

THE SEARCH FOR THE 'SAL'  
BY SAMUEL HAHNEMANN

Lefas Michalis,  
Papadopoulos Georgios

As early as November 1806 Samuel Hahnemann wrote in the *Allgemeiner Anzeiger* d.D. (1806, p.2297):

‘If I once made a chemical error – for to err is human – I was at any rate the first to retract as soon as I had been better instructed’

According to the authorities of established medicine, Hahnemann seems to be another case of these heretic healers, with whom it is not worth while to be engaged, apart from historic interest, though for the majority of the followers of the homoeopathic tradition (approach) is considered a marvellous empiricist, who, due to the keenness of his intellect, discovered and established a therapeutic system complementary to conventional (mainstream) medicine.

The subject of this presentation, that is the search for the ‘sal’ by the founder of homoeopathy, offers one more opportunity to approach him and to conceive how, one could trace in his work, continuities with pre-existing therapeutic traditions and ideas, which, however, were impregnated by his spirit and transformed accordingly.

Towards the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, between 1797 and 1799, Hahnemann engaged in a endeavour to prepare an alkaline salt, the Alkali Pneum, as he termed it. First of all, the word ‘pneum’ does not mean anything concrete in Latin, and probably this term refers to the greek word ‘πνεύμα’. Hahnemann considered that his effort was successful, and thus in 1800 and 1801 published three articles in *Intelligenzblatt der Allgemeiner Literatur-Zeitung*, in *Crell’s Chemical Annals* and in *Scherer’s Journal of Chemistry* correspondingly, where he presented that unknown, up to that time, salt describing the way of its preparation and its properties. The considerable reaction on the part of contemporary pharmacists was partly because of the rather high price this salt was sold.

The subsequent chemical identification of the salt proved that it was nothing but common borax. It was known that borax has been used in preparation of this salt by Hahnemann, but what impressed him and led him to the conclusion that he had, indeed, prepared the Alkali Pneum, something he was probably searching systematically for, was the fact that a considerable amount of floury sediment appeared after the addition of a potash solution into diluted borax. The precipitation and the following crystallization convinced him that he had prepared a new and peculiar substance, since, according to the then existing knowledge, pure borax remains uncrystallized when potash is added to it.

The first citation of this presentation, taken from a publication of Hahnemann, shows his apologetic tone when, it was proved, without any doubt, that this new alkaline salt did not exist at all. Some pharmacists, like Professor Trommsdorff, expressed their general doubts on the reliability of Hahnemann's statements and became very hostile towards the financial parameters of this affair. Hahnemann admitted publicly that he made a deplorable error, and he insisted that he had no intention to deceive neither the physicians, nor the pharmacists, or the patients.

This almost unknown story - apart from showing us certain characteristics of Hahnemann's personality, that is his self-critical attitude, although he was considered as a non-compromising thinker – urges us to think on the haste with which Hahnemann tried to prepare the salt. Up to that time, he had not shown particular ardour to prepare unknown substances, but - on the contrary - he prepared his homoeopathic drugs using known herbal, mineral or animal substances, that were already used medicinally, but in a crude form. It is well known, as well, his significant effort to prepare mercurius into a soluble form, a metal (which has been) already used, but, according to him in an unsatisfactory manner. The question emerging is in which extent his interest has to do with the alchemical tradition considering sulphur, mercurius and salt as the three fundamental essences. In Hahnemann's time, nobody ( in the field of prevalent medicine, at least officially) spoke about the essences sulphur – mercurius – salt. The material (physical) bodies sulphur ( the well known brimstone in its diverse forms) and the metal quicksilver were, however, known.

Both of them had a past history of conventional pharmaceutical use, and both of them were included among the first medicines in the homeopathic materia medica. The ‘discovery’ or the establishment of a third material body taking the place of the alchemical salt could complete the alchemical trinity in a new, modern form.

According to the alchemical tradition, Sulphur is the quality of combustibility or the ability to burn that a body possesses, so that it can go to the element of fire, to the element of warmth and on the other hand it is the ability of a body to receive a definite form.

Salt centers, in some way, on the solid, invariable state, without being identical to it. For the salt often emerges through the process of combustion, but on the other hand comes in close contact to the liquid element ( it is ‘dissolved’ in it or ‘separated’ from it).

Mercurius is, in some way, the connecting link between the two previous principles. It is the one that constantly moves, connecting different states, it is the one that changes constantly form. Thus, its correlation to Hermes of ancient Greeks and to Mercurius of Romans is almost obvious. Although these three principles are traditionally called *essentiæ*, it is wrong to confuse them with the modern chemical substances or with the *substantiæ* or with the material (physical) bodies of the older times. On the contrary, every material (physical) body is created from sulphur, mercurius and salt and it is distinguished in appearance and function according to the matrix – the element where it is born, that is: earth, water, fire and air. Every body has its own sulphur, its own mercurius and its own salt in a latent seed – like form. There are, of course, material (physical) bodies that represent , more or less, one or another of the three essences. The material Sulphur possesses the characteristic quality to burn producing heat but not light. The metal quicksilver has as peculiar feature its changeability (it flows, it splits easily into liquid globules, it goes easily over into the airy state). The various salts are solid, they are often products of combustions, they are generally easily dissolved in water etc

The three essences, however, are not restricted to the material world. A fundamental property of them is that they participate in spiritual regions, in the fields of spiritual forces. The salt has particular reference to these spaces since, as we have stated, it emerges through a process of combustion, a procedure of purification. Through such a process and the accompanying appearance of the solid element, it is as if the spiritual forces are emancipated or strengthened. The biblical word: ‘Ye are the salt of the earth’ ( Matthew 5:13) is relative to this.

The attempt of a parallelism between the three alchemical essences and the ‘corresponding’ material (physical) bodies of Hahnemann’s time refers unavoidably to a comparison of these two epochs concerning the relation between man and nature, man’s attitude towards nature, the way man acquires knowledge about nature, or man’s possibility to unveil the secrets of nature.

Representative for the first period is the work of Paracelsus that constitutes, somehow, the historical culmination of the alchemical tradition, and a tendency, as well, to its secularization and spreading.



Walter Pagel, one of most prominent investigators of Paracelsus' works recapitulates the great healer's attitude towards the problem of acquiring knowledge as follows:

‘ If man, the climax of creation, unites in himself all the constituents of world surrounding him – minerals, plants, animals and celestial bodies – he can acquire knowledge of nature in a much more direct and ‘internal’ way than the ‘external’ consideration of outside objects by the rational mind. What is required is an act of sympathetic attraction between the inner representative of a particular object in man's own constitution and its external counterpart.

Union with the object is therefore the sovereign means of acquiring intimate and total knowledge. This is not achieved by brain, the seat of the rational mind. It is to the deeper strata, to the person as a whole, that true knowledge is given.’

Paracelsus, in his *Labyrinthus Medicorum Errantium*, maintains that, since god has given a pear tree (and other trees) such a great ‘scientia’], he will teach every man who studies (eagerly) the ‘book of godly wisdom’. ‘Scientia’ is hidden in nature, but it has to (become manifest). Otherwise the (talent) would remain under the earth and would be of no use. And he stresses that there is nothing hidden that could not become manifest.

In another point of the same book, he makes his aspect, concerning the drug, more concrete. He states that, although a medicine seems to be something natural and to be on the earth, like argentum vivum (quicksilver) or guaiac, it is only through the book of the godly wisdom that we can learn what it *really* is and how to use it correctly. As he explains, a material body is not a remedy, it is only earth. The real remedy is what lies inside the material corpus and that which earth, blood and flesh cannot have a knowledge of.

---

Let's see how Hahnemann faces the same subject a few centuries later:

‘ All the imagings and aspirations of the best physicians in all ages were directed to this object, the most worthy of the dignity of our art. But, to use a Spagyrian expression, they did not advance beyond particulars; the great philosopher's stone, the knowledge of the fundamnental cause of all diseases, they never attained to. And as regards most diseases, it will remain for ever concealed from human weakness’.

---

In his book ‘Organon’, Hahnemann writes as well:

‘ How the vital force causes the organism to display morbid phenomena, that is, how it produces disease, it would be of no practical utility to the physician to know, and therefore it will forever remain concealed from him; only what it is necessary for him; to know of the disease what is fully sufficient for enabling him to cure it, has the Lord of Life revealed to his senses’.

The difference between these two attitudes is comprehensible if we take into consideration what had intervened between these two eras: the development of modern physical sciences and the enlightenment.

Hahnemann's attitude, however, is not representative of a scientist of enlightenment.

He negates the ability of man to penetrate the curtain of matter and to approach directly what is hidden behind the phenomena. But he, himself, appears to possess with astonishing certainty, knowledge about the virtues of the 'spirit-like' vital force, which rules all the phenomena of life.

Even the process of drug preparation, though having externally all the signs of an accurate chemical elaboration, aims at the emancipation of the curative power of the drug from its material bonds, the 'spiritualization of the material substance itself' as Hahnemann puts it.

Following the above considerations, we shall dare to sketch the role of Hahnemann during the historical period he acted and within that specific stage of the evolution of therapeutics.

For him the era during which man could directly communicate with the nature and its forces has irrevocably passed away. Such an approach had become impossible even for the most capable and bright searchers of knowledge and the most gifted healers. For Hahnemann the source of knowledge, the source of a healer's ability remains basically the same: the access to the higher spiritual forces. But this access could not be, anymore, direct. It ought to proceed necessarily within the scientific framework of the new era, that is through a precise formulation and description of the symptoms, through a strictly defined method for the preparation of drugs, through a method that could be repeated mechanically and trustworthily. And the founder of homoeopathy had to investigate and teach these new means of access to the higher worlds and to their spiritual forces.

Nevertheless, the echo of the alchemical tradition seems to survive into Hahnemann's teaching through the theory of miasms. The brimstone survives furthermore as the homoeopathic remedy Sulphur and becomes the representative of the psoric constitution and, correspondingly, the quicksilver, as Mercurius Solubilis, of the syphilitic miasm. It is impressive that the sycotic miasm did not ever obtain the one and unique remedial representative. Thuja, Natrum sulphuricum and more recently Medorrhinum were mentioned to be the main sycotic remedies. It seems, however, that the difficulty which Hahnemann met regarding the search for the alkaline 'sal', accompanies even now the identification of the typical sycotic remedy.

Would it be very daring to suppose that the fact that the identification of the alchemical salt with a material substance was not attained, (as happened for that of brimstone with Sulphur or of quicksilver with Mercurius), is due to the greater connection of salt to the spiritual districts?

‘*Salt* is good: but if the *salt* have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? Have *salt* in yourselves, and have peace one with another.’  
(Mark 9:50)

Friedrich Christian Oetinger, contemporary of Goethe, stated something almost similar in the beginning of his work on the secret of the salt:

“Salt is a good thing. It is the noblest and most marvellous being, the god’s greatest and highest benefaction in the whole realm of nature, such a matter and subject that there is nothing like that, a circle and secret that nobody fully knows and that never will be fully known by anybody.”

If things are like that, then we can appreciate even more Samuel Hahnemann’s attitude, namely that, after his initial attempt we referred to at the beginning, he admitted his mistake and resigned from any further endeavour for the preparation of the salt.

---