“To him who concerns himself with Alchemy, may Nature, Reason, Experience, and Reading be his guide, staff, spectacles, and lantern.” Maier 1618 (de Rola p92 and p103 n71)

Introduction:

“The opus corresponds to the work of the individuation process, and both may be expressed in symbolic terms” (Singer 1994 p212).

Alchemy can be traced back to Alexandria c 200 BCE, where we find the first texts on chemistry (Henderson and Sherwood 2003 p8). Practices such as fabric dyeing, smelting, metallurgy, glass making, ceramics, “producing artificial gems, [and] compounding cosmetics” (Principe 2013 p10) were around long before they were assembled into what might be called recipe
books. Artisans of the classical period understood the processes of mineral development in the earth as evolutionary and it seemed reasonable to them to assume that, if the correct procedure was followed, one could hasten this process, evolving gold from a lesser material. But as it matured alchemy also developed a thread of mysticism and the medieval alchemist saw his/her work as refining one’s soul (Henderson and Sherwood 2003 p9).

Alchemy is rich in symbolism and the symbols themselves were fertile ground for cultivating the enlightenment of one’s soul or, as Jung would call it, the process of individuation (Jung 2013 p201f, Connolly 2013 p5, and Ramsay 1997 p44).¹ This is the path to “becoming one’s own self” (Jung 2013 p395) in which one may “unify polarities and conflicts, and develop … wisdom” (Matsumoto 2009 p254).

It is this spiritual and psychological aspect of alchemy – an aspect that has survived the rise of modern scientific chemistry -- that captured my interest. I am writing about my process of producing a series of paintings exploring spiritual and psychological alchemy.

As an artist, I often enter into an intuitive and exploratory dialogue with my work. I ‘speak’ to my materials about my intentions and allow the materials to shape the piece along with me. For me, the importance of Jung to art making lies in his emphasis on “the creative function of images and on the power of images to change minds” (Connolly 2013 p4). Alchemy, like art making, is something one can only really understand by being inside the process (Ramsay 1997 p34).

I knew very little about alchemy at the outset but wanted to explore and understand it experientially and, since visual imagery is significant for the psyche in grasping the ungraspable (Connolly 2013 p5), express it through paintings. I wanted to immerse myself in an alchemical process – allowing

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¹ Although later writers have found Jung’s use of Alchemy problematic, reducing everything to psychology, it is nonetheless a rich source for individual personal meditative and transformative work. See Connolly and Principe for more information.
both meditations from Ramsay and the images from de Rola (such as that at the beginning of this essay) to inspire me.

Rather than communicating with the images directly, (Elkins 2004 p210-12), I used them as an aesthetic language to shape what came to me in the meditations I did based on Ramsay's *Alchemy: The Art of Transformation*. Through the history of alchemical illustrations, artists repurposed ideas from other earlier works using “the disjunction and recombination of separate metaphorical elements of previous illustrations, … to gradually increase the cognitive function [of the viewer] and the symbolical power of the images” (Connolly 2013 p216). In the spirit of Jung, I also resolved to let chance happenings, synchronicities, and meaningful coincidences (Main 2007 p13) guide me.

The first synchronicity came about when I went to see the studio space Wilma Fraser had arranged for me for this project. James Frost met on 20 January 2015 at 10am. We walked over to the studios and so I could be assigned a spot and given a locker. On the way, he said I should look at a particular book, “The Golden Game”, containing 17th C alchemical engravings, which he found to be “beautiful.”

The second synchronicity came when a classmate, Karl Musson, upon hearing what my creative project would be, told me about a book on Alchemy that he particularly liked. He described the author as “poet, writer, healer, and friend.” One week later, Katherine Pierpoint, another classmate who had not been at that seminar, gave me the very book and described it just as Karl had.

In both cases, the masculine and the feminine had come together to arrange for me to have the materials (space, time, and sources) that I would need. I decided that those two texts – one of poetic thought and meditations on the stages of Alchemy and one of inspiring images – would be my primary sources for the project. I would also use Jungian psychology as a tool to reflect on each stage. While it might seem limiting to rely on only two texts as sources, limitations are frequently used to spur creativity in art schools.
student might be assigned to tasks such as: monochromatic painting; making a painting in 40 brush-strokes; making a 40” X 40” painting in 40 minutes; using no outlines in her painting; or using only one continuous line.

In this spirit, I decided to impose on myself one further limitation. I would only use a chromatic black and not a pigment black. Pigment black is a single pigment like carbon or black iron oxide in the carrier medium. It can often look flat and lifeless in a painting. A chromatic black is made up of complementary colours. Doing this was a way of honouring the contribution of alchemy to painting in the creating of new pigments with better qualities. (Principe 2013 p53 and Ball 2002)

Chromatic Black Tests

“Both painting and alchemy are intimately bound up with colour” (Ball 2002), which plays a symbolic as well as literal role. The sequence of black (nigredo), white (albedo), yellow (citrinitas), and red (rubedo) (Henderson and Sherwood 2003 p15) not only “signified the successful progress of the Great Work” (Ball 2002), but also describe “the method of working, the stuff worked on, and the condition of the worker” (Hillman 2015 loc 1616).

In meditations, I asked to be shown the quality of the alchemical stage and my
relation to it. My own subconscious, meditative, dream-like imagery would offer clues to follow in looking at the illustrations from de Rola of the alchemical stages. My meditations are written in the present tense to retain the freshness of the response.

*Meditation: Beginning - I am aware of both excitement and fear within me. I know that I both love and hate these kinds of exercises, and that they are usually both fruitful and searing. I hope for it to be not too searing as I do have other work to do, but I want it to be searing enough to expand me. I keep in mind the key focus of the alchemical process “solve et coagula, literally dissolve and re-form” (Ramsay 1997 p12). I am hopeful.*

**Prima Materia**

Before beginning, one must first choose the prima materia, or first matter, which will be turned to gold. The variety of substances suggested by alchemists through the ages is vast with no agreement as to what it might be (Principe 2013 pp118-123 and Gilchrist 1991 pp41-3). Ramsay describes it as “the raw stuff or chaos” (Ramsay 1997 p9), which Singer refers to as “the undifferentiated self” (Singer 1994 p211). We find it in through the physical work, which is “how we gain access in a sustained way to our imagination so the process can take place” (Ramsay 1997 p40). I think the first matter is our own shadow material, which needs transformation. Although we can’t look directly at the shadow, we can find clues in our behaviour and in deep emotions such as shame, anger, or fear (Zweig and Abrams 1991 pp pxvii - xix). I have done enough Jungian analysis to know that, painful as it is, this stage is like having found the beginning of the path, knowledge that there is a way out, and the way out is through.

*Meditation: The Prima Materia and Preparing the Flask – Sinking down within myself, I am a child, around 6 or 7 years old, going out to the slough to catch frogs. I can feel the sensation of the mud oozing up between my bare toes. I am simultaneously aware of anger or jealousy as well as the pure sensual pleasure of the cool mud, the hot sun, and the wind moving the long grass of*
the prairie. I know that both my body and my feelings are the flask as well as the material within the flask. If my body is the flask, the sunlight washing over me is the fire of change. I am prepared for the work.

**Nigredo – The Blackening or Death**

“In the midst of life, we are in death” (Book of Common Prayer)

The nigredo stage can be compared to the darkness, described in Genesis, which was the void before creation (Ramsay 1997 p35), and corresponds to the classical element of Earth. “Of all alchemical colours, black is the most densely inflexible and, therefore, the most oppressive and dangerously literal” (Hillman 2015 loc 1718). Nigredo is equated with death and decay (Hillman 2015 loc 1686) and is the stage of something dying in order for something to be born. It is a place or state of mind that is “slow, repetitive, difficult, desiccating, severe, astringent, effortful, coagulating and/or pulverizing” (Hillman 2015 loc 1618). And yet, this first stage is essential for opening us up, “deepening the soul, teaching endurance, and, perhaps most important, serving to deconstruct [our] paradigms” (Marlan 2014 p73), so we can begin the work of becoming whole and understand that our wounds are our source of healing; our nigredo opens us up to “a new psychic grounding that must include [our] underworld experiences” (Hillman 2015 loc 1917).

*Meditation:* I am sinking into swampy, smelly muck and ooze. I am afraid as I sink, that I will not be able to breathe once my head is under. I ask fear to be my friend and ally and tell me what needs to be done. “Let go of your preciousness,” comes the reply. I feel my forehead tingling.
The skeleton represents death.

Nebulae remind me that death is a vital part of what makes life possible. All the heavier elements such as carbon, iron, and even gold were formed by the deaths of stars. So in a very real sense we are stardust (Schlickenmeyer 2012).
The male and female figures are symbols for the inner archetypes of Sol (masculine) and Luna (feminine), and of yearning for wholeness (Ramsay 1997 p63).

Dead Bird

I began working on 27 January 2015. As I left the studio at the end of the day (5pm), I saw a dead bird in the road. As I had been working on Nigredo, I photographed it knowing that it would be included.
This stage corresponds to the classical element Earth. Working on and meditating with this painting I recall one of my favourite authors, reminding me that the Earth is made of death, and the fertility of the soil depends on death.

“The earliest word for earth in our language was the Indo-European root *dhghem*, and ... we turned it by adding suffixes, into humus in Latin ... , and somehow or other the same root became "humility." With another suffix the word become "human." Did the earth become human or did the human emerge from the earth? One answer may lie in that nice cognate "humble." "Humane" was built on, extending the meaning of both the earth and ourselves.... There is a deep hunch in this kind of etymology. The world of [hu]man[s] derives from this planet, shares origin with the life of the soil, [and] lives in humility with all the rest of life.” (Thomas 1983 p14)

**Albedo – The Whitening or Solutio.**

Both albedo and nigredo are “two sides of the coin” much like the yin/yang symbol (Ramsay 1997 p79). This stage can be seen as the light of the word of God penetrating the darkness to begin the process of creation (Ramsay}
1997 p35). It can also be seen as the stage in which we no longer are our suffering, but we come to understand it (Hillman 2015 loc 1727). We have been opened and understand that we are not our ego (Ramsay 1997 p80). Having been washed in our tears – “the water of wisdom” (Ramsay 1997 p82), we receive grace in the form of the peacock, and we have “more psychic space to carry [our] shadow” as it is “aired in life” (Hillman 2015 loc 1967).

**Meditation:** I am a ragged, smelly creature. The moon is a sliver overhead and I can see little lights in the distance. I know that someone is looking for me. I desire both to hide and to be rescued. As I am taken up onto the glittering swan/ship, I am still covered with muck and ooze, but I don’t feel dirty and no one seems to even notice.

Just before Albedo is achieved the colours that iridesce\(^2\) within the Alchemists’ flask are known as the Peacock’s tail (Ramsay 1997 pp81-2). The most frequent image of this stage is the Swan.

\(^2\) [https://www.wordnik.com/words/iridesce](https://www.wordnik.com/words/iridesce)
“Once the raven is slain it turns into the peacock displaying its tail – that is the stage at which all sorts of colours can be briefly seen in the vessel. Then the Matter takes on the wings of the swan, for it is whitened.” (Heinrich Kuhnraith 1602 in de Rola p44 n12)

This stage corresponds to the classical element of Water. This is the realm of the soul’s awakening from darkness; where one can begin to redeem one’s shadow material as it emerges from the nigredo (Hillman 2015 loc 1968). One comes to be at peace with this material and gains the ability to see it objectively (Henderson and Sherwood 2003 p140). Here we are concerned with actual movement rather than abstract philosophy (Hillman 2015 loc 3301). The light of the moon enters the darkness and softens the soul, opening it to the possibility of poetry and beauty in one’s suffering (Marlan 2014 p74).

Rubedo – The Reddening or Iosis
The next stage should be Citrinitas or Yellowing. I was planning to produce the paintings in order from Nirgredo through Albedo, Citrinitas, and then Rubedo, as “a correct sequence of colour changes [is] of critical importance in ascertaining whether the work is proceeding along the right lines” (Gilchrist 1991 p16). But I was having trouble discerning Citrinitas. I could clearly see where I wanted to go – to the gold of Rubedo at the end. Since I was struggling and was keenly aware of time limitations, I decided to work next on Rubedo, knowing that was what I wanted – filled with spiritual gold.

Later, I am thinking about rubedo one morning as I am walking to class. I see a scattering of many copper pennies on the path. I feel the familiar diffuse electric sensation that I get when I am being shown something. I know that this means something as the coins are red, and I was thinking about rubedo. I don’t yet know what it means but I feel I should leave them there, so I photograph them and carry on my way.
In Nigredo we see that we are one with the Earth. In Rubedo we see that we are one with the stars, and that Heaven and Earth meet within the cathedral of your heart, which is both within and all around us (Ramsay 1997 p126).

“Every level is present here, and because Alchemy is about wholeness there is a paradox at the heart of the rubedo. There is the marriage here but there is also death… And the extraordinary is also revealed as the ordinary” (Ramsay 1997 p127) if only we had eyes to see.

Meditation: From the crown of my head I am connected to the centre of the universe, from the soles of my feet I am connected to the centre of the earth. To either side of me I am connected across all of time and space; I am a jewel
on an intersection of Indra’s\textsuperscript{3} net spread out across the cosmos. I know the unity of male and female, life and death, heaven and earth. As above, so below.

The symbols for rubedo are of the Hieros Gamos or sacred marriage, from which comes spiritual gold, and the Phoenix who dies and is reborn in a continual process of being and becoming.

\textsuperscript{3} For more information see: \url{http://www.heartspace.org/misc/IndraNet.html}
Rubedo acts as a tincture, transforming all with which it comes into contact into lambent gold (Hillman 2015 loc 4790). It is like achieving the Holy Grail and “can also be taken as an image of the transcendent function … the psychic synthesis of conscious and the unconscious” allowing us the possibility of wholeness (Jung and von Franz 1971 p156). In rubedo soul and spirit are contained in matter and matter is a manifestation of the numinous.

**Citrinitas – The Yellowing or Xanthosis**

This is the stage before Rubedo. Nigredo and albedo are considered the Lesser Work, while citrinitas and rubedo are considered to be the Greater Work. The alchemist/artist has raised matter up by going through the Lesser Work and now must also embody spirit before she can get to the goal of rubedo. “The body has to be spiritualized and the spirit must be incarnated, both things must take place” –von Franz (in Ramsay 1997 p93). In this stage
we return to the Earth, but it is a warm, inviting, sensuous, and fertile Earth that offers us sustenance (Ramsay 1997 p95).

This was the most difficult of all the images to make, mostly because the imagery around Citrinitas was unclear and this stage not covered well in old Alchemical literature (Gilchrist 1991 p16 and Hillman 2015 loc 4341). Citrinitas seems to contain multiple stages (Ramsay 1997 p98) and I had trouble finding consistency. This stage is sometimes seen as the Masculine and Feminine at a new level (Ramsay 1997 p97), or the enriching of the intellect with passions (Hillman 2015 loc 4551).

*Meditation: I hear a phrase from the Charge of the God, “Lord of harvests, ripening grain, hear us as we call your name.” My body is made of the fragrance of fresh mown hay and dust motes in the sunlight of the hayloft. Tender shoots of young plants pierce me in ecstatic growth. I am alive to all of life.*

“Within the Forest of the Work are found the twin Natures, Mercury the Stag and Sulphur the Unicorn” (de Rola p197 n358)
The Sower – spirit can enter the material only if both are properly prepared. The field must be ploughed and the seed planted. (de Rola p98 n35)

Citrinitas is about integration. The symbols are present but this hasn’t captured what I’m after. It is pictorial rather than symbolic and doesn’t fit in with the rest of the series. I feel like I haven’t captured the meat of Citrinitas. I again pore over my sources.
Then several small things started clicking into place for me. “Texts caution about red coming too soon” (Hillman 2015 loc 2024) and I had ignored the warnings not to miss this stage “though such impatience is understandable. It would be leaving out a quality of earth and earthing (sic) that is vital” (Ramsay 1997 p98). I was also taking an extra-curricular class at ‘The University of Bridge’ (aka Simon Wilson’s sitting room). It was here that I learned that in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival, the grail was considered to be a stone (Jung and von Franz 1971 p34).

Jung and von Franz considered Wolfram’s story to be full of “psychological subtleties” and important alchemical symbolism. (Jung and von Franz 1971 p34) Parzival’s tale begins with him living in an isolated forest with his mother. He is ignorant, unworldly, and knows nothing of knights and chivalry. One day he sees some knights and is struck by the beauty of their armour and horses. He believes he has seen God, and decides then to leave his mother and follow them to King Arthur’s court. On the way to the court, he meets and kills the Red Knight and puts his armour on over his own clothes (McGoodwin 2002).

Parzival’s ignorance is the nigredo; his idealisation of the knights is the albedo. Citrinitas “would be the process of manifesting those ideals in the material world” (Annon 2013) and the hard work of turning inward towards individuation. This is a crucial step, which Parzival omits (Annon 2013).

“In Jungian theory, [individuation is] the process of self-realisation… in which a person attempts to develop and bring to consciousness the unfulfilled aspects of the collective unconscious, unify polarities and conflicts, and develop a unified self, including the appearance and realisation of wisdom” (Matsumoto 2009 p254).

Parzival has taken the red knight’s armour and is now called the red knight. When he meets Blancheflor he is unable to behave chivalrously toward her. Their names are a clue to their basic alchemical symbolism and show how a hastening towards red is ultimately unfruitful (Jung and von Franz 1971 p184). “Parzival was honoured for murdering the Red Knight and taking his horse, weapons and armour when he had not earned them” (Annon 2013).
Since Parzival wasn’t trained in the knightly arts, he has no idea how to ride a horse and so “the Red Horse takes him where it will” (Annon 2013).

This got me thinking in a different direction – that Citrinitas is an active and lively process of integration of the lessons of the earlier stages. Then I saw these two images on the same page in de Rola. I heard the question, “How well prepared is your soil to receive from the heavens? What are the ‘impediments that will prevent success?’” (de Rola p166 n284 and 285)

“The Sun, through the mediation of the Moon [gives] the celestial influx” to the Earth (Maier in de Rola p166 n284).
When I saw these two images together, I thought of the Kabbalistic lightning flash, which is both a symbol and a map of the divine becoming manifest in the world. (Regardie 1989 pp61-2)

Spirit manifesting into matter. Image: https://criticalkabbalist.wordpress.com/2010/06/02/the-lightning-flash/
Citrinitas may be less smooth and easy and more vigorous and alarming. Individuation and integration are not comfortable or easy. It “leads through the confrontation of the opposites until a gradual integration of the personality comes about, a oneness with oneself, with one’s world, and with the divine” (Singer 1994 p396). I showed both of these to my Jungian analyst, whom I have been seeing for years. She commented that the two paintings go together as a pair, one being how you might look on the outside to an observer and the other being how it feels to be in the process.

While working on this painting I also made a connection to the four-fold hermeneutic from Module One. I realised that citrinitas corresponds to the tropological turn. Parzival did not integrate the ideals of chivalry when he killed the Red Knight; he only put on the outer trappings and so could not act on the symbol of knightly virtues. He has not penetrated into the mystery of chivalry, and until Parzival can “see through the literal or allegorical” he cannot “connect [his] inner life to the outer” (Voss 2014 p3). In holding an
awareness of “different ontological levels” (Voss 2014 p3) and the corresponding “tolerance for ambiguity” (Statt 1981 p132) is how we (and Parzival) can enter citrinitas and experience our own integration. “[Parzival’s] Quest for the Holy Grail is then truly the quest to be a mature man in productive relationships … that temper youthful idealism into pragmatic creativity” (Annon 2013).

**The Alchymical Sisters**

After this, I had a canvas left over. This image caught my eye every time I went through de Rola’s book, so I decided to use it for the last canvas as something just for fun.

![Image](image-url)
I had come to the conclusion that citrinitas was very rich and I could probably work with it for a long time. I don't recall how or where I came across this image from the Turba Philosophorum.
Melusine is “an alluring vision, the palpably real presence of a strange yet helpful being” (Roth 1996), who appears “when the hero finds himself in one of life's blind alleys and his entire life plan has collapsed” (Roth 1996). This is when one feels like movement in any direction is impossible and things seem hopeless; she appears as the psychopomp who helps us find a way out. I thought this was appropriate for the stage of citrinitas and so placed her in the flask of one of the sisters.

It seems to me that citrinitas is the ability to both deepen our awareness and to be the bridge between our ordinary everyday self along side our divine self. Making conscious aspects of the collective unconscious is a life’s work and the rubedo only comes in glimpses. Nonetheless, these glimpses can fill us with awe.

Details of Nigredo, Albedo, Citrinitas, and Rubedo

**Conclusion**

Leaving the studio on the last day, with my paintings and supplies all boxed up, I see a single bright new penny on the walk outside the studio door. This time I pick it up, put it in my pocket, and place it on my altar when I get home.
Penny on altar

Both artists and alchemists “extract from matter, i.e. from the unconscious itself, a … ‘light of nature’ and a way of thinking” (Jung and von Franz 1971 p172). They are not ways of “thinking about but thinking in substances and processes, that is to say, thinking that springs from the feelings and the aesthetic experiences of the alchemist” or artist (Connolly 2013 p15).

Alchemy is “the science of ourseves” (Ramsay 1997 p34) and we are the base matter of the beginning of the process, our bodies and minds are the vessel, and we are also the fires that will temper and transform (Ramsay 1997 p39), making us aware of our “psychic totality” that “underlies the process of individuation” (Jung and von Franz 1971 p98). The development of The Self is “the goal of human life” Matsumoto 2009 p464), and “to follow it consistently is an important achievement in the course of human development.” (Jung and von Franz 1971 p186)

I realise what the earlier scattering of pennies from earlier means that rubedo is all around me, if I have eyes to see.
References:


