life into truth” and likens it to a “distillation” (46) and a transfiguration (50). It is through this alchemical intellectualism that Emerson believes American artists may overcome “the sluggard intellect of this continent” and will “fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill” (43). On one level, Emerson is speaking about the individual and his own inner life, but on another important level, he is speaking to the potential artists of the nation, pleading with them to embrace transcendental precepts so that their art may be imbued with the kind of beauty he believes only comes from a supersensible origin.

Such is the call that Nathaniel Hawthorne attempts to answer in his work as a fictional artist—and especially as an artist who posits creative production within a

transcendental and alchemical framework, for even though his use of alchemy in his fiction is not always straightforward, Hawthorne does characterize several artistic figures as alchemists. There has been much discussion among critics regarding Hawthorne's representations of artists, and these discussions invariably lead to his relationship with transcendentalism. Notwithstanding his friendship with Emerson and other American transcendentalists, Hawthorne is generally considered a skeptic of the transcendental project, for his realism is seen as a check on the idealism of his friends. The *Blithedale Romance* is particularly viewed as a skeptical look at transcendentalism and its material manifestations of utopian communities. But while Miles Coverdale portrays a detached onlooker of Brook Farm rather than an integral member and believer of the community, he remains throughout the book in close proximity to the transcendental society. Such is the position Hawthorne seems to take toward transcendentalism generally: he is fascinated by it at the same time he is vocally skeptical of it.

I believe the spiritual discourse of transcendental philosophy held great interest for Hawthorne, so that he could not dismiss it altogether, even if its material practices did not appeal to him. Most critics acknowledge that Hawthorne was deeply invested in the spiritual and that he actively wrote against the materialism of post-Newtonian empiricism. Because the transcendental project was also formed as a reaction against mechanistic philosophy, Hawthorne's investment in the spiritual reveals an important shared interest with his transcendental associates. Additionally, a significant intersection between Hawthorne and the transcendentalists is their use of alchemical tropes. Alchemy is, indeed, a favorite motif for Hawthorne, and its appearance in his stories reveals commentary on its transcendental ideals. While that commentary does not always depict

alchemy as a legitimate practice, Hawthorne has his moments when he does portray alchemy as just that. This varied and seemingly contradictory use of alchemy contributes to the ambiguity that defines Hawthorne as an artist, and it, in turn, reveals a more complex relationship with transcendentalism than is traditionally thought.

Hawthorne's use of alchemy in his fiction has been well documented. Those stories that contain overt alchemical figures or symbols include "The Birthmark," "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure," and "The Great Carbuncle" as well as his novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne also left an unfinished manuscript at his death titled "Septimius Felton, or, the Elixir of Life," which, as its title suggests, has alchemical themes. All of these stories contain exoteric alchemy, or the literal alchemy that involves lab work, alembics, and actual substances. But esoteric alchemy, with its symbolic and philosophical aspects, also abounds in stories such as "Rappaccini's Daughter," "Ethan Brand," *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Marble Faun* (whose British title was *Transformation*). The nature of esoteric alchemy, however, makes it difficult to identify, especially in the absence of obvious alchemical equipment or substances, such as Aylmer's laboratory and furnace or Dr. Heidegger's Fountain of Youth. The alchemy in "Artist of the Beautiful," the story I will examine in this chapter, has particularly gone unnoticed because it is largely esoteric, rather than exoteric, and, therefore, easily overlooked.

The mere presence of alchemy in Hawthorne's stories does not suggest that he embraces it wholeheartedly. The purpose of Hawthorne's use of alchemy is actually a contested point among critics. Randall Clack contextualizes alchemy within an American framework, showing how Hawthorne's contemporaries, such as Poe and Fuller, also use

alchemy to promote a theme of regeneration. He also claims Hawthorne equates love with the *elixir vitae* or the philosopher's stone as a transmuting agent. He surveys the common thread of alchemy that runs through such stories as "The Birthmark," "The Great Carbuncle," and *The Scarlet Letter* in an effort to show love as a powerful transmuting force. Thus, according to Clack, Hawthorne's use of alchemy is a trope that idealizes unselfish love in relationships, particularly marriage. More often, though, critics portray Hawthorne as skeptical of alchemy, with its fantastic goals of eternal life and youth, arguing he uses it as a tool to discredit the characters associated with it. These critics base their conclusions on the assumption that Hawthorne values genuinely spiritual endeavors, yet he portrays alchemy in an ultimately materialist way. David Van Leer, for example, believes Hawthorne equates alchemy with magic, and in that sense his alchemists manipulate matter through "witchcraft." According to Van Leer, the medieval alchemists alluded to in "The Birthmark"—Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa most notably—come from a tradition of "crypto-materialism" because they misdefine spirit as "etherealized matter," which can then be worked on and transformed into physical manifestations of that spirit. Van Leer asserts that Hawthorne would have been deeply skeptical of such manipulation of matter because it "unites matter and spirit in a way ultimately fatal to the latter" (215). Thus, "the first order of business" for Hawthorne is to "cry out against the follies of yesterday and tomorrow" embodied in "an alchemical tradition of spiritualized matter" (218).

Arthur Versluis, in echoing this view, argues that "For Hawthorne, the esoteric traditions [e.g. alchemy] represent something to be feared or mistrusted" (81), and that any physical practices based on alchemical or mystical philosophy are regarded by him



with “fascinated horror” (89). However, Versluis also acknowledges that Hawthorne’s representations of alchemy are not consistent, for in the *Elixir of Life Manuscripts* he portrays “an English alchemical tradition that isn’t denigrated ... at all, but is seen as quite real and not at all necessarily bad” (85). This one favorable depiction of alchemy does not, in the end, convince Versluis that Hawthorne embraces it, for he maintains that “spiritual connotations...are wholly absent from Hawthorne’s portrayal” of alchemy (84), and one thing critics do agree on is that Hawthorne is invested in the spiritual.

But if Hawthorne indeed mistrusted alchemy, why did he spend so much time with it? The depth of Hawthorne’s alchemical knowledge is not shallow in the least; in fact, he had much more than a common or passing acquaintance with its philosophy, as Charles Swann notes in his discussion of *The Elixir of Life Manuscripts*: “Hawthorne clearly knew far more about alchemy than simply the bare fact that alchemists were interested in turning base metals into gold or in the search for the elixir of life” (375). John Gatta, Jr.’s conclusions comes closest to what I see is happening with alchemy in Hawthorne, which is that Hawthorne is skeptical of a physical, occultish alchemy but is sympathetic to its spiritual ideals. The crucial distinction in defining this idealism in Hawthorne lies with the difference between exoteric and esoteric alchemy, with esoteric alchemy being what Hawthorne advocates because it is a philosophy of the spiritual. Exoteric alchemy has always been viewed skeptically because its promise of eternal youth and wealth defies the limits of possibility, and Hawthorne’s realism would not allow such fantasies to go unchallenged. But as alchemical texts show, the spiritual or psychological refinement of an individual has always been considered the “true” project of alchemy, of which the material substances are mere by-products. This spiritual,

esoteric alchemy exists in transcendental philosophy and literature; it also, I believe, drives Hawthorne's extensive use of alchemy in "The Artist of the Beautiful" by providing a structure for the plot, the characters and the themes.

An examination of Hawthorne's relationship to alchemy and transcendentalism would need to include a close look at "Artist" and its alchemist/transcendentalist, Owen Warland. Because Owen is an artistic figure and because the alchemical work he undertakes represents the work of artistic production, an interpretation of Hawthorne's use of alchemy in this story may lead to conclusions regarding his attitudes toward transcendental aesthetic practices. While such conclusions can easily become simplistic, which is problematic for a writer as intentionally ambiguous as Hawthorne is, his repeated use of alchemy suggests some consistency for him regarding the ideology it represents. Although many critics have recognized Owen as a representative transcendentalist—and particularly a transcendentalist who is a weak and ineffectual artist—no one, as far as I can find, has addressed him as an alchemist. Yet, as an esoteric alchemist, Owen is, I contend, characterized as empowered. Such a characterization of Owen consequently suggests an affinity on Hawthorne's part for the transcendental discourse associated with esoteric alchemy.

## I

"Artist of the Beautiful" was written in 1843, in the midst of other alchemical stories such as "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter." It contains familiar themes that run throughout many of Hawthorne's stories, such as questions regarding the moral and social viability of mysterious pursuits. One important Hawthornian theme in "Artist" is the dichotomy between spirit and matter that makes up much of transcendental discussions. Owen Warland symbolizes the spiritual in both the artist and his art. In

direct contrast is Peter Hovenden, a former watchmaker who only values the utilitarian over the superfluous existence of art. By virtue of his former vocation, Peter is symbolized by a favorite trope of mechanistic philosophy, a watch with “springs and wheels” (Hobbes 3). Peter’s daughter Annie, along with her fiancé and later husband, Robert Danforth the blacksmith, are also aligned with the utilitarian values of Peter, even though they represent varying degrees of matter. All three act as the antagonist to Owen, but Peter especially is set up as his direct opposite. With his ethic of utility and physical strength, Peter cannot abide Owen’s artisan, even superfluous, character. As such, Owen especially feels threatened by Peter. Through the small and delicate Owen, Hawthorne portrays the spiritual as the underling that must assert its importance in a world dominated by the material. As the plot unfolds, the narrator’s commentary affirms the undervalued but, nonetheless, valuable qualities of the spiritual.

Most critics acknowledge the opposition of spirit and matter in “Artist,” and they also conclude that Hawthorne clearly sides with the spiritual. They don’t agree, however, on what the tensions between the characters finally mean for Hawthorne’s aesthetic project. Many critics argue that Hawthorne censures transcendentalism through the weak and insignificant Owen, and their argument is usually based on an ironic narrator, which is a common device in Hawthorne’s stories. An ironic narrator in “Artist” affects how we view Hawthorne’s relationship to transcendentalism, for the seemingly positive depictions of Owen, these critics claim, are actually ironic quips that reveal Hawthorne’s deep skepticism of its claims. Two important critics, Millicent Bell and Nina Baym, see the narrator’s descriptions of Owen and his achievement as ironic, largely because it comes at the expense of human relationships. Bell calls Owen’s success a “melancholy

triumph” (111) and claims it is “but half-comfort for his surrender of human happiness” (108). Owen himself, as a symbol of the spiritual and transcendental ideal, is not only small, weak, and “restricting,” but he and his butterfly are “unimportant,” even “pathetic” (105). Nina Baym echoes Bell’s reading even more forcefully by calling the butterfly “a fragile, cold bauble” that illustrates Owen’s “shrunken...conception of art” (110). Thus, Baym suggests we must read against the narrator’s language to get at the limitations an artist such as Owen represents.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of Hawthorne’s clear use of irony in his other stories, Bell’s and Baym’s interpretation may be justified, but such an emphasis on irony overlooks the many straightforward statements made by Hawthornian narrators. Thus, some critics choose to read the narrator in “Artist” at face value and, consequently, as a ratification of transcendental ideals. Veronica Bassil, for instance, rejects an ironic reading by suggesting the myth of Psyche and Eros as a source for the symbolism of the butterfly. Because Psyche is a symbol of the soul, and because the butterfly is used as a symbol of Psyche, she makes the connection between source and symbol to conclude with a reading that describes Owen’s spiritual metamorphosis: “Artist of the Beautiful,” she says, is about Owen’s soul and the stages it goes through to reach a transcendent state. Sheldon W. Liebman also describes Owen’s “arduous spiritual pilgrimage” (86) as occurring in stages, which epitomize Owen as a Romantic artist who must navigate his way through many opposing forces.

Bassil’s and Liebman’s interpretations of the story are almost alchemical readings. As Jung points out in *Symbols of Transformation*, “the butterfly is a symbol

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<sup>12</sup> For more recent criticism that depicts Owen as a transcendental failure, see Urban and Bromwell.

and allegory of the psyche” (250), especially as the psyche undergoes a process of deepening self-consciousness. The caterpillar in its dark cocoon represents the first unenlightened stages of the process, with the gradual change from a base and earthy creature to a beautiful and heavenly “air-sylph,” as Coleridge puts it (285), representing the progressive nature of self-transformation. Liebman’s observation of these stages particularly includes the presence of the opposing forces that make up much of alchemical/transcendental discourse: “the central figure in the story is not just an artist but a *Romantic* artist, caught between the antitheses of ideal and real, spirit and matter, imagination and understanding, and art and criticism” (85). The butterfly represents the possibility of resolving these conflicts, and is, in that sense, an alchemical symbol. Alchemy presents the binary of spirit and matter in nature and then seeks to unify them through a harmonious relationship in which both are necessary for nature’s functions. Reconciling spirit and matter is precisely what Owen succeeds at doing with his spiritualized mechanical butterfly so that it serves as an alchemical emblem for reconciliation. But the butterfly is also an emblem of Owen himself, which means the reconciliation of the butterfly’s opposing elements (its mechanism fused with the spirit Owen gives it) represents his own inner unity. This inner unity also incorporates the other antitheses that Liebman mentions, particularly of art and criticism as they are linked to the ideal and real.

Because “Artist” has never been read as an alchemical allegory, Owen has never been seen as an alchemist. He has often been compared to Aylmer from “The Birthmark,” though, because the themes of the two stories are so similar, and that similarity, I suggest, carries over to the central place alchemy takes in both stories. As

Owen works in his shop, the description of his physical appearance is similar to that of Aylmer as he works in his laboratory. Aylmer, the alchemist, is “pale as death, anxious and absorbed” as he “hung over the furnace” that brewed his concoction (187). Such a picture connotes the mad scientist who is so intent on his delicate work that he completely insulates himself from the distractions around him. Likewise, the first description we get of Owen is of “his pale face bent earnestly over some piece of mechanism on which was thrown the concentrated luster of a shade-lamp” (248). As the story progresses, Owen becomes “more and more absorbed in a secret occupation which drew all his science and manual dexterity into itself” (252).

Furthermore, Aylmer’s studies take him far beyond the utility of science and into areas that even he deems dangerous. He is one of the many “ardent votaries” of eighteenth-century science, which believed that man could find the “mysteries of Nature” to the extent that a “philosopher” may eventually “lay his hand on the secret of creative force” (175). While the narrator does not say that Aylmer has gone this far in his studies, we are later told that he had, in his past, come close to such Frankenstein-like goals by studying “the wonders of the human frame, and attempt[ing] to fathom the very process by which Nature assimilates all her precious influences from earth and air, and from the spiritual world, to create and foster man, her masterpiece” (180). In his flirtations with the power of creation, Aylmer, like Victor Frankenstein,<sup>13</sup> pushes the limits of what had

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<sup>13</sup> See *Frankenstein* (24-39) for Victor Frankenstein’s explanation of his alchemical studies that lead him to a preoccupation with creative powers. Aylmer’s studies and interests are almost identical. Aylmer’s sources for his study of Nature match those of Victor Frankenstein: Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, and Paracelsus—all alchemists of the Middle Ages. These alchemists are also referenced in “Artist.”

so far been distinguished as mortal versus divine ability, and in doing so, he illustrates one aspect of the alchemical quest, which is to find the secrets of creation.

Owen's quest to spiritualize a mechanical butterfly is, in essence, the same thing as discovering the creative force, for Owen is not only "attempting to imitate the beautiful movements of nature" (250) but to have power over them. By giving a mechanism the animation of spirit, Owen is also giving it a soul, thereby becoming its master and creator in a God-like manner. Delving into the deep unknown of creation is one of the fantastical pursuits scoffed at by the naysayers of alchemy, so that alchemists protected themselves against ridicule by clouding their studies in mysterious or secretive language. Like Aylmer, then, Owen does not openly talk about his esoteric work, which is described as the "hidden mysteries" (250) and "a secret occupation" (252). Particularly in light of the skepticism toward his work that he endures from Peter, Owen conceals his butterfly from those he cannot trust. At one point, for example, Owen had hoped to tell Annie of his secret work, but after her visit where she ruins the butterfly, these hopes are dashed. He says, "I yearned for sympathy, and thought, and fancied, and dreamed that you might give it me; but you lack the talisman, Annie, that should admit you into my secrets" (259). Thus, as a typical alchemist, Owen guards the work he does on the butterfly very carefully.

The theme of time that runs throughout the story subtly reveals Owen to be an alchemist. On one level, time represents the utilitarian and finite values of Peter and the townspeople, and Owen partakes of those values to a certain extent through his vocation as watchmaker. On another level, however, time refers paradoxically to Owen's spiritual endeavors. Mircea Eliade explains that early alchemists believed that the minerals in the

earth would eventually become gold through the natural processes that occur through time. In their attempt to modify matter, the alchemists were actually trying to speed up this process artificially, so that the alchemist's "labours replace the work of Time" (8). The concept of time within alchemy, therefore, is symbolically connected to the refinement process. Eliade further explains, "to collaborate in the work of Nature, to help her to produce at an ever-increasing tempo, to change the modalities of matter—here...lies one of the key sources of alchemical ideology" (8). Owen's earthly watchmaking skills are the beginning point for his ability to "change the modalities of matter," so that the theme of time not only places Owen within the dichotomy of the empirical and spiritual, but it reveals him to be a reconciler of its contradictions. Likewise, alchemists begin with the practical skills of experimentation in a lab, and they perform their experiments not to merely create useful objects but to refine the nature of humankind. The material, then, is a means to a spiritual end; it opens the door to loftier pursuits. The fact that Owen controls the clocks of the town, that he may move time around as he wills, is a symbolic gesture toward his alchemical ability to combine spirit and matter with the intent of a material regeneration. Annie Hovenden even points out to her father that "Owen is inventing a new kind of timekeeper," (248)—a pun on the alchemical labor Owen performs on himself. The theme of time, then, places him clearly within the "alchemical ideology" that Eliade describes.

In addition, many other symbols clarify Owen's stance as an alchemist, such as references to seasonal changes, which signify regeneration after a period of decay, and colors that correspond to the stages the philosopher's stone undergoes in the laboratory. But most importantly, the story is structured around a butterfly motif, incorporating



Owen's character and his struggles. Owen is explicitly described with butterfly imagery, in that he is "seized with a fluttering of the nerves" (252) and he pursues a "flitting mystery" (257). At the end of the story, Owen reveals how his identity is completely wrapped up in the butterfly when he tells Annie, "[I]t has absorbed my own being into itself" (268). In addition, his chasing after butterflies is "an apt emblem of the ideal pursuit in which he had spent so many golden hours" (257). Of course, "golden" is an obvious reference to alchemy, but the "ideal pursuit" also refers to the abstract idealism that drives alchemy, of which a priori or intuitive knowledge is a part. Thus, the butterflies of nature act as inspiration for his own pursuit, not only as mechanisms to imitate but as the embodiment of a spiritual, "beautiful idea." The same inspiration is later repeated for Owen following a period of drinking and dissipation. A butterfly flies through an open window and "fluttered about his head" (260), thereby acting as "a spirit commissioned to recall him to the pure, ideal life" (261).

Winged creatures are common symbols of alchemy, and the butterfly is a particular image of sublimation, especially in its relationship to the psyche's regeneration. Another important alchemical meaning of the butterfly is its quadrangle form, which would then associate it with the mandala, a symbol of unity or wholeness according to Jung.<sup>14</sup> A close analysis of the story reveals that Owen rises and falls according to the success and failure of his mechanized butterfly four times, in progressive stages, which gives the structure of the story a quadrangle form. Each of Owen's failures comes after the appearance of one of the antagonists: The first after Danforth's visit, the second after Peter's visit, the third after Annie's, and the fourth after Peter's

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<sup>14</sup> See *Psychology and Alchemy*, Chapter 3, "The Symbolism of the Mandala."

announcement of Annie's and Danforth's marriage in which he acts as the representative of all three. Each failure represents a different stage for Owen within the alchemical process. Arriving at the final stage of the philosopher's stone is considered a difficult task so that an alchemist must make several attempts before he is successful. It is a given, then, that an alchemist will fail in his attempts, but that those failures are necessary for the knowledge he will need to eventually be successful. These failures are often talked about as a death and as bringing on spiritual darkness, from which the alchemist must work his way out toward a brighter existence represented by the light of the sun.

Such imagery of darkness and light and of death and rebirth is invoked by the narrator as he describes Owen's turning points. In the first stage, when Robert Danforth visits Owen's shop, his large stature casts a physical shadow over Owen, but his incapacity to understand Owen's "passion for the beautiful" also dampens Owen's enthusiasm for his work on the butterfly. Owen acknowledges to himself that his work looks "so vain and idle whenever my path is crossed by Robert Danforth" and that "His hard brute force darkens and confuses the spiritual element within me." Moments later, when he ruins his butterfly with a careless stroke, he describes "the influence of that brute force [Danforth]" as "the vapour" that has "obscured my perception." As he sits "in strange despair" contemplating his failure, his lamp goes out, leaving "the Artist of the Beautiful in darkness" (254). Within this spiritual darkness, Owen is a changed man, and he works for the sake of utility for a little while, keeping the town clock and working with "dogged industry" (254) for his customers. The other three stages are described in a similar manner, with Owen being overshadowed by darkness after a slight but fatal mistake ruins the butterfly. He spends a winter lost in the "gloom" of wine after Annie's

visit, and after Peter's final visit announcing Annie's marriage to Danforth, he becomes very ill. Earlier he works nights locked in his shop, and even the daylight, "to the morbid sensibility of his mind, seemed to have an intrusiveness that interfered with his pursuits" (257-58). Such imagery of death, darkness, and sleep suggest that Owen is like his butterfly in the formation stages, like a caterpillar in its cocoon. He is a lone figure, isolating himself in his shop while he works secretly on his butterfly.

This isolation is what Baym and Bell deem "pathetic" and "restricting," and it is what they believe the narrator condemns in Owen. However, when we read this story alchemically, Owen's isolation takes on new significance. In the first step of exoteric alchemy, *separatio*, the elements of a substance are broken down and separated in order to reveal the *prima materia* underneath. When translated into esoteric alchemy's symbolism, this separation is enacted by the alchemist in his voluntary removal from the "base" elements of society. A British pamphlet published in 1714 titled "A Short Enquiry Concerning the Hermetic Art" declares the importance of an alchemist's seclusion: "...the Alchemist undertakes no light task. I can hold out no hope of success to those who still retain an absorbing interest in the world. *In* the world Adepts may be, but not *of* it. Alchemy is a jealous mistress, she demands from pupils no less than life" (15). Also, at the symbolic level, this separation is a psychological separation in the consciousness, as described by Schelling, where the self becomes an object of study. Thus, the substance in the alembic in its separated form represents man's study of his own soul. In Owen's case, his isolation is not only an integral step in his role as alchemist, but it is a reflection of his mind serving as the substance in his alembic. Because he and the butterfly mirror each other in a macrocosmic/microcosmic

correspondence, we know that the butterfly is the physical manifestation of his psychological labors. As the butterfly is kept hidden until the end, Owen, too, hides himself away until his labor is finished.

When Owen does come out of his *separatio* stage in the end and allows the object of his labors to be displayed for Peter, the Danforths and their child, the butterfly is imaged specifically as the philosopher's stone, with its "purple and gold-speckled wings" (267). The mechanism itself, in uniting spirit and matter, represents Owen's exoteric labor, which he knew would impress those from whom he felt the need of vindication. But the image of the butterfly on the ebony box represents his own emotional and psychological transformation. Its contrast of ebony and pearl show the cycles of darkness and light Owen had undergone throughout the story. But even more, the image on the box portrays Owen's pursuits in the context of the transcendental or "beautiful" idea behind a purely symbolic philosopher's stone—the beautiful idea of an enlightened mind. It shows "a boy in pursuit of a butterfly," which then becomes "a winged spirit" that is "flying heavenward" (267). The boy on the box also "ascend[s] from earth to cloud, and from cloud to celestial atmosphere," in order to catch the transformed butterfly. Owen's box, therefore, tells the tale of his own alchemical (i.e. psychological) transformation, and, as such, reveals Owen to be an effective transcendental figure. As a symbol of sublimation, the butterfly throughout the story represents not only Owen's change from a material watchmaker to the creator of a spiritual creature, but particularly of his spiritual progress from a "low" man who is fearful, overly-emotional, and bitter to one who overcomes these weaknesses as a result of the higher knowledge he has gained from his labors.

## II

As I noted previously, the mere fact of alchemy in one of Hawthorne's story does not necessarily mean he is promoting or embracing it. But I believe there is enough evidence in "Artist" to suggest that Hawthorne is not scornful of his alchemist here or of the work he pursues. Contrary to Bell's and Baym's claims that the narrator's irony devalues Owen, I see the narrator's tone as actually deflecting sarcasm away from him and toward the materialists who undervalue or misunderstand him. For example, after Owen experiences a devastating setback with his butterfly, a change comes over him: he works at his job and completely neglects his butterfly. The narrator describes this change in Owen as "cold, dull, nameless," (254). But the narrator also calls this change a "happy transformation" (255) in connection to Peter Hovenden, who thinks "the alteration was entirely for the better" (254). Of course, we cannot trust Peter's opinions regarding Owen, for Peter is depicted as sneering and contemptuous in the face of Owen's emotional vulnerability. The narrator's irony, therefore, works in Owen's favor rather than against it.

Later in the story when Owen resumes his butterfly chasing and nightly seclusion after a bout of drinking and idleness, the townspeople believe Owen to be mad. But the narrator, rather than condemning Owen for his strange behavior, condemns the townspeople for their lack of sympathy:

The townspeople had one comprehensive explanation of all these singularities. Owen Warland had gone mad! How universally efficacious—how satisfactory, too, and soothing to the injured sensibility of narrowness and dullness—is this easy method of accounting for

whatever lies beyond the world's most ordinary scope! From St. Paul's days down to our poor little Artist of the Beautiful, the same talisman had been applied to the elucidation of all mysteries in the words or deeds of men who spoke or acted too wisely or too well. In Owen Warland's case the judgement [sic] of his townspeople may have been correct. Perhaps he was mad. The lack of sympathy—that contrast between himself and his neighbours which took away the restraint of example—was enough to make him so. (261)

While the narrator does not deny that Owen is different or eccentric compared to the people he lives among, he scoffs at the townspeople, who in their “ordinary scope” protect their “injured sensibility of narrowness and dullness” by condemning Owen. In their rejection of Owen, the townspeople are partially to blame for his eccentricities, for they don't extend the hand of acceptance or friendship that would bring him into the mainstream. On the other hand, “poor” Owen has “acted too wisely or too well” in his higher ability to comprehend the mysterious. Thus, in this passage Owen is hardly cast as a character we should scorn, but as someone we should not only sympathize with but recognize as possessing admirable qualities, which are nothing less than the higher consciousness of the poet-prophet as described by Coleridge.

Granted, the narrator's tone toward alchemists in other stories is one of skepticism, perhaps even ridicule, and a common interpretation of alchemy in “The Birthmark” could continue with other stories as well: any character associated with alchemy is a failure. Most of Hawthorne's alchemists are failures, but not because they don't successfully perform alchemical experiments, for in that regard, they are mostly

successful. However, their experiments do not end in the manner the alchemist had hoped. Rappaccini and Aylmer, for example, both perform seemingly impossible feats with their alchemy so that they both become arrogant in their abilities. As a result of an overestimation of their powers, they both kill a woman they love. The voice of the narrator in these stories often provides subtle commentary that questions and condemns what these alchemists are doing. Hence, after Georgiana's death at Aylmer's hands, the narrator concludes with this clear censure of his actions: "Yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away [his] happiness...he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time...to find the perfect future in the present" (192). Such a statement is an illustration of why critics read Hawthorne as condemning alchemy, for his alchemists are often portrayed as misguided idealists who invest their hopes in something other than the people around them and, therefore, miss out on the richness of the life sitting right before their eyes.

Notwithstanding Owen's similarities to Aylmer, however, I believe Hawthorne is doing something different with him. The most obvious difference is the tone of satisfaction the narrator gives to the conclusion of Owen's story:

And as for Owen Warland, he looked placidly at what seemed the ruin of his life's labour, and which was yet no ruin. He had caught a far other butterfly than this. When the artist rose high enough to achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality." (272)

Aylmer misses out on “the reality,” while Owen “possessed” himself in its enjoyment; in contrast to Aylmer’s ruin, Owen’s “life’s labour” is “yet no ruin.” Here is a very distinct difference: Aylmer fails but Owen succeeds, and he succeeds in a distinctly transcendental vein, as one who “has caught a far other butterfly” of self-knowledge.

Hawthorne here seems to make a distinction between the two kinds of alchemy: purely exoteric alchemy brings misery and ultimate failure, but esoteric alchemy brings enjoyment and personal fulfillment. Hawthorne clearly does not believe in a literal philosopher’s stone as a panacea for illness, old age, poverty, or sorrow, and he does not believe man could, or should, find the secrets of creation. Thus, I believe Hawthorne did scoff at the claims of exoteric alchemy through Aylmer and characters like him.

Hawthorne draws a line where the possibilities of science end and where the privileges of God begin. Even Aylmer unwillingly admits that “our great creative Mother [Nature]” is “severely careful to keep her own secrets.” He recognizes that Nature is “like a jealous patentee,” allowing us to “mar” or destroy but “on no account to make” (180). If we look at Hawthorne’s failed alchemists, such as Aylmer, Heidegger, and Rappaccini, they are preoccupied with the literal, exoteric experiments of alchemy that encroach on God’s domain. In their work in labs or pseudo-labs, they all ultimately overlook the correspondence between themselves and the substances in their alembics. But Owen focuses on the esoteric side of alchemy—in other words, on himself as a substance that needs refining—and this yields very different results.

On another level, the esoteric alchemy of the story is meant to represent the creative process an artist undergoes in his production of art. While the term “artist” signifies alchemy (alchemy is often referred to as “the Art”) it also has obvious



connections to a producer of works of art, especially to a literary artist such as Hawthorne. As a trope of artistic creation, the esoteric alchemy in “Artist” resembles the transcendental model of genius in which the artist (or “poet”) is a prophet who creates works of art that are meant to recall society back to the spiritual, precisely as Emerson calls American artists to do. According to the transcendentalists, such as Coleridge and Emerson, translating a piece of literature from vision to words is a transformation process that ends with the presentation of a priori truth, and Owen’s butterfly, as an image of art, alchemy, and spiritual truth, enacts such a model. In addition, the butterfly is an image of Schelling’s claim that works of art are a manifestation of the spiritual. Its beauty, Owen tells Annie, “is not merely outward, but deep as its whole system” (268), and its appearance as “a material trifle” actually “symboliz[es] a lofty moral,” that the artist has the ability to convert “what was earthly to spiritual gold” (270). As Owen expected, none of his antagonists recognize the spiritual nature of his art because they, as representatives of empirical society, have been blinded by materialism’s apathy toward the spiritual. They only see his butterfly as an impressive plaything, clever and pretty, but ultimately as a waste of time. As Robert Danforth expresses it, “There is more real use in one downright blow of my sledge-hammer than in the whole five years’ labour that our friend Owen has wasted on this butterfly” (269). If there is a chord of melancholy to Owen’s story, it is regret that an artist’s work is only valued for its impressive material appearance, but that its real value, “the exercises and manifestations of the spirit” (265), remains neglected.

But this story seems to suggest that the creation of art, if overlooked or scorned by society, does something for the artist at a deep personal level: it allows the artist himself

to partake of the transformational nature of art. As a result of this personal regeneration, the artist may then transcend the opinion of others in favor of his own, wiser opinion. Such is one dimension of esoteric alchemy, and it is shown in the story by Owen's eventual confidence in his work in the face of society's indifference. Despite the achievement he brings to the Danforth's fireside in the form of the spiritualized butterfly, Owen knows what the reaction will be: misunderstanding of his life's work and of the full implications of its worth. But this time he does not shrink in the face of Danforth's strength, Peter's sneer, or Annie's "secret scorn" as he once did. He has learned to detach himself from the effects of such reactions, and he responds with an almost stoic placidity: "in the latter stages of his pursuit," the narrator tells us, Owen "had risen out of the region in which such a discovery might have been torture" (269-70). His acceptance of Annie's opinion rests with the belief he comes to have that the "reward of all high performance must be sought within itself, or sought in vain" (270). Thus, Owen is not devastated by the destruction of the butterfly by Annie's child, for his complacency is founded on a transcendental ideal: he had "risen high enough to achieve the beautiful" (272).

The symbol of this transcendence, the butterfly, is no longer necessary as long as Owen's "spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality" (272). As an esoteric alchemist he obtains the proverbial philosopher's stone that is tangible to himself alone since those he offers it to cannot or will not see it for what it is. Owen, as transcendental artist, portrays the spiritual as a legitimate alternative to materialism's short-sightedness, especially as that short-sightedness misses the purposive scope of artist work. This

transcendental state of consciousness may seem unusual for a Hawthornian character, but it is the ideal Hawthorne measures his other characters against.

## EPILOGUE

As I have previously noted, little work has been done in literary criticism to contextualize alchemy within a larger scope than mere recognition of its imagery in fiction, prose and poetry. Indeed, few critics have attempted to explain why in the nineteenth century—a time when Enlightenment ideals had been culturally internalized and when science had become sterile of feeling, emotion, and metaphoric language—an old form of pre-Enlightenment science appears in philosophy and literature. But as Schmidt proposes for mysticism, alchemy served a purpose for those writers who used it. I have attempted in this project to examine a couple of these purposes, namely its role as a spiritual discourse in the transcendental reactions against purely empirical philosophy and in the formulations of artistic creativity.

Caught up in the paradigm of transcendental genius is a central investment in the individual. Certainly, one of alchemy's most important functions is its ready-made discourse of self-regeneration through a becoming consciousness. Writing in 1857, Ethan Allen Hitchcock (curiously, a well-respected army general who was also a leading expert in alchemy) seizes upon the individualistic implications of alchemy in the preface for his book *Alchemy and the Alchemists*. He asserts, "the author thinks it a duty to declare the opinion he has derived from a careful reading of many alchemical volumes, and in the following remarks he has taken for his thesis the proposition that *Man* was the *subject* of Alchemy; and that the *object* of the Art was the perfection, or at least the improvement, of Man" (iv). Such is the legacy of a cultural exchange across the Atlantic from America to Europe. If Germany was the folkloric nucleus for alchemical traditions from which we may trace a line through Britain and then to America, the political

movement begun in America that was seen to encapsulate the importance of the individual quite likely supplied the impetus to apply alchemical ideology for modern purposes in Europe. The texts I have examined here—from Kant’s subjectivity, to Schelling’s objectification of self, to Coleridge’s genius of higher consciousness, to Hawthorne’s isolated artist—all explore the dimensions of a Self as the starting point for any discovery of knowledge. Thus, alchemy as an individualist philosophy is one representation of an exported influence America provided to the countries it usually imported culture from.

I have also tried to demonstrate in this project the emphasis alchemy placed on human possibilities and how those promises of human potential dominated the transcendental discourse. I have also recognized the transcendental awareness of the impossibilities of their idealism within the parameters of alchemical paradox. Although many critics are now focusing on the prevalence of subversion and even nihilism of the time period against the traditional backdrop of Romantic idealism, I see the idealism of the age as equally compelling. The idealism of the transcendentalists has become, through the efforts of Abrams and other like-minded critics, the canonical version for the Romantic aesthetic project. As such, the post-modern and deconstructive movements were formulated in direct response to this privileged version of Romanticism. The Romantics’ perceived investment in unity, harmony, and synthesis is precisely what we now react against, so that in contrast to unity and synthesis, we now focus on disunity and fragmentation; instead of harmony, we speak of discord and dissonance. Thus, our present discussions of the Romantic time period have been formed specifically from the perspective, skewed or otherwise, transcendental idealism articulated. In that sense,

alchemy's role within our own reactionary structures of cultural analysis is worth our notice.

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