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## Alchemical Theory and Practice as Overcoming the Split Between the Domain of Culture and Life Itself

### Introduction

Although alchemy, its philosophical, theoretical assumptions and its practical activities is a domain beyond Bakhtin's interests, this article is to demonstrate that one of his theories – even though originally concerning other issues – may be applied to the research in this field. This paper refers to Bakhtin's work *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and his theory of a fundamental split between two worlds: the domain of culture and life itself, which he describes as a “split between the content or sense of a given act/activity and the historical actuality of its being, the actual and once-occurrent experiencing of it”<sup>1</sup>. It is to be demonstrated that the nature of alchemical activities and ideals may be analyzed in relation to this theory. The aim of this paper is to answer the question whether the realm of alchemists' efforts may be perceived as referring not only to the unity of different cultural domains of sense but also to the unity of sense or meaning of an act/activity and the historical actuality of its being.

### The realm of alchemical ideals

The popular notion of alchemy often regards *opus alchymicum* as a conscious deception:

In the 1300s and 1400s continuous wars and power plays created a great demand for gold, and the swindler indulged in a lively game: Find powerful nobles

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<sup>1</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward the Philosophy of the Act*, trans. V. Liapunov, University of Texas Press, Austin 1993, p. 2.



in need of funds; put on a good show and convince them to invest; collect all you can; then run for your life<sup>2</sup>.

However, in spite of all the forgeries and tricks performed by pseudo-alchemists<sup>3</sup>, the real alchemy was not a wicked deception<sup>4</sup>. According to Tara Nummedal:

This modern understanding of alchemical fraud, however, is anachronistic, rooted in the post-Enlightenment view that the transmutation of metals is impossible. Early modern Europeans, on the other hand, had solid natural philosophical reasons to believe that transmutation was possible, though difficult (...). Not surprisingly, the notion of alchemical fraud that emerges is far more complex than might be expected. In fact, the sleights of hand or manipulative tricks that early modern Europeans and historians alike claim were ubiquitous appeared only rarely in the arrest warrants or interrogation records. More frequently, the notion of fraud at the heart of trials (...) had to do with practitioner's inability or unwillingness to fulfil the contracts they had signed with their patrons<sup>5</sup>.

Equally often, the art of alchemy is classified beside magic, witchcraft and fortune-telling under a common category of "occult" or "pseudo-science". This judgement, also anachronistic (like the identification of alchemy with fraud), is probably the heritage of the Enlightenment period, as "[the] Enlightenment writers drew heavily on metaphors of light and darkness to describe the dawning of chemistry out of the misty obscurity of the medieval delusions of alchemy"<sup>6</sup>.

Also, many misunderstandings and controversies have arisen around the relation between alchemy and chemistry<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, alchemy and its efforts is sometimes perceived only as early, primitive chemical knowledge and naïve scientific experiments; sometimes – quite the contrary – it is described and analysed as a purely spiritual domain, deprived of all scientific elements.

<sup>2</sup> C. Cobb, H. Goldwhite, *Creations of Fire: Chemistry's Lively History from Alchemy to the Atomic Age*, Plenum Press, New York–London 1995, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description of the most famous tricks performed by pseudo-alchemists see: K. Hoffmann, *Kann man Gold machen?*, Urania-Verlag, Leipzig–Jena–Berlin 1979.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of the nature of alchemical fraud see: T.E. Nummedal, *The Problem of Fraud in Early Modern Alchemy*, [in:] *Shell games: Scams, Frauds and Deceits in Europe, 1300–1650*, ed. R. Raiswell, M. Crané, Centre for Renaissance Studies, Toronto 2004.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> L.M. Principe, W.R. Newman, *Some Problems with The Historiography of Alchemy*, [in:] *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. L.M. Principe, W.R. Newman, MIT Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 386.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this problem see: W.R. Newman, L.M. Principe, *Alchemy vs. Chemistry: the Etymological Origins of a Historiographic Mistake*, "Early Science and Medicine" 1998, 3(1), p. 32–65.

Principe and Newman<sup>8</sup> oppose both of those attitudes towards alchemy, including the theories of Carl Gustav Jung and Mircea Eliade, as representative of the latter category<sup>9</sup>: “Although we argue that the artificial segregation of alchemy from the scientific tradition is an error, we wish equally to steer away from a ‘positivist’ position that there is no real distinction between alchemy and later science”<sup>10</sup>. They indicate that “the approach of picking and choosing nuggets of positive contributions to chemistry out of their alchemical context” was followed by the “presentist attitudes [which] have led certain historians to dismiss alchemy from serious scholarly consideration”<sup>11</sup>, thus leaving “the overall context of the field largely unexplored, allowing esoteric and psychological notions to fill that vacuum with little resistance, thus further removing from our reach an accurate understanding of the sum of the discipline”<sup>12</sup>.

It is noticeable that the Jung’s and Eliade’s theories appealing to the domain of alchemical tradition, criticized for their unilaterally spiritual interpretation, do emphasize only one side of the phenomenon. As Eliade remarks – “alchemy was not, in its origins, an empirical science, a rudimentary chemistry. This it did not become till later when, for the majority of its practitioners, its mental world had lost its validity and its *raison d’être*”<sup>13</sup>. However, such statements, like: ‘*alchemy was not a pure empirical science*’, do not necessarily imply that it must have been an utterly spiritual domain. They do not exclude the possibility that alchemy might have been – in its origins – a combination of both: material and spiritual elements. And only “later when, for the majority of its practitioners, its mental world had lost its validity and its *raison d’être*”<sup>14</sup> did those – primarily integrated – elements become separated, causing an isolation of its material and spiritual dimensions from each other. This has resulted in an independent development of its material elements into regular science on one hand, and – on the other hand – the appearance of many esoteric and occult movements, appealing to the alchemical symbolism and its mystical elements, increasingly losing its original sense and validity<sup>15</sup>.

Also, it seems that the decline of the “original alchemy”, caused by the separation of its two integral dimensions (the material and the spiritual one) is

<sup>8</sup> L.M. Principe, W.R. Newman, *Some Problems...*, p. 385-431.

<sup>9</sup> For a critique of Jung’s and Eliade’s theories concerning the art of alchemy see: *ibidem*, p. 401-415.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 415.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 416.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 417.

<sup>13</sup> M. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, trans. S. Corrin, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> See: H.E. Fierz-David, *Die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Chemie*, Birkhäuser Verlag, Basel 1952, chap. 3.

not randomly traditionally connected with the seventeenth century<sup>16</sup>. This was the century of Descartes and his immensely influential theory. According to Helene Metzger: “What did manage to ruin [alchemy] was the Cartesian theory, which did not even attack it directly; indeed, to admit, as Descartes had done, that ‘all varieties which are found in matter depend on the movement of its parts,’ was in effect to admit that matter is similar to itself everywhere; it is therefore to render absurd the idea of the perfection of chemical substances or even of Nature, which remains always as created”<sup>17</sup>. But there is also another fundamental issue connected with the Cartesian philosophy: the differentiation of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*; thus – the separation of the spiritual and material aspect of reality, which has influenced even the nineteenth century separation of the *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* as two divergent domains of knowledge. This Cartesian differentiation might have been “the beginning of the end” of the “traditional” two-dimensional alchemy. What seems to be irreversibly lost and incomprehensible for us – is the cultural context of the long period of alchemy’s development, which effected not only the differences of expression in a written text, but also the unity of the spiritual and material aspect existing in most of human activities (including the art of alchemy).

Eliade and Jung seem to explore only one side of this material-spiritual integrity of alchemical operations, trying to omit its material, practical aspect. According to their theories, to understand the realm of alchemical ideals, one has to realize that although alchemical operations were physical operations carried out in laboratories, their purpose was mainly not that of the practical chemist<sup>18</sup>. Eliade emphasizes that while a chemist aims to become familiar with the structure of matter and physical and chemical phenomena, an alchemist is focused on symbolic categories like “death” or “marriage” of substances: categories connected with transmutation of matter and human life<sup>19</sup>. In this interpretation alchemy is a continuation of a primeval myth of *homo faber*: striving to bring

<sup>16</sup> H.E. Fierz-Dawid (*Die Entwicklungsgeschichte...*) and J. Read (*Prelude to Chemistry: An Outline of Alchemy, its Literature and Relationships*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1937, reprinted in 1997 by Kessinger Publishing Company) indicate the publishing of Robert Boyle’s *The Sceptical Chymist* as an identifiable end of the original alchemical tradition: “(...) although alchemical traditions lingered until late in the eighteenth century, the long age of alchemy virtually ended with Robert Boyle’s abolition of the system of the four elements and the three hypostatical principles, and his introduction to of the modern chemical idea of an element, as expounded in his celebrated book published in London, in 1661, under the title of *The Sceptical Chymist*” (J. Read, *Prelude...*, p. 31).

<sup>17</sup> After: L.M. Principe, W.R. Newman, *Some Problems...*, p. 410–411. The original Metzger’s quotation is to be found in: H. Metzger, *Les doctrines chimiques en France du début du XVIIe à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, Les Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1923, p. 138.

<sup>18</sup> M. Eliade, *The Forge...*, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

matter to perfection in association with acquiring perfection of oneself<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, Jung remarks that it is the integrity and completeness of a human being that should be perceived as the aim of alchemical efforts. He emphasizes that those alchemists who were aware of the true essence of their work and for whom the operations carried out in laboratories were pursuits connected with symbols and their psychological influence – despised the naïve “gold manufacturers” whose work only seemingly had anything to do with the realm of the real alchemical efforts<sup>21</sup>. That is why their maxim was: *aurum nostrum non est aurum vulgi*<sup>22</sup>. Although they were occupied with the art of gold production, the chemical transformation seemed to interest them not for itself, but as a reflection of a psychological process that had been projected on the process of transmutation of matter.

We may criticize Eliade’s and Jung’s approach for neglecting the material aspect of alchemy. But we should appreciate their attempts to propose a theory exploring its spiritual side, perhaps still imperceptible for us. When trying to integrate those two aspects, alchemy and its efforts towards transformation-by-transmutation seems to be like Janus: having two faces, but remaining an undividable one-being. This recalls one of the symbols of the alchemical *opus*: the image of a two-faced hermaphrodite, uniting the opposites that constitute a dual-unity.

### Alchemy and the idea of unity

It is the transformation in its philosophical dimension – a transformation that aimed towards perfection – that became the main idea of alchemy. And the central notion of this transformation-by-transmutation seems to be *the uniting*. The idea of uniting is expressed in *Tabula Smaragdina* [see fig.1] and its philosophical message of the unity of microcosm and macrocosm: of a human being and the universe [see fig. 2]. It can be noticed in the image of *Ouroboros* [see fig. 3] – a symbol of the secret alchemical knowledge. It is a basic assumption for the *mysterium naturae* – the great transformation aimed to acquire the perfection of matter (achieved by use of *lapis philosophorum*) and a human being (*elixir vitae* that provided immortality). The alchemical process of conjunction of substances in *vas hermetis* can be seen in many allegoric images of *mysterium coniunctionis* that appeal to the uniting of the opposites: sun and moon, opposite elements, etc., expressed by the dual-unity of king and queen,

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 169.

<sup>21</sup> C.G. Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie*, Rascher Verlag, Zürich 1944, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> *Rosarium philosophorum*, [in:] *Artis auriferae quam chemiam vocant*, vol. 2, Basileae 1593, p. 220.



brother and sister, winged and wingless snake, black and white flower, etc. that create a new unity – a new quality (often expressed by the image of hermaphrodite) [see fig. 4]

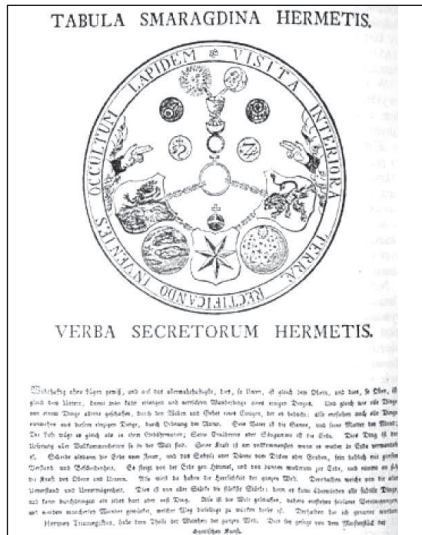


Fig. 1. *Tabula Smaragdina. Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer aus dem 16ten und 17ten Jahrhundert*, Altona 1785 (after: Bugaj, *Hermetyzm...*)

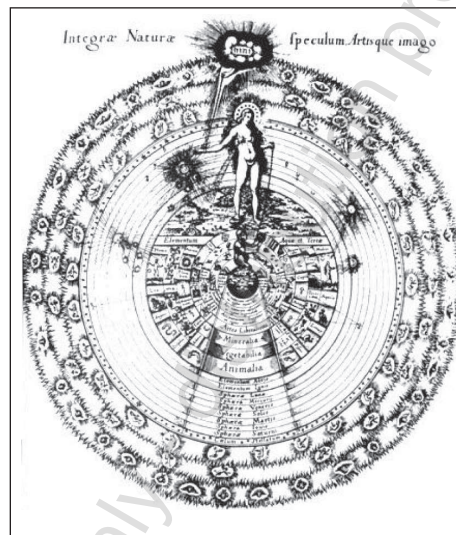


Fig. 2. The unity of microcosm and macrocosm – a human being and the universe. Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historica*, Oppenheim 1617 (after: Jung, *Psychologie...*)

But the alchemical art of uniting seems to have far more distant connotations. Alchemy itself is a realm that integrates in its theoretical ideals and physical activities different cultural domains of sense. Alchemy included two kinds of activities: the material alchemy and the spiritual alchemy. The first one was concerned with practical knowledge of chemical substances, pharmaceutical recipes, metals alloys and tinctures. The second was focused on psychological issues<sup>23</sup> and was connected with anthropological and mythical context<sup>24</sup>. Thus, although – as Cassirer claims – different domains of culture constitute different symbolic forms and are connected with different ways of perceiving and interpreting the reality<sup>25</sup>, alchemy seems to integrate even distant perspectives connected with distinct cultural domains. It is science, art, myth, religion (and magic), which elements *opus alchymicum* seems to appeal to.

<sup>23</sup> See: C.G. Jung, *Psychologie...*

<sup>24</sup> See: M. Eliade, *The Forge...*

<sup>25</sup> See: E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Yale University Press, Yale 1955; E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Yale University Press, Yale 1970.

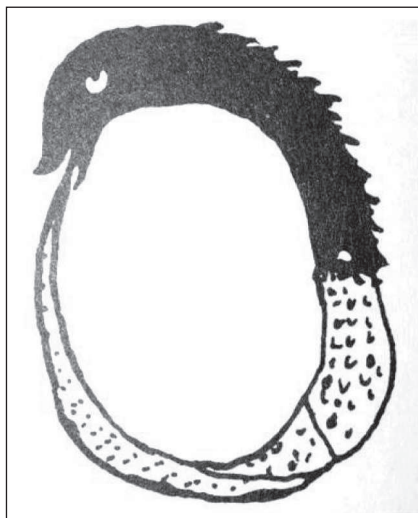


Fig. 3. Ouroboros. *The Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra* (after: Bugaj, *Hermetyzm*...)



Fig. 4. The dual-unity expressed by the image of hermaphrodite, Stolcius, *Viridarium chymicum*, 1624, (after: Read, *Prelude*...)

The unity connected with alchemical ideals goes even further: it is also the interior, psychological integration of the adept<sup>26</sup> – “*Ex alijs nunquam unum facies quod quaeris, nisi prius ex teipso fiat unum*”<sup>27</sup> – and the unity of the alchemist and his *opus*. Eliade remarks that alchemists must have been convinced that by aiming at perfecting the matter, simultaneously they aspired to the perfection of themselves. According to his theory, a great importance was attached to the integration of the *opus alchymicum* and the adept’s own experience. All the successive phases of the *opus magnum* and their stages [see fig. 5, 6, 7]<sup>28</sup> appealed not only to the transmutation of matter, but the alchemist himself as well. It was the human being indeed, whose transmutation was the sense and the aim of the *opus*. By experiencing the initiation “suffering”, “death” and “resurrection”, the alchemist was experiencing transmutation and was becoming “immortal”<sup>29</sup>. But this initiation function of suffering was transferred on the matter. It was the alchemical operations identified with “suffering”, “death” and “resurrection” of the matter – leading to the transformation into gold – that were identified with the spiritual transformation of the adept

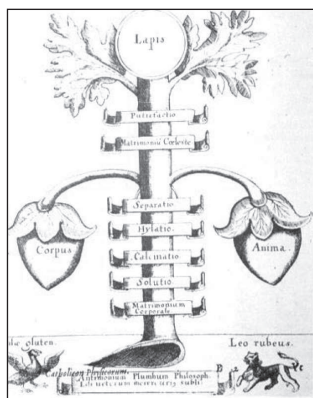
<sup>26</sup> C.G. Jung, *Psychologie*..., p. 349.

<sup>27</sup> G. Dornei, *Philosophia meditativa*, [in:] *Theatrum chemicum, praecipuus selectorum auctorum tractatus de chemiae et lapidis philosophici*, vol. 1. Argentorati 659, p. 417.

<sup>28</sup> About the phases of alchemical *opus magnum* see: J. Read, *Prelude*..., p. 130-148; C.G. Jung, *Psychologie*..., p. 316-319.

<sup>29</sup> M. Eliade, *The Forge*..., p. 142-168.

(gold is the symbol of enlightenment and immortality). Thus, two levels of alchemical activities: the transformation of the matter and the transformation of the human being become integrated<sup>30</sup>.



**Fig. 5.** The successive stages of the alchemical process: *Arbor philosophica*. Thomas Norton, *Catholicon physicum, seu modus conficiendi tincturam physicam et alchymiam*, Frankfurt 1630, (after: Jung, *Psychologie...*)



**Fig. 6.** The successive stages of the alchemical process: *Mons philosophorum*. Stephan Michelspacher, *Die Cabala, Spiegel der Kunst und Natur*, in *Alchymia*, Augsburg, 1654, (after: Jung, *Psychologie...*)



**Fig. 7.** The successive stages of the alchemical process. Libavius, *Commentatorium alchymiae*, 1606, (after: Read, *Prelude...*)

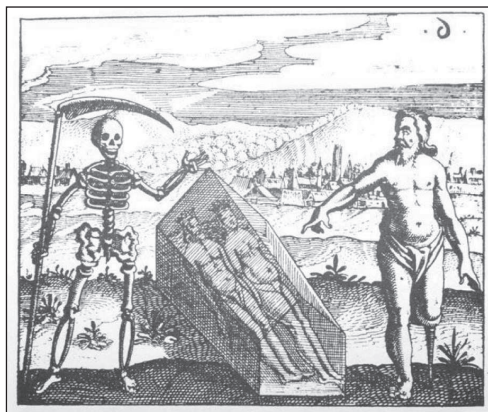
Of course, the identification with the *opus magnum* demanded from the alchemist several spiritual and physical features as well as immense devotion to the *opus*<sup>31</sup>: “*Ars totum requirit hominem*” – claimed Theobald de Hoghelande<sup>32</sup>. But the initiation experience – where the physical “torturing” of metals acquired its spiritual meaning – was indispensable. It is where the material and spiritual dimensions of alchemy integrate. This was the unity of the material, physical aspect of an alchemical act/activity and its spiritual sense or meaning.

<sup>30</sup> C.G. Jung (*Psychologie...*) and Eliade (*The Forge...*) emphasize the fact, that the alchemical symbolic of the “suffering” and “death” (unavoidable for the resurrection-transmutation) is featured in the way that allows an interpretation appealing to both: matter and human being. It is noticeable in alchemical allegoric illustrations of the *opus alchymicum* [see fig. 8, 9] and descriptions like: “*Accipe hominem, tonde eum, et trahe super lapidem... donec corpus eius moriatur*” (*Allegoriae super librum Turbae*, [in:] *Artis auriferae quam chemiam vocant*, vol. 1, Basileae 1593, p. 139).

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed information see: H. E. Fierz-David *Die Entwicklungsgeschichte...*, p. 48, 95-96; R. Bugaj, *Hermetyzm*, vol. 1, Orion, Warszawa 1998, p. 140-141; M. Eliade, *The Forge...*, p. 159-160.

<sup>32</sup> T. de Hoghelande, *De alchemiae difficultatibus*, [in:] *Theatrum chemicum, praecipuos selectorum auctorum tractatus de chemiae et lapidis philosophici*, vol. 1, Argentorati 1659, p. 126.





**Fig. 8.** Allegoric illustration of the *opus: mortificatio* or *nigredo* and *putrefaction*.  
Johann Daniel Mylius, *Philosophia reformata*, 1622, (after: Jung, *Psychologie...*).



**Fig. 9.** Allegoric illustration of the *opus: boiling Saturn (Mercurius senex)*.  
Salomon Trismosin, *Splendor solis* [in:] *Aureum Vellus oder der Guldin Schatz und Kunstkammer*, 1600, (after: Jung, *Psychologie...*).

### An application of Bakhtin's philosophy of the act to the realm of alchemical ideals and activities

Can these alchemical ideas of integration be related to the Bakhtin's theory featured in his philosophy of the act? Bakhtin claims, that all the human cultural activities which he analyzes:

establish a fundamental split between the content or sense of a given act/activity and the historical actuality of its being, the actual and once-occurrent experiencing of it. And it is in consequence of this that the given act loses its valuableness and the unity of its actual becoming and self-determination. This act is truly real (it participates in once-occurrent Being-as-event) only *in its entirety*. Only this *whole* act is alive, exists fully and inescapably – comes to be, is accomplished. It is an actual living participant in the ongoing event of Being: it is in communion with the unique unity of ongoing Being. But this communion or participation does not penetrate its content/sense aspect, which pretends to being able to achieve full and definitive self-determination within the unity of this or that domain of sense or meaning (science, art, history), although, as we showed, these objective domains, apart from the act that brings them into communion with Being, are not realities with respect to their sense or meaning<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward...*, p. 2.

Thus, first of all, Bakhtin criticizes those “standpoints in philosophy and science that effectuate peculiar alienation of various products of human activities, separating them from an integral act and closing in ivory towers of particular domains of culture”<sup>34</sup>. Whereas—as it has been demonstrated above—alchemy, in its philosophy and practice, integrates in one act different domains of culture (different domains of sense) and their ways of perceiving and interpreting the reality.

Secondly, Bakhtin emphasizes the necessity of surmounting “the pernicious non-fusion and non-interpenetration of culture and life”<sup>35</sup>. According to him “as a result, two worlds confront each other, two worlds that have absolutely no communication with each other and are mutually impervious: the world of culture and the world of life”<sup>36</sup>. It is the split between the domain of sense or meaning of an act/activity and the actual experiencing of it. Also at this point, the alchemist in his activities seems to meet Bakhtin’s requirements by overcoming this split. The alchemist, as it has been demonstrated, unites his life and his act: he *lives* his *opus*. Not only is his life subordinated to his activities (the *opus* demanded from the alchemist special features of personality, living a definite life style and obeying certain rules<sup>37</sup>), but the physical alchemical operations and their symbolism appeal – according to Jung – to the interior, unconscious levels of a human being and reflect his psychological processes of transformation: the process of individuation<sup>38</sup>. Thus, by causing the transmutation of the matter – the alchemist transforms himself. Unlike in other human acts/activities analyzed by Bakhtin, in the realm of alchemical ideals, for the “abstract sense-aspect of the thought, the individual-historical aspect (the author, the time, the circumstances, and the moral unity of his life)” is important<sup>39</sup>. This is where the material and the spiritual aspect of an act integrate. It is the uniting of the sense or meaning of a certain act/activity and the experiencing of it in the temporal actuality of its being. This is where the world of culture and the world of life integrate in an overcoming of the dualism of cognition and Being.

Although alchemy integrates in its acts “the content or sense of a given act/activity and the historical actuality of its being, the actual and once-occurrent experiencing of it”<sup>40</sup>, paradoxically, in its results, it simultaneously releases the

<sup>34</sup> B. Żyłko, *Michaił Bachtin i jego ‘filozofia moralna’* (an introduction to the Polish edition of Bakhtin’s *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*), [in:] M.M. Bakhtin, *W stronę filozofii czynu*, trans. B. Żyłko, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 1997, p. 19.

The English translation of the quoted fragment by the author of this article.

<sup>35</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward...*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> See: footnote 31.

<sup>38</sup> C.G. Jung, *Psychologie...*, p. 331-390.

<sup>39</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward...*, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

adept from the burden of temporality and historical being. While the modern individual in his activities has become a strictly temporal, historical creature and the irreversibility and idle uniformity of time has become a dogma of the modern world, the alchemist was “the master of time”. His efforts were to recreate in a symbolic way the primordial chaos and cosmogony. When he was experiencing the initiation “death” and “resurrection” – he was constituting his victory over temporality: from that moment he considered himself “immortal” and extra-temporal<sup>41</sup>. For the alchemical *opus* the sense or meaning of the act had to be integrated with the actual, temporal experiencing of it, but the outcome resulted in annulment of time – while the modern individual, whose work has lost its sacral dimension has no respite from history: he is inescapably immersed in time and historical being<sup>42</sup>. Thus, perhaps it is an unconscious need of extricating oneself from this burden that has caused the pernicious split between the sense or meaning of an act and the actual, temporal experiencing of it. Perhaps this split is to be interpreted as a “defence” response to the unbearable inescapability of history.

The alchemists complex relation to time is connected with another crucial issue of Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act: the answerability. According to Bakhtin, the whole life of a human being is to be interpreted as an act, and answerability is the most important attribute of every act. This is the Bakhtin’s concept of *non-alibi in Being*:

a human being has no right to an alibi – to an evasion of that unique answerability which is constituted by his actualization of his own unique never-repeatable ‘place’ in Being; he has no right to an evasion of that once-occurrent ‘answerable act or deed’ which his whole life must constitute<sup>43</sup>.

Bakhtin postulates, that:

An act must acquire a single unitary plane to be able to reflect itself in both directions – in its sense or meaning and in its being; it must acquire the unity of two-sided answerability – both for its content (special answerability) and for its Being (moral answerability). And the special answerability, moreover, must be brought into communion with the unitary and unique moral answerability as a constituent moment in it. That is the only way whereby the pernicious non-fusion and non-interpenetration of culture and life could be surmounted<sup>44</sup>.

In alchemical operations “in taking upon himself the responsibility of changing the Nature, man put himself in the place of Time”<sup>45</sup>. It is his labours

<sup>41</sup> M. Eliade, *The Forge...*, p. 153-178.

<sup>42</sup> About human attitude towards time and history and the need of „escaping” from the history see: M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. W.R. Trusk, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1955.

<sup>43</sup> S.G. Bocharov, *Introduction to Russian Edition*, [in:] M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward...*, p. XXII.

<sup>44</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward...*, p. 2-3.

<sup>45</sup> M. Eliade, *The Forge...*, p. 169.

that replace the work of time: “To collaborate in the work of Nature, to help her produce at an ever-increasing tempo, to change the modalities of matter – here (...) lies one of the key sources of alchemical ideology”<sup>46</sup>. This is the reason for enormous answerability that the adept undertakes. The alchemist – when causing the transmutation of the matter – was accelerating the natural process of its ripening, since the matter was perceived as “embryos” ripening in the womb of *terra mater* until achieving the desirable state of gold. Thus, the alchemist in his operations undertakes the responsibility for transforming the nature and putting himself in the place of time. What would normally need eons to achieve the final state of perfection (turning into gold) is being accelerated by the alchemist in his laboratory. His *vas mirabile* replaces the womb of *terra mater*. It is he who causes the “death” and “rebirth” of substances and transforms them into their state of perfection<sup>47</sup>.

What is more, Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act, especially his attitude towards the answerability, inclines him towards perceiving the life as an assignment, as *something-to-be-achieved*<sup>48</sup>. As Bakhtin claimed: “My entire life as a whole can be considered as a single complex act or deed that I perform: I act, i.e., perform acts, with my whole life, and every particular act and lived-experience is a constituent moment of my life – of the continuous performing of acts”<sup>49</sup>. Similarly, the alchemist, who – as it has been demonstrated – *lives his opus* and unites his spiritual transformation with the transmutation of the matter, perceives his whole life as an assignment subordinated to his aim.

## Conclusions

In his work *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* Bakhtin points to a calamitous split between the sense or meaning of an act/activity and the actual experiencing of it: a split between the world of culture and the world of life. The realm of alchemical activities seems to be a domain which overcomes this split. It is the unity as the central concept of alchemical efforts that results in the integration of various domains of culture, the unity of the adept and his *opus*, the unity of a spiritual and material aspect of an act/activity: its sense or meaning and the actual experiencing of it. Alchemical activities cause the integration of the world of culture and the world of life. What is more, it is also the crucial

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> See: *ibidem*, p. 169.

<sup>48</sup> The term appeals to the opposition of “something given and something to be achieved”. Equivalents of German *Gegebenheit* and *Aufgegebenheit* (deriving from *gegeben* and *aufgegeben*), Polish *dane* and *zadane*. See: Notes 38, 91 and 94 by Liapunov in: M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward...*, p. 87, 94.

<sup>49</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward...*, p. 2.

concept of Bakhtin's philosophy of the act – the concept of answerability, of *non-alibi in Being* and the idea of perceiving life as an assignment – that finds its realization in alchemical activities and their ideals.

### Abstract

The paper refers to Bakhtin's philosophy of the act and his theory of a fundamental split between two worlds: the domain of culture and life itself, which he describes as a "split between the content or sense of a given act/activity and the historical actuality of its being, the actual and once-occurrent experiencing of it"<sup>50</sup>. His theory is related to the realm beyond Bakhtin's interests – to the research on the alchemists' activities and their ideals. The aim of the paper is to answer the question whether the alchemists' thought and efforts do correspond with the Bakhtin's theory and may be perceived as referring to the unity of sense or meaning of an act/activity and the historical actuality of its being – *ipso facto* the unity of culture and life.

### Teoria i praktyka alchemiczna jako aktywność jednocząca dziedzinę kultury i życia (Streszczenie)

Artykuł odnosi się do filozofii czynu M. Bachtina i jego teorii dotyczącej fundamentalnego rozłamu pomiędzy dwoma światami: światem kultury i światem życia. Rozpad ten Bachtin opisuje jako „rozdział między treścią-sensem danego aktu-działania i historyczną rzeczywistością jego bytu, rzeczywistym i jednokrotnym doświadczeniem go”<sup>51</sup>. Jego teoria zostaje zastosowana do dziedziny leżącej poza sferą zainteresowań Bachtina – do badań nad działalnością alchemików oraz ideałami leżącymi u jej podstaw. Celem artykułu jest udzielenie odpowiedzi na następujące pytania: Czy myśl alchemiczną i praktyczne wysiłki jej adeptów można analizować w odniesieniu do założeń teorii Bachtina? Czy, w kontekście myśli Bachtina, działania alchemiczne mogą jawić się jako jednoczące w sobie treść-sens danego aktu-działania i doświadczaną, historyczną rzeczywistość jego bytu, a tym samym znoszące rozpad między światem kultury i światem życia?

<sup>50</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward the Philosophy of the Act*, trans. V. Liapunov, University of Texas Press, Austin 1993, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *W stronę filozofii czynu*, przekł. B. Żyłko, Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 1997, s. 29.